



[Media and Freedom of Expression](#)

# Journalists under Pressure

Is Freedom of Expression at Risk in Mexico?

[Hans-Hartwig Blomeier / Luis Téllez Live](#)

Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries in the whole of the Americas for journalists. In addition to threats from organised crime groups and cartels, representatives of the press are increasingly exposed to state repression when they critically report on the government of the incumbent Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and his party.

---

### **Freedom of Expression as a Key Element of Democracy**

The essential components of a functioning democracy are diversity of opinion, political and social pluralism, and, above all, the ability and willingness to engage in dialogue. Of course, democracy also involves a functioning rule of law, the separation of powers, access to and holding of free and fair elections, a political system with democratic parties and organisations, and an active, organised, and participatory civil society. However, if freedom of expression and press freedom are at risk, and if a certain opinion or political position is unilaterally asserted so that criticism of the country's government, rulers, and politicians is restricted or even suspended, then this liberal democracy is endangered, and the door is opened to authoritarian structures and mechanisms.

Authoritarian states and regimes are vehemently opposed to unrestricted freedom of expression and press freedom. Open and free dialogue, discussion, criticism, evaluation, or disagreement with their political position are perceived as a direct threat that has to be countered. This is why the degree of freedom of expression and press freedom provides a clear indicator of the functioning, quality, or even viability of a democracy.

In the case of Mexico, it is almost a tradition for freedom of expression to be in direct confrontation with political power. Over the last ten to fifteen years, it has been further eroded by a spiral of rapidly escalating violence perpetrated by organised crime, which is dominated by the country's increasingly powerful drug cartels.

Since 2000, the spread of democracy in Mexico has facilitated greater media plurality, provided space for analysis and reflection across the political spectrum, and increased the diversity of publicly voiced opinions and viewpoints, but this has not reduced the number of violent acts, including assassinations, directed against journalists.

### **A High-Risk Profession**

For 71 years – until the election of Vicente Fox in 2000 – Mexico was governed without interruption by one political party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which severely restricted freedom of expression in the country. The PRI regime used censorship and state funding to exert constant pressure on the media, suppress dissidents, monitor publications, and discredit the independent media. On the other hand, the pro-government media enjoyed official favours and direct financial benefits (such as major government advertising campaigns), including bribing journalists to ensure they gave the government positive coverage.<sup>1</sup> For the sake of completeness, one should mention that such behaviours and actions were not limited to the federal government but were also practised by state governments and governors, at times in an even more draconian fashion.<sup>2</sup>

Even today, many media outlets are financially dependent on government advertising when their revenue from commercial advertising, sales, and subscriptions is insufficient to cover their expenses. In 2020, ten media outlets accounted for 54 per cent of Mexico's budget for government advertising, with the remainder distributed across 387 other media outlets.<sup>3</sup>

It should also be noted that during the 70 years of uninterrupted PRI rule, the only supplier of newsprint in Mexico was a state-owned monopoly, and newspaper distribution at the national level was controlled by PRI-affiliated unions.<sup>4</sup>

State control of the media was relaxed a little in the early 1990s when the country enjoyed a gradual opening up on the political front. This was triggered by the economic crisis at that time, which led to a serious programme of trade liberalisation and a degree of stagnation and attrition for PRI governments. The state monopoly on newsprint was also ended, and new rules were introduced relating to how public money was allocated to the media and regarding the public relations activities of federal and state governments.

### **Journalists who spotlight the lack of social justice and high rates of impunity put their lives at risk.**

—

In 2000, the election of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) led by President Vicente Fox ushered in reforms to transparency laws with a view to facilitating access to public information. Overall, this led to a significant improvement in press freedom and to freedom of expression in Mexico, which increased the importance of public opinion as a factor in consensus building and in the appraisal of government policies and actions.

The media also began to act as a counterweight to the executive power. This position of greater strength led to growing public demands for greater accountability and transparency in public administration. However, despite this political shift and the corresponding changes in the law, this period continued to be marred by attacks on journalists.

