

Friday, 07 May 2010

GUEST BLOG: A Columnist Sentenced to Three Years in Prison in Ecuador

Reprinted with permission from Cato-at-liberty.org

Gabriela Calderon de Burgos



Gabriela Calderon de Burgos. Source: Cato Institute.

Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa has long labeled the free press as his “main enemy.” His attitude has unfortunately resulted in official intolerance of individuals critical of the government.

The latest example is that of Emilio Palacio, the editor of the op-ed page of *El Universo* — the newspaper with the highest circulation in the country — who was sentenced on Friday to three years in jail for [an op-ed he wrote in August 2009](#). Palacio accused Camilo Samán, director of a state-owned bank, of having sent protesters to *El Universo*’s offices after the newspaper reported on possible acts of corruption at the bank. The President has repeatedly stated that Palacio should be punished for what he wrote. In a country where everybody knows that the courts are not independent of political power, it’s not surprising that the ruling went against the editor.

I have known Palacio since I began writing op-eds for *El Universo* in late 2006. Although we hardly ever agree on policy issues, I certainly don’t believe he (or anyone else) deserves to go to jail (and possibly pay a fine of \$3 million) for expressing an opinion. (The court actually found Palacio guilty of libel, but even if we were to agree with that finding, the punishment surely does not fit the crime.)

Correa’s government has [accused at least 31 people](#) of offending “the majesty of the presidency,” jailing many of them for short periods of time.

To do so, the President revived a law that the first military dictatorship of the 1970s put into place that made such an offense a crime and that was never taken off the books.

The government regularly vilifies its critics including journalists, university students, businessmen, and indigenous leaders. For example, during his weekly national radio shows, the President has attacked Carlos Vera and Jorge Ortiz, the two most popular news anchors in the country. The government's frequent nationally televised messages (that every TV station on public airwaves is forced to broadcast) usually have the sole purpose of attacking a person or group that opposes official policy. Sometimes these messages were broadcast during Vera's and Ortiz's programs, thereby keeping their viewers from watching them. In 2008 Correa took over several privately owned TV and radio stations. Last year, he apparently had his eyes set on Teleamazonas, another TV station on public airwaves. In December, the government shut down Teleamazonas for three days and now has a frivolous legal case pending against it.

Sadly, Correa is following the pattern of his fellow populist Hugo Chávez in curtailing freedom of speech, though receiving virtually no international scrutiny.

First published on cato-at-liberty.org on 29 March 2010.

The author is the Editor of EICato.org, the Cato Institute's spanish language website and a weekly columnist for El Universo (Ecuador).

© IPI: International Press Institute 2010