

Freedom of Expression in Venezuela: state of play and lines of action

Joint Statement by UN and IACHR Special Rapporteurs regarding Freedom of Expression in Venezuela

Washington D.C., Ginebra, August 30, 2022,

The UN and Inter-American system Rapporteurs on freedom of expression have come together under the event "Freedom of Expression in Venezuela. State of play and lines of action", held on August 2, 2022, to reflect on the current situation in Venezuela and acknowledge the growing need for commitment and action to fully guarantee the right to freedom of expression in the country.

There are worrying limitations on the exercise of freedom of expression in Venezuela, marked by the harassment and persecution to dissident voices, particularly journalists, media workers and independent media outlets, as well as social leaders and human rights defenders. Restrictive measures have also been reported in the digital space in Venezuela, notably via unjustified internet shutdowns and targeted content blocking against independent media outlets. The closure of media outlets, and/or seizure of their equipment, ordered by the government are increasingly limiting the access of citizens to reliable information from independent sources, while accentuating a general environment of self-censorship among the media.

Of particular concern is the use of criminal law against the media, including the crimes of treason or terrorism, and the reiterated application of the 2017 Law Against Hatred. This Law mandates fines and up to 20 years' imprisonment for anyone who disseminates via traditional or social media information deemed "intolerant". The law also allows authorities greater legal grounds to block digital content deemed contrary to its standards.

The right to freedom of expression is a essential to the protection and promotion of democracy and the Rule of Law. Free, independent, and pluralistic media both online and offline is critical for a democratic society to make informed decisions, hold governments, institutions and individuals accountable and hear a diversity of opinions. Being able to work in safety allows journalists to fulfill their fundamental role as a source of objective and unbiased information.

The undersigned understand that it is essential to redouble efforts to accompany Venezuelan civil society at this time. In this sense, they firmly condemn attacks against independent press and urge Venezuelan authorities to respect the right to freedom of expression, particularly of those who contribute with their work to the strengthening of public deliberation and freedom of expression, such as journalists and media workers. We express our particular concern regarding the situation of women journalists who also must face structural obstacles in their exercise of freedom of expression, including and gender-based violence.

Bearing this in mind, the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Office of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression call for continued engagement by all actors to promote of freedom of expression in Venezuela, particularly along the following lines of work:

- Closely monitor and raise awareness on the restrictions to freedom of expression, particularly on media freedom in Venezuela, with special consideration on harassment and persecution of media workers and independent media outlets, and using a gender-based approach.
- Use of international mechanisms to protect Venezuelan press, in particular women journalists.
- Monitor the impact of the restrictive and regressive regulatory framework as well as practices that affect the exercise of freedom of expression, association and access to information, including in the digital space, and advocate for laws to be modified in accordance with international standards.
- Strengthen the media, including through providing international support for independent and plural journalism, including initiatives encouraging the participation of women in the media environment.

Signed on August 30, 2022 by,

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and

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UN Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of
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