

Venezuela, Honduras, Peru, Ecuador: Media Lies and “Oversights”

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It may be useful to assess the dangers of the systematically hostile attitude of the overwhelming majority of major European and North American media companies in relation to the current events taking place in Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela. This hostility is only matched by an embarrassed, complicit silence with regard to those involved in the putsch in Honduras or the repression enacted by the Peruvian army against the indigenous populations of the Amazon.

In order to demonstrate this statement, here are a few recent facts:

1) On 5 June 2009, the Peruvian army massacred over 50 Amazonian Indians who were protesting against the land concessions made by Alan Garcia’s government for foreign, mainly European transnational companies. The repression aroused no disapproval among the major global media groups. [1] These groups gave almost exclusive priority to the protests occurring in Iran. Not only did the press fail to condemn the repression in Peru; it did not even bother to cover the story. And yet in Peru, so great was public discontent that the government had to announce the repeal of the presidential decree which the Amazonian Indians had fought against.

Once again, media coverage of the government’s backtracking was almost non-existent. We must ask ourselves the following question: if a Venezuelan or Ecuadorian army or police intervention had caused the deaths of dozens of Amazonian Indians, what kind of media coverage would such events have received?

2) When the constitutionally elected president Manuel Zelaya was ousted by the military on 28 June, the overwhelming majority of media groups declared, in total contradiction of the truth, that the soldiers were reacting to Zelaya’s attempt to modify the constitution, thus ensuring he could remain in power. Several other media groups added that he was following the example of Hugo Chavez, who is presented as an authoritarian populist leader. In fact, Manuel Zelaya was proposing to the Honduran citizens that they vote in favour of the organization of general elections for a Constituent Assembly, which would have represented real democratic progress being made in this country. This is well explained by Cécile Lamarque and Jérôme Duval on their return from a CADTM mission in Honduras:

“The coup d’Etat was carried out on the same day Manuel Zelaya had organized a non-binding “consultation” asking the Hondurans whether or not they wanted to convene a National Constituent Assembly, after the elections which were due to take place on the 29 November 2009. The question went like this: “Do you agree that at the next general elections of 2009, a fourth ballot box be installed so as to allow for the people to express

their point of view on the convocation of a national Constituent Assembly? YES or NO?" *If this consultation had resulted in the majority voting "yes", the president would have issued a decree of approval before Congress so that, on 29 November, the Hondurans would formally make known their decision on the convocation of a Constituent Assembly through this "fourth ballot box" (the first three ballot boxes would be for the election of a president, deputies and mayors, respectively). In order to give an air of legality to the coup, Congress and the Supreme Court, associated with the putsch, deemed the ballot box to be illegal and asserted that president Zelaya had "violated the Constitution" by trying to modify it "so as to set his sights on serving a new mandate", in the manner of an "apprentice Chavist dictator". And yet, Manuel Zelaya, through this consultation with the people, was not seeking to renew his presidential mandate of four years which cannot be renewed. Zelaya would therefore be unable to be a candidate for his own succession.*" [2]

Whilst the popular movements opposing those involved in the Putsch increased, with protests and strikes in July, August and September, the big media names only dedicated a couple of lines to these events. On the rare occasions when the leading daily newspapers dedicated a feature article to the situation in Honduras, they adopted a policy of slander against the constitutionally elected president by presenting the military's actions as a democratic military coup. This is the case with The Wall Street Journal, which in its editorial on 1 July 2009 wrote, *"the military coup d'Etat which took place in Honduras on June 28th and which led to the exile of the president of this central American country, Manuel Zelaya, is strangely democratic."* The editorial adds, *"the legislative and judicial authorities will remain intact"* following military action. On its part, perhaps in a more subtle manner, the famous French newspaper Le Monde participated in a smear campaign against Manuel Zelaya. Here is one example. On 12 September 2009, Jean-Michel Caroit, the paper's special correspondent in Honduras, quoted the words of a French expatriate living in the country and then associated these words with the systematically repeated lie regarding Zelaya's supposedly sinister intentions, *" 'For the Hondurans, Zelaya's return is unacceptable as that would mean there would be twenty years of a Chavez-style dictatorship,' states Marianne Cadario in reference to the Venezuelan president who - as his ally Manuel Zelaya tried to do (underlined by me) - modified the Constitution in order for him to be allowed to be re-elected. Marianne Cadario, a Frenchwoman who has lived in Honduras for over thirty years states that she is "very shocked by the reaction of the international community who condemned the putsch."* [3] The tone of newspapers like Le Monde and Libération began to change at the end of September after those involved in the putsch began to increase their repressive measures. The tone became more critical of those involved in the putsch. Having said this, the daily newspaper Libération deserves a prize for its use of euphemisms. In fact on 28 September 2009 (3 months to the day after the coup) the title *"The Scent of Dictatorship"* (underlined by me) of a paragraph explaining how the government involved in the putsch had declared, *"the banning of "any public unauthorized meeting," the arrest of "anyone putting their lives or anyone else's in danger" "evacuation" of areas where there are protesters and those who interfere with "any broadcasting of programmes by any media that endanger public order."* [4]

