

Authorities must guarantee safety, freedom of journalists covering election result protests in Venezuela, says RSF

After a journalist sustained a gunshot injury in Maracay and three others were arrested, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) calls on the Venezuelan authorities to guarantee the safety of media personnel covering protests in response to the announcement that Nicolas Maduro won another term as president in elections marked by press freedom violations.

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) is very concerned about the situation in Venezuela, where journalists have been attacked or arrested during protests in various parts of the country since the announcement that President Maduro won the election held on 28 July although no detailed poll results have been published.

While covering a protest in Maracay, in the northern state of Aragua, *Código Urbe* news site reporter **Jesus Romero** sustained two gunshot injuries, one in the abdomen and one in the leg, and had to be operated. The person who fired the shots has yet to be identified.

Journalists have been among the hundreds of persons arrested by the security forces during the protests. **Yousner Alvarado**, a cameraman working for the *Noticia Digital* news site, was arrested by the Bolivarian National Guard (GNB) while on his way by motorcycle to cover a protest in the city of Barinas on 29 July. Without being able to contact his lawyer or his family, he appeared at a video hearing in Caracas in the early hours of 30 July with a court-appointed lawyer. Accused of terrorism, he is still being held incommunicado.

Joaquin de Ponte, a reporter who had covered the previous day's protests against the election results, was arrested as he was returning home in San Juan de los Morros, in the state of Guárico, on 30 July. Charged with "inciting hatred and terrorism," he was held at a GNB post until the evening, when he was released because he was in poor health.

VPI-TV cameraman **Paul León** was arrested by the Bolivarian National Police along with many demonstrators while covering a protest in Valera, in Trujillo state. He is still being held at a police station and has not been able to see his lawyer or family. RSF calls for Alvarado and León to be allowed immediate access to their lawyers and family, and to be released.

Noticias Neveri news site reporter **Gabriel Rodríguez's** parked car was torched by protesters after he went to cover a protest in Barcelona, in the northeastern state of Anzoátegui. Dozens of people have lost their lives in the course of the protests in various parts of the country but so far no journalist has been killed.

"Journalists' rights are being violated at a time when media coverage of the demonstrations that have erupted throughout the country is crucial. The authorities must open investigations into these serious violations and must guarantee the protection of media professionals, so that they can cover what is happening on the streets and in the country's institutions. It is also imperative that the National Electoral Council (CNE) should allow journalists access to vote tallies, detailed ballot box by ballot box, as provided for by Venezuelan law.

Artur Romeu

Director of RSF's Latin America bureau

RSF's local partner, the Press and Society Institute (IPYS Venezuela), registered no fewer than 41 press freedom violations during the presidential election on 28 July, including 27 restrictions on access to information (reporters being denied access to polling stations by the CNE), 12 physical or

verbal attacks on journalists, and one arrest – **Cake Minuesa**, a Spanish reporter for the *OkDiario* news site, who was arrested on 29 July and was deported to Spain.

Soldiers assigned to protecting polling stations were responsible for most of these violations, but the perpetrators also included GNB officers, the General Directorate for Military Counter-Espionage, supporters of President Maduro, and unidentified citizens.

RSF will continue to monitor attacks on journalists and obstruction of the media's work in Venezuela, as part of an international electoral observation mission being carried out with various partner organisations.