The Colombian writer, journalist, and Nobel Prize winner Gabriel García Márquez once described journalism as “the best job in the world”,<sup>5</sup> but in Mexico it is also one of the most

dangerous. Reporters Without Borders currently ranks Mexico as one of the most dangerous countries in the Americas for journalists. And the World Press Freedom Index ranks Mexico 143<sup>rd</sup> out of 180 nations and places it in the “difficult situation” category along with countries such as Myanmar, India, Cambodia, and Pakistan.<sup>6</sup>

According to ARTICLE 19, an international human rights organisation that defends freedom of expression and information, 138 journalists have been murdered in Mexico since the turn of the millennium.<sup>7</sup> Working with civil society organisations and media, many of these journalists put their lives at risk by spotlighting the lack of social justice, high rates of impunity, and the ineffectiveness of the police and justice system in prosecuting criminal activities. To date, the Mexican authorities have largely ignored these complaints and demands.

Indeed, Mexico is one of the countries with the highest rate of impunity for crimes against journalists. According to the Global Impunity Index 2020,<sup>8</sup> the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) ranks Mexico sixth in the world for the number of murders of journalists that go unsolved, or fail to result in conviction. The study also shows that this situation is essentially due to corruption, weak institutions, and lack of political will.

### **Social Transformation and Freedom of Expression – The Discrepancy between Words and Deeds**

When leftist politician Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) took office in the wake of the 2018 elections, his victory was accompanied by high hopes of social and political change. These hopes included strengthening civil society and significant improvements in freedom of expression and press freedom, including providing journalists with far greater protection against verbal and physical attacks. However, nearly three years on, these hopes and expectations remain unfulfilled. Indeed, the opposite is true: President AMLO’s relations with journalists and the media are very strained. There is a clear discrepancy between the



Good journalist, bad journalist: For President López Obrador, media outlets are either with him or against him – and, hence, against “the people”. Source: © Carlos Jasso, Reuters.

official line and AMLO’s claim that he guarantees “respect for different opinions”<sup>9</sup> on the one hand, while government officials and the president himself regularly attack the national and international media whenever they ask difficult questions or criticise the government’s policies.

AMLO’s narrative and political discourse are clearly focussed on his so-called Cuarta Transformación (4T)<sup>10</sup> project. He makes extensive use of symbolism and historical analogies from Mexico’s past to embed this project and his socio-political ideas in the mind of the public. The 90-minute press conferences (*mañaneras*) that he holds every weekday morning play a key role in this respect. He uses them as a comprehensive and very effective tool for setting his agenda, laying out his political plans, setting new priorities, and ultimately for steamrolling the media and opposition.

Three factors support the initial argument that press freedom and freedom of expression in Mexico are not only endangered by the very real threat to journalists’ lives but also by newer, current developments and actions:

#### *Stigmatisation of the Press*

Since assuming office on 1 December 2018, AMLO has taken the social and political polarisation that he pursued so consistently throughout the 2018 election campaign and extended it to the media and journalists. He divides them into “good” and “bad” reporters, which equates to pro-government (good) and anti-government (bad). So he does not engage in general media-bashing and repeatedly stresses the importance of freedom of expression, but then he launches vicious and personal attacks on critical commentators. This applies equally to national and

foreign media and journalists. The president then usually accuses these critical journalists and media outlets of being “conservative” and funded by corporate interests linked to previous “neoliberal governments”.<sup>11</sup>

For instance, on 25 September 2020, he used his morning press conference to specifically name media outlets and journalists who he believed had written negative articles about his government’s policies. He noted that a total of 148 articles in the national and local media had been reviewed, and complained that 66 per cent of these articles were opposed to his 4T project.<sup>12</sup>

### In AMLO’s world, there is little room for dissent or diversity of opinion.

---

Another example is the response to criticism of the Tren Maya, an infrastructure project initiated by AMLO.<sup>13</sup> The plan to build a 1,525 kilometres-long railway line to connect tourist destinations in the states of Tabasco, Chiapas, Campeche, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo is opposed by many experts, as well as by large swathes of the population. Journalists, environmental NGOs, and academics have particularly highlighted the potential damage to the environment and the negative economic and social impact on the communities affected. This led the president’s press secretary, Jesús Ramírez Cuevas,<sup>14</sup> to accuse certain media and civil society organisations of being paid to criticise the project.

