

Oral report

On behalf of the Inter-American Press Association, I want to thank the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere for the invitation to participate in this important hearing.

We have already submitted to the Subcommittee a written and detailed report about the situation in the región, with some recomendations.

Freedom of the press and of expression in the hemisphere underwent a marked deterioration in recent months due to a significant increase in direct and indirect censorship and physical attacks on journalists.

Violence carried out by organized crime, drug traffic hitmen and police-style groups on the orders of several governments of the region left a balance of more than 20 journalists murdered during the past 12 months in Honduras, Paraguay, Mexico, El Salvador, Colombia and Peru.

But while the murders of journalists are terrible news for press freedom in the region, let me focus on two types of censorship which are of main concern to IAPA.

Firstly, censorship in the Cuban dictatorship.

The governments of the United States and Cuba began a new relationship on July 20.

Of course, it is too early to make definitive evaluations, but the reopening of embassies in Washington and Havana did not produce any improvement in the practice of journalism, or people's access to free information. Nobody in Cuba is authorized to establish an independent media external to the government and the ones that exist are those belonging to the regime. Internet access is virtually impossible for ordinary citizens.

Recently, fifty independent journalists, bloggers and freedom activists were arrested. After the resumption of relations with the United States persisted practices of beatings, arrests, intimidations, harassment and vandalism against opponents and independent journalists. Three of them are in jail now.

The government of Raul Castro has "outsourced" repression using paramilitaries trying to avoid the traces of the regime to be recorded. During 2014, there were 9,000 arrests for short periods, which is the new repressive tactic of the Castro brothers.

Since IAPA's point of view, the resumption of relations between the US and Cuba will not be good news *per se* unless there is good news

for the return of freedom to the Caribbean island.

The least we can expect, after more than half a century, is a “give and take”, something like a barter with the Cuban regime. The isolation policy applied during 50 years can be discussed, but the principle of defending freedom was valid during these 50 years and it is still valid now.

Secondly, censorship in “legal dictatorships”.

With varying degrees, there are now “legal dictatorships” in Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Ecuador. Argentina has followed similar paths, but in that country still remain some liberties that make it a unique case.

This description of “legal dictatorships” may sound a bit strong, but we will try to explain it using the example of Ecuador.

Since January 2007, in Ecuador, President Rafael Correa imposes a system which keeps in his fist the control of the three branches. He is decided to perpetuate endlessly in office. To silence the independent and critical press, Correa displays an ongoing campaign against the media, journalists and citizens who have different opinions from his.

But, unlike Cuba, where there is in place a dictatorship that everyone recognizes as such, in Ecuador and the other countries mentioned, there are constitutions and laws based on which the freedoms of speech and press are attacked “legally”.

In Ecuador is in force since June 2013 the “Communications Act”, the most perfect and effective gag law created in recent times in Latin America.

This law is imposed against any critical comment by a team of 300 officials who are under the order of a censor appointed directly by President Correa.

To give you an idea, the gag law already enabled the government to impose 37 types of sanctions against no government media outlets: 5 verbal warnings, 7 fines, 4 orders of rectification, 4 answers imposed by the government, 4 orders to apologize, 7 written warnings, two suspensions of radio frequencies and three forced answers in specific radio programs.

In Ecuador, and in the other countries mentioned, one can say that there are “elected governments” but not necessarily “democratic governments” and, much less, “republican governments”. Yes, there are elections, but

there is no separation of powers, there is no independent judiciary, there is no respect for individual rights and freedom of expression is constantly under attack.

Therefore we speak of “legal dictatorships”.

Paradoxically, as they are “elected”, it is more difficult to denounce them than the very Cuban dictatorship.

Without a free press, as our Declaration of Chapultepec says, democracy does not exist, let alone free and legitimate elections.

You can not say that people choose when they do not know what are they going to choose.