3) At the beginning of August 2009, the Venezuelan authorities' intention to question the right of 34 radio and television channels made the headlines in the international press: *"It is further proof of the almost total disappearance of the right to expression and criticism in this authoritarian country."* The way in which the major news publications treat the subject of the media in Venezuela is one of unilateral hostility, despite the fact that 90% of the Venezuelan media is privately owned, a large number of which actively support

disinformation campaigns. Globovisión, one of the main privately-owned TV channels, actively participated in the military coup d'Etat against Chavez on 11 April 2002. A documentary made by Globovisión made its way around the world on 11 April 2002 and the days following the military coup. It was actually a set-up, designed to distort the truth. One can see people posing as Chavez supporters on a bridge, firing their guns in an unidentifiable direction. The voice-over of the Globovisión journalist states that the Chavez supporters are about to kill opposition protesters who were protesting peacefully in the streets below the bridge. The Venezuelan prosecution has been able to reconstruct the exact chain of events, having analysed the reports and photographs made by certain individuals on the day of 11 April. In fact the pro-Chavez militants, who, according to Globovisión, were shooting at protesters, were actually responding to gunfire coming from an armoured vehicle of the metropolitan police, allied to the putsch. The opposition protesters were no longer in the streets when those guns were fired. Several sources can prove without a doubt that the assassination of the anti-Chavez protesters was used as a set-up so as to attribute these crimes to Chavez, thus justifying their coup. On 11 April 2008, the Venezuelan viewers were able to see again the images of the press conference given by the military involved in the putsch at a time when no protester had been killed yet. And yet the military announced at that time that they were taking power following the murders carried out by the Chavez supporters. This clearly supports the theory that these murders were planned deliberately so as to be able to justify their seditious plan.

In the days following the putsch, on 12 and 13 April 2002, when hundreds of thousands of unarmed citizens surrounded the barracks of the putschists to demand the return of Hugo Chavez, then in prison, Globovisión failed to broadcast any coverage of these protests, explaining that the country was back to normal and that Hugo Chavez had tendered his resignation and was on his way to Cuba. During the last hours of the putsch, this channel broadcast only cartoons and variety shows [5]. Globovisión in fact connived with the putschists on several critical occasions, a fact which led the parents of victims and injured survivors' associations to demand the channel's conviction. Up to now the Chavist government has refused this demand in order to prevent further escalation of the international smear campaign being waged against him. Several human rights associations are dissatisfied with the passive attitude of the Venezuelan authorities in this matter.

More recently, Globovisión has been sympathetic towards the authors of the 28 June putsch in Honduras. Several programme presenters at Globovisión have supported the putsch from the very beginning, at the same time accusing the Chavez government of interference in condemning it. For example, Guillermo Zuloaga, the president of Globovisión, stated on 17 July that *"the government of Micheletti complies with the Constitution, and we would like, indeed we would be delighted, if here in Venezuela, the Constitution was respected in the same way that it is in Honduras"*, thus making clear his support for the putschist government.

