

Venezuelan election poses risks for press

CARACAS, VENEZUELA: "The nearer we get to the elections, the more the media risks coming under attack." So said Miguel Henrique Otero, publisher of daily newspaper *El Nacional*, in a meeting with a WAN-IFRA delegation that conducted a mission to Venezuela earlier this month to assess the press freedom situation after 14 years of rule by President Hugo Chávez.



The full article from WAN-IFRA's mission to Venezuela can be read at www.wan-ifra.org/node/59592.

President Chávez' government has carried out a sophisticated and aggressive campaign of control over the independent media that has silenced the most influential critical voices while maintaining an appearance of media pluralism.

The mission found that many commentators fear the official grip over media might tighten even further. "Attacks against journalists peak during election years," said Marianela Balbi, executive director of Press and Society Institute of Venezuela (IPYS), a local media watchdog. "This election is the most important one since Chavez' arrival to power, and therefore we fear the highest peak ever recorded."

Caracas-based *El Universal*, one of Venezuela's most important national dailies, is a staunch critic of Chávez' government. The newspaper received an anonymous threat on 1 June demanding that its reporters stop investigating the aftermath of a two-week-long riot in April by prisoners in La Planta jail in Caracas, which resulted in the death of nine people.

Rising tension

Media in the provinces are also feeling increased tension ahead of the run-off election between President Chávez and opposition candidate Henrique Capriles on 7 October. *La Prensa* newspaper, based in Barinas state - governed by President Chavez' brother and cited as "the state with the most attacks on freedom of expression" in a recent statement by the National College of Journalists - recently had its editorial independence undermined after local government officials directly intervened to stop the publication of critical articles.

The model of oppression against the media used by Venezuelan authorities has been so effective that many populist leftist governments in the region have applied similar methods.

WAN-IFRA has recently expressed its growing concern over similar government offensives against independent media in a

number of Latin American countries. In the past five months, WAN-IFRA has actively opposed (<http://www.wan-ifra.org/node/59115>) the initiatives led by the Ecuadorian and Venezuelan governments to weaken the Inter-American Human Rights Commission of the Organisation of American States and its Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression.

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