Another episode at a morning press conference (23 September 2020) illustrates AMLO’s stance and relations with the press. A reporter in the room asked what he thinks “good journalism” is, and whether it means journalism that defends his government. AMLO replied that “good journalism defends the people and is far removed from power”, but “what we have now is journalism that is very close to economic power [...], it is elite journalism that does not defend the people”.<sup>15</sup> This description reflects the polarisation

that the president is also fostering with regard to political parties, the private sector, and non-governmental organisations.

In this way, AMLO repeatedly stresses his view of himself as someone whose sole purpose is serving the people (*el pueblo sabio y bueno*, the wise, good people) – but only those people who share his political vision and view him as their legitimate president and hope for the future. Nearly three years on, his approval rating stands at a remarkable 60 per cent, so this approach seems to be working for him.

Anyone who publicly criticises the president is accused of supporting inequality, corruption, and impunity. “Helping the poorest, fighting corruption, and improving the lives of Mexicans” have been the buzzwords and goals of the 4T project since the 2018 election campaign. The argument is simple: anyone who attacks the president or federal government is also against these goals.

This argument leaves little room for dissent or diversity of opinion. An executive that believes itself to be the sole possessor of the truth also defines which media outlets or journalists are lying. Since 20 June 2021, this line of reasoning has been given concrete form at the morning press conferences, which now kick off with “Who’s who in this week’s lies?”, a segment designed to delegitimise media outlets that are critical of the government.<sup>16</sup>

In the run-up to Mexico’s recent midterm elections on 6 June, the president’s confrontations with the press ramped up to international level when *The Economist*, *Le Monde*, *Die Welt*, and *The Nation* all published lengthy articles criticising AMLO’s performance after three years in office. Although these publications are positioned across the political spectrum, the authors of all the articles agreed that Mexico’s main problems remain unresolved (no significant improvement in the daily lives of Mexicans; omnipresent and growing violence due to organised crime; unabated corruption and impunity). They also highlighted how the Mexican government, unlike most of the world, continues to



rely on fossil fuels while neglecting renewable energy, and how authoritarian elements are increasingly creeping into the administration.

The government was particularly stung by The Economist's cover story of 27 May 2021, which called AMLO "Mexico's false messiah".<sup>17</sup> The president used his morning press conference as an opportunity to denounce the report as "rude, deceitful, propagandistic, and neoliberal". He also accused the magazine of being "conservative" and failing to report on the corruption of previous governments. In the end, Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard was asked to write a letter to the magazine's editor (which, of course, was immediately published by the government).<sup>18</sup> In his letter, the minister accused the magazine of "being insensitive and of failing to understand López Obrador and his national project", because the president's vision "prioritises the most marginalised sections of society".<sup>19</sup>

#### *Lack of Safeguards for Journalists*

As part of its austerity programme, in October 2020 the government decided to dissolve 109 public trusts (*fideicomisos*), some of which were lavishly funded, and transfer these funds to the central budget. It justified this move by claiming that the use and allocation of the trusts' funds had not been managed transparently or efficiently and that the money was urgently needed elsewhere. More specifically, it earmarked these funds for the country's additional health care needs and economic recovery in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. It remains to be seen to what extent the – as yet unproven – accusations of corruption and lack of transparency are justified (a blanket statement is not enough to make a serious assessment). There is also no clear answer to the question of whether the funds that have flowed into the national budget are actually being used to address the effects of the pandemic.

What is clear, however, is that abolishing these trusts has not only led to drastic cuts and hence a reduction in opportunities for scientific and research projects (which received the majority

of the funds), but also to the disappearance of a specific fund for the protection of human rights defenders and journalists.<sup>20</sup> Abolishing this fund could endanger the lives and safety of victims, human rights defenders, and journalists because the money was used for relief activities such as food, shelter, transportation, security, funeral expenses, and sundry medical costs.<sup>21</sup>

A similar mechanism is planned to be set up within the remit of the Ministry of Interior, but it remains unclear whether this will be allocated additional resources to carry out such activities.<sup>22</sup> In addition, there are (justified) doubts about the extent to which a government-controlled fund would preserve the political neutrality of an independent public trust. This is a factor that should not be ignored in light of the polarisation mentioned above.

For the sake of completeness, one should also mention here that the existing military trust funds were continued, and their funding even increased from 2.5 billion pesos in 2019 to 31 billion in 2020 – a remarkable contrast.<sup>23</sup>

#### *Attacks on Social Media*

Just as the traditional media has had to adapt to digital platforms and social media, the repression and intimidation of journalists has also changed and expanded or shifted to these new channels.

### **The #RedAMLO network produces content directed against journalists who are critical of the president.**

---

Signa Lab at ITESO, the Jesuit university in Guadalajara, specialises in these issues. Its research demonstrates how social media is used for political purposes, censorship, and intimidation. The report titled "Democracy, freedom of expression and the digital sphere. Analysis of trends and topologies on Twitter: the case of #RedAMLO"<sup>24</sup> demonstrates that there is a

network (#RedAMLOVE) on Twitter whose main purpose is to attack the president's opponents.

The authors of this study found that this network pursues a sophisticated strategy of producing and massively replicating content directed against journalists and media outlets that are critical of the issues raised by AMLO at his press conferences. Specific examples or victims of these online attacks include the journalists Carlos Loret de Mola, Joaquín López Dóriga, and Ivonne Melgar.<sup>25</sup>

According to the Signa Lab report,<sup>26</sup> these orchestrated attacks are characterised by deliberately violent language, which leads to greater social polarisation, more extreme political positions, and even a degree of self-censorship, as people feel reluctant to air their views in public for fear of attacks and threats. #RedAMLOVE has also been successful in getting pro-government tweets trending on Twitter through appropriate use of hashtags, in this way reducing the visibility of the president's critics.

However, this is not an isolated case: Signa Lab and ARTICLE 19 have also published research proving that verbal attacks on journalists have emanated directly from the public news agency NOTIMEX. The report "Targeted Attacks: Smear Strategies"<sup>27</sup> illustrates how the Twitter accounts of certain journalists who complained about the agency were attacked. Numerous testimonies confirm that Sanjuana Martínez, director of NOTIMEX, directly ordered the attacks against journalists and former employees of the news agency.

When the report was published and the media began to cover it, AMLO personally intervened and took ARTICLE 19 to task at one of his morning conferences. At this press conference which, as usual, was aired live on national TV, he accused the organisation of accepting money and resources from the US government and using them against his administration. More specifically, he called ARTICLE 19 a "coup organisation".<sup>28</sup>



While it is true that the organisation has long received funding from USAID, the US Agency for International Development (well before AMLO took office in 2018), the same agency also provides funding for numerous governance and development projects run by the current Mexican government.

The conflict finally escalated to the point that, following another similar accusation against a Mexican NGO (Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción



Loving AMLO, agitating against his opponents: A protestor shows her support for Mexico's president. Meanwhile, on social media, his critics are defamed under the hashtag #RedAMLOVE. Source: © Jose Luis Gonzalez, Reuters.

y la Impunidad, also funded by USAID), the president wrote to the US government demanding that it cease funding the projects and activities of organisations that, in his view, were working against his government and the Cuarta Transformación.

To date, the Biden administration has not responded directly to this letter, but President Biden's subtle remarks that he will continue to work internationally against corruption, and

also the fact that this issue was not discussed during Vice President Kamala Harris's recent visit to Mexico on 8 June 2021 reveal that the US side will not be so easily swayed.

