

Sr. Nayib Bukele
Presidente de la República
Calle Circunvalación #248,
Colonia San Benito, San Salvador
El Salvador

January 12, 2020

Dear President Bukele:

We are disturbed to learn of continued attacks on freedom of the press in your country. On August 1, 2019, we wrote to you about smear campaigns, threats, and online harassment against three journalists who reported on the potential human rights impacts of your government's "*plan de control territorial*," which increases police and military presence in certain regions to combat criminal gang activity. We do not see the situation improving for journalists in El Salvador.

Journalists have reported being excluded from presidential press conferences during your first six months in office. They have also reported at least one disabling cyberattack on a news website during that period. The newspaper *El Diario de Hoy* saw government advertising suspended after it covered one of these developments.


Some journalists have said that they feel your government does not want independent journalism in El Salvador. They are troubled by characterizations of their media outlets as "fake news" coming from your office's Twitter and Facebook accounts. They feel that you verbally attack the journalists rather than answer their questions. Other Twitter accounts have followed your lead in attacking journalists. One Twitter account, which uses the name Lazmen, imitates your phraseology (e.g., "se les ordena") and jokes that his tweets come from the "Ministry of Trolls." This same Twitter account shared an image encouraging his nearly 2,000 followers to "mute or block" the three journalists who were the subject of our August 1, 2019 letter: Bessy Ríos (social media activist), Karen Fernández (FOCOS TV), Mariana Belloso (journalist for *La Prensa Gráfica* and radio presenter).

We understand that restrictions on press freedom have continued since we wrote to you on August 1, 2019. In September, **Gabriel Labrador** of *El Faro* and **Fernando Romero** of *Revista Factum* were barred from a presidential press conference, a sanction that your office officially announced on Twitter. (Then in October, a cyberattack devastated *Revista Factum*, making the website inaccessible for about a week.) When *El Diario de Hoy* documented the exclusion of *El Faro* and *Revista Factum* from the press conference, they saw government advertising contracts withdrawn the next day for "denouncing" the action. Fabricio Altamirano, editor and publisher of *El Diario de Hoy*, stated that around this same time, the government canceled a printing contract that his publishing company had with the Ministry of Education. Fabricio Altamirano called this action "an intent to damage our group financially," something he said has "never happened in the last ten years."

To foster a climate of protection for journalists and freedom of expression, **we urge that you:**

- refrain from publicly discrediting journalists for exercising their right to freedom of expression and opinion
- prohibit your government agencies from retaliating against media outlets (e.g., canceling printing or advertising contracts) that report news critical of your administration
- take all necessary measures to prevent hate speech and online violence against journalists.

Sincerely,


Brian J. Stefan Szittai
Co-Coordinator


Christine Stonebraker-Martinez

copies: Dr. Raúl Ernesto Melara Morán, Fiscal General de la República ~ via email
Ronald Johnson, US Ambassador to El Salvador ~ via US mail
Werner Romero, Chargé d'Affaires, Embassy of El Salvador in Washington, DC ~ via email and US mail
El Salvador Desk, US State Department ~ via email
Margarette May Macaulay, Rapporteur for El Salvador, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via email & US mail
Edison Lanza, Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights ~ via email & US mail
US Senators Brown & Portman ~ via email
US Representatives Beatty, Fudge, Gibbs, Gonzalez, Johnson, Jordan, Joyce, Kaptur, Latta, Ryan ~ via email

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The following people hereby urge you to take action on this matter as indicated in this letter: