

# Media under assault in the Americas

## OUR OPINION: SILENCING CRITICAL VOICES PUTS DEMOCRACY AT RISK

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The Venezuelan government's shut-down of Radio Caracas Television on Sunday marks a low point for free speech in the Americas. President Hugo Chávez replaced a fierce critic of his administration with a state-owned TV station that spouts government propaganda.

As disturbing as is this latest move to chill freedom of speech, the regional trend is just as troubling. In some countries, politically motivated governments attack media in an attempt to silence opposition voices. In other countries, journalists are being killed with impunity in the absence of effective law enforcement. Recent examples include:

- **Ecuador**, where President Rafael Correa has filed a criminal-defamation complaint against the *La Hora* newspaper's editorial-board chairman, Francisco Vivanco Riofrío. Mr. Vivanco faces up to six months in jail for an editorial that criticized the government for trying "to govern with disturbances, rocks and sticks." President Correa used an antiquated law against insulting the president to punish the paper. This charge could be levied against newspapers in any democratic country with free speech.
- **Honduras**, where President Manuel Zelaya ordered private radio and television stations to air government propaganda for up to 12 days. The broadcasts began on Monday night, and the first featured the president himself. Mr. Zelaya criticizes Honduran media for unfair coverage. But his authoritarian takeover of the airwaves invites comparisons to Mr. Chávez's brazen assault on freedom of expression.
- **Mexico**, which has become the second most-deadly country in the world for journalists after Iraq. More Mexican journalists have been murdered on the job than in Colombia, where journalists long have been targets. With drug turf wars assailing Mexico, journalists increasingly are among the victims. Corruption and ineffective law enforcement allow perpetrators of the crimes to go unpunished. The unfortunate result is media self-censorship. Hermosillo-based *Cambio Sonora* newspaper just shut down after being bombed twice in two months. It had denounced the lack of protection against of organized crime. Mexico's federal government needs to strengthen its response. Those who assault media stifle democracy itself.

The Organization of American States should redouble efforts to reverse these discouraging anti-media trends. For all the democratic reforms in Latin America in the 1990s, too many laws curbing free speech remain on the books and too many journalists remain in the line of fire. This is unfortunate, because the press provides a vital check on government corruption, waste and abuse of power.