In the wake of these accusations, Amnesty International, Red de Rendición de Cuentas (an accountability network), and journalists such as Lydia Cacho, who was tortured in 2005,<sup>29</sup> immediately voiced their support for ARTICLE 19. They condemned the attacks and



underscored the importance of the organisation, which “has saved the lives, integrity, and freedom of dozens of journalists and communicators.”<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

As we have seen, freedom of the press and freedom of expression in today’s Mexico face a dual challenge: on the one hand, the unrelenting direct threats to, and murders of, journalists, which in most cases can be attributed to organised crime, and on the other, the disconcerting approach to these freedoms adopted by the Mexican government.

The fact that this is undermining one of the key elements of a liberal democracy and weakening democracy in Mexico itself is a cause for concern. It is also paving the way for greater social polarisation, something that is clearly part of the Mexican government’s political strategy.

It is too early to draw a final conclusion about how this will affect the success of the AMLO administration. The Cuarta Transformación initiated by AMLO has identified Mexico’s development deficits quite accurately, and accordingly it enjoys the support of the majority of the population. However, halfway through the president’s term, there are at the very least doubts about whether the proposed solution will actually resolve these problems. The deficits in press freedom and freedom of expression as described above serve to fuel this scepticism.

*- translated from German -*

---

**Hans-Hartwig Blomeier** is Head of the Mexico office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

**Luis Téllez Live** is Project Manager at the Mexico office of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

- 1 Buendía Hegewisch, José 2018: Libertad de expresión y periodismo en México: Situación del ejercicio y percepción de la libertad de prensa en el contexto de las alternancias políticas de 2000 a 2015, in: <https://bit.ly/3rBiysN> [20 Jul 2021].
- 2 Examples include concealing the violent suppression of student protests in 1968 and 1971, covering up corruption scandals, and using private and public funds to trumpet government actions.
- 3 Reyes Márquez, Ricardo 2021: Publicidad oficial: el deber de informar y el derecho a recibir información, *Animal Político*, 15 Feb 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3xbLk4E> [20 Jul 2021].
- 4 The PRI’s control of the Mexican media was so well known that former President José López Portillo (1970–1976) commented: “I don’t pay them to hammer me”, a quote that illustrates the PRI administrations’ view that media and journalists who receive public money should bestow flattery and praise on the government, not criticism.
- 5 García Márquez, Gabriel 1996: El mejor oficio del mundo, *El País*, 20 Oct 1996, in: <https://bit.ly/373sz8S> [30 Jun 2021].
- 6 Reporters Without Borders 2021: 2021 World Press Freedom Index, in: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking> [29 Jul 2021]; McCarthy, Niall 2021: The State Of World Press Freedom, *Statista*, 20 Apr 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3AARmxJ> [13 Aug 2021].
- 7 According to Article 19, of the 138 journalists murdered in Mexico between 2000 and 2021, 47 were killed during the administration of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018) and 18 during the current administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (from 2018). ARTICLE 19 2021: Periodistas asesinadas/os en México, en relación con su labor informativa, in: <https://articulo19.org/periodistasasesinados> [23 May 2021].
- 8 Beiser, Elana 2020: Getting Away with Murder, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 28 Oct 2020, in: <https://cpj.org/?p=63336> [23 May 2021].
- 9 López Obrador, Andrés Manuel 2018: Ejerceré siempre mi derecho de réplica de manera respetuosa, que nadie se sienta ofendido: AMLO, Comunicado 073, 5 Nov 2018, in: <https://bit.ly/3i31Cbn> [30 Jun 2021].
- 10 AMLO believes his project of deep political and social change to be the Fourth Transformation, being the historical successor to Mexican independence (1810 to 1821) as the First Transformation, the “Reforma” with Benito Juárez (1858 to 1861) as the Second Transformation, and the Mexican Revolution (1910 to 1917) as the Third Transformation.
- 11 The national media outlets that AMLO has identified and attacked as “conservative” and as “opponents” of his political project are: Reforma, El Universal, Milenio, Excelsior and El Financiero.
- 12 *Animal Político* 2020: AMLO analiza a la prensa: el 66 % de las columnas son contra el proyecto de la 4T, 25 Sep 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/36XxJ6e> [20 Jul 2021].

