

Mexico's New President Inherits Grim Media Landscape



President-elect of Mexico Claudia Sheinbaum speaks during a press conference at Palacio Nacional on June 10, 2024 in Mexico City, Mexico. © Hector Vivas/Getty Images

Claudia Sheinbaum will preside over one of the most violent countries for journalists.



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For the first time in its history Mexico, which has been governed only by men for 200 years, will have a female president.

When she takes office in October 2024, Claudia Sheinbaum will inherit unprecedented power and a series of grave and unresolved human rights issues, including the fact that Mexico is the most dangerous country to practice journalism in peacetime, according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

Although there have been federal and local protection mechanisms for human rights defenders and journalists in place since 2012, the situation remains grave.

According to Article 19, 164 journalists died in Mexico between 2000 and 2024; 153 men and 12 women.

Most recently, on April 26, 2024 — a month before the electoral campaigns ended — journalist Roberto Carlos Figueroa, who directed the media outlet *Acá en el Show* in Cuernavaca, Morelos, was kidnapped by an armed group. Money was demanded for Figueroa's release and his wife paid the ransom; however, he was later found dead.

RSF announced it would join the official investigations to determine if his disappearance was related to any published or upcoming news. Organised crime groups do not usually target

journalists for ransom, knowing that it was unlikely this would be profitable in a country where the average reporter's salary is 18,898 pesos —1,025 US dollars a month.

FEW SAFEGUARDS

Figueroa's murder raised the number of journalists killed under López Obrador's 2018-2024 government to 44, an average of seven each year. The president, who steps down on October 1, has repeatedly insisted that journalists were neither persecuted nor harassed during his tenure. Although it is true that no media outlet closures were ordered during his term, his speeches were consistently hostile against any watchdog journalism that held him, his party or their allies to account.

Nonetheless, López Obrador has presided over the Mexico's third deadliest ever government for journalists, behind the administrations of Enrique Peña Nieto with 47 and Felipe Calderón Hinojosa with 48, when a war against drug trafficking was unleashed.

On Sunday, January 23, 2022 — when López Obrador's government was starting its fourth year — journalist Lourdes Maldonado was shot dead in front of her house. She was under federal protection after receiving threats and had been given a panic button to activate in case of an emergency. However, it was of no use, as the killers surprised her before she got out of her car.

Two years earlier, in March 2019, she had expressed fear for her life at one of the Mexican president's morning conferences after winning a labour lawsuit against the company Primer Sistema de Noticias — which owned a local TV channel — belonging to Jaime Bonilla Valdez, former governor of Baja California.

On that occasion, López Obrador listened attentively, then committed to follow up on her case. Lourdes returned to Tijuana.

While the perpetrators of her murder were detained, nothing is known about who ordered her assassination, or why.

Amnesty International (AI) and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) have warned that Mexico's protection mechanisms for journalists tend to deny, weaken, or withdraw safeguards for those who need them.

In a joint statement, CPJ and AI described “an alarming picture of a deeply flawed institution that needs significant reform to meet the needs of journalists in one of the most violent countries in the world for the press”.

On Tuesday, June 11, the body of reporter Víctor Manuel Jiménez Campos was found in an abandoned water well in the community of Torrecillas, in the municipality of Villagrán. He had been missing since November 1, 2020, last seen heading to cover a baseball game.

Villagrán, with an estimated population of around 65,700, is the operations centre of the Santa Rosa de Lima cartel, led by Antonio Yepéz Ortiz, “El Marro,” initially dedicated to fuel theft and later to drug trafficking. Rates of violence in Guanajuato have increased due to territorial clashes with the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG), one of the most aggressive organisations to have emerged in Mexico in the last decade.

GROWING DANGERS

Threats against journalists have been another growing issue. In 2023 alone — the penultimate year of López Obrador's term — Article 19 recorded 561 threats, highlighting 124 cases of harassment, 100 assaults and 106 instances of illegitimate use of public power. They also recorded 54 blockages by the authorities to prevent information from being made public and 37 physical attacks.

Another pending issue is the distribution of official advertising in the media. In 2022, López Obrador's government spent significantly less money compared to other administrations. But it

concentrated 680 million pesos, or 28 per cent of its budget, in just three companies: Televisa, TV Azteca, and La Jornada, seriously limiting access to finance for smaller and more investigative media.

López Obrador often used his daily press conferences to label the media as corrupt and conservative. Every Wednesday, he included a section called Who's Who in the Lies, where he not only responded to reports but also revealed journalists' incomes.

It was perhaps no surprise that judicial harassment has increased year by year, according to Article 19. In 2023, 22 judicial processes were initiated against journalists in administrative, civil, electoral, and even criminal areas, equivalent to an average of 1.8 cases opened each month.

Article 19 highlighted the case of journalist Claudia Solera, who in April 2024 received notice of a 300 million peso lawsuit — over 16 million US dollars— for an article published in the Excelsior newspaper 14 years ago. A law firm accused her of damaging its assets and image by exposing a series of irregularities in illegal agreements with retirees.

So far, Sheinbaum has not made her view of the media clear, but recently she alleged that “there are some outlets that are dedicated to permanently criticising our movement without reason, regardless of what is said or done”.

Artur Romeu, director of the Latin America Office of Reporters Without Borders, said in a statement that Sheinbaum would have the historic opportunity to end this uncontrolled violence against media professionals.

“The biggest challenge will be to effectively coordinate institutional efforts in favour of a more ambitious policy of prevention and protection for journalists, using all possible mechanisms at the federal and state levels,” he said. “The fight against violence against media professionals cannot continue to depend solely on the federal protection mechanism. A more systematic approach is essential, and its success depends on genuine political will.”