- 13 Caso, Diego 2020: Gobierno de AMLO acusa a fundaciones de financiar oposición a Tren Maya, El Financiero, 28 Aug 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3eWDkhg> [8 Jun 2021].
- 14 The president's spokesman specifically accused the Ford Foundation, the Kellogg Foundation, the NED, the Rockefeller Foundation and the Climate Works Foundation of paying Mexican media outlets and organisations to oppose the Tren Maya.
- 15 Animal Político 2020: Nunca la prensa le había pegado tanto a un gobierno: AMLO dice que no hay periodismo independiente, 22 Apr 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/373MPXI> [23 May 2021].
- 16 Pérez, David Marcial 2021: El 'quién es quién' de López Obrador o la nueva ofensiva contra la prensa, El País, 24 Jun 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3x3B9yY> [30 Jun 2021].
- 17 The Economist 2021: Mexico's false messiah: Voters should curb Mexico's power-hungry president, 27 May 2021, in: <https://econ.st/3BEWzWt> [20 Jul 2021].
- 18 El Financiero 2021: Majadera, muy grosera y mentirosa: AMLO responde a The Economist, 28 May 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3ryv2BB> [1 Jun 2021].
- 19 El Financiero 2021: Ebrard responde a The Economist: Entiendan que no están entendiendo, 28 May 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3xbOntC> [30 Jun 2021].
- 20 This refers to the "Fondo para la Protección de Personas Defensoras de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas".
- 21 ARTICLE 19 2020: La eliminación de los fideicomisos pone en riesgo la vida de personas defensoras de derechos humanos, periodistas y víctimas, 21 Oct 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3eWVpw1> [3 Jul 2021].
- 22 Vivanco, José Manuel 2020: Un nuevo revés para los periodistas y defensores de derechos humanos en México, Human Rights Watch, 3 Nov 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3kXnZkE> [29 May 2021].
- 23 Reina, Elena 2020: López Obrador aumenta el poder del Ejército con un incremento histórico de fondos en cuatro fideicomisos, El País, 14 Oct 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/3rAg2D0> [29 May 2021].
- 24 Signa Lab 2019: Democracia, libertad de expresión y esfera digital. Análisis de tendencias y topologías en Twitter: el caso de la #RedAMLOVE, 28 Feb 2019, in: <https://bit.ly/3kV7NAa> [20 May 2021].
- 25 Martínez, León 2019: Estudio del Signa Lab sobre la #RedAMLOVE no es un ataque contra el presidente, El Economista, 13 Mar 2019, in: <https://bit.ly/3zExIQG> [20 May 2021].
- 26 The report shows that #RedAMLOVE consisted of 176 Twitter accounts that generated and mobilised thousands of tweets in order to carry out their attacks.
- 27 Signa Lab 2020: Ataques selectivos: estrategias de desprestigio y descalificación, 12 May 2020, in: <https://bit.ly/2UHpl2U> [22 May 2021].
- 28 Pérez, David Marcial 2021: López Obrador acusa a EE UU de financiar a organizaciones "golpistas", El País, 7 May 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3x3FsKE> [1 Jul 2021].
- 29 Barragán Almudena 2021: La ONU pide a México esclarecer la tortura contra la periodista Lydia Cacho, El País, 30 Jul 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3z7t8uz> [16 Aug 2021].
- 30 Forbes México 2021: Amnistía Internacional defiende a 'Artículo 19' tras críticas de AMLO, 31 Mar 2021, in: <https://bit.ly/3BB17jj> [1 Jun 2021].