Globovisión has never been prohibited from broadcasting. What major European or North-American media has even mentioned this fact? What major European or North-American media has ever informed the public that the overwhelming majority of Venezuelan media are controlled by the private sector? Or that they account for over 90% of the viewing audience? Or that they are extremely aggressive towards the government, presenting it as a dictatorship, or that some of them played an active part in ousting a constitutionally elected president, and have continued to broadcast freely for seven years? Can one imagine General de Gaulle failing to take repressive measures against a newspaper, radio or TV

station that was seen to actively support an OAS coup during the Algerian war? Would it not be considered normal for the Spanish government to take measures against the media that actively supported - in real time - Colonel Tejero when he burst into the Cortes [6] with a group of military putschists and held (up) at gunpoint the MPs who were there? If Manuel Zelaya were restored to office as constitutional president, would he and his government not be in their right to demand accountability and take measures against the Honduran media owners who deliberately supported the putschists by systematically deforming the truth and covering up the many human rights violations committed by the military?

4) Arms spending. When you read the European or North American papers, you have the distinct impression that Venezuela is indulging in huge arms expenditures (particularly by way of Russia), which poses a serious threat in the region. Yet according to the CIA [7] the situation is quite different: the Venezuelan military budget ranks 6th in the region, after the budgets of Brazil, Argentina, Chile (far less populated than Venezuela and regarded as a model), Colombia and Mexico. In relative terms, taking the GDP of each country, the Venezuelan military budget comes 9th in Latin America! Is any of this published in the leading news publications?

On another front, in August 2009 we read in the papers that Sweden took Venezuela to task after the Colombian government once again denounced its neighbour for supplying arms to the FARC guerilla. Sweden had in fact informed Colombia that SAAB missiles found in a FARC camp had been supplied by Venezuela. But for those who read Hugo Chavez' detailed response it became clear that the missiles in question had been stolen from a Venezuelan harbour in 1995, four years before Chavez became president.

Conclusion

One needs to be aware of the one-sided manner in which the leading media report the news, and adopt a highly critical approach when appraising it. The discrediting of Hugo Chavez, Rafael Correa and Evo Morales is so excessive that it poses the risk of numbing international public opinion in the event of another coup d'Etat, or of lulling the public into approving aggressive measures taken by a government such as the US. Among the many insidious and unfounded accusations, we can read in the Spanish papers (for example in El Pais) that Rafael Correa's election campaign was financed by the FARC. We can also read that the Venezuelan authorities do nothing to fight drug trafficking. In the case of the Honduran president Manuel Zelaya, the discredit heaped on him is intended to prevent international opinion mobilizing in favour of his return to power as head of State.

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1. See <http://www.cadtm.org/Le-CADTM-est-pleinement-solidaire> and <http://www.cadtm.org/Perou-le-massacre-de-Bagua>

2. Cécile Lamarque and Jérôme Duval, « Honduras : Why the Coup d'Etat », 17 September

2009, www.cadtm.org/Honduras-Pourquoi-le-coup-d-Etat

3. Jean-Michel Caroit, « Au Honduras, la campagne électorale s'ouvre dans un climat de haine », Le Monde, p. 8, Saturday 12 September 2009.

4. <http://www.liberation.fr/monde/0101593847-le-honduras-s-enfonce-dans-la-crise>

5. It is interesting at this point to note the initiative of Hugo Chavez' government on 11 April 2008, six years after the putsch. The government used its right to broadcast on the private and public TV stations to show a re-run of the entire reportage produced by the anti-Chavist private channels (Globovisión, RCTV...) on the official inauguration session of the president and the putschist government in a reception room in the Miraflores presidential palace. The complete programme, which the whole of Venezuela could watch on 11 April 2002, was re-broadcast without any cuts or critical commentary by the Chavez government. Hugo Chavez relied on the critical acumen of Venezuelan viewers to form their own opinion on the active complicity of the private media with those behind the putsch, amongst whom the viewer could identify the leading Catholic church authorities, the putschist military brass, the head of the anti-Chavist labour union CTV (Confederation of Workers of Venezuela), the chief executives of private corporations and the president of the Venezuelan Federation of Chambers of Commerce (Fedecámaras), Pedro Carmona. It should be said that this president, who held power for scarcely 36 hours, earned the enduring nickname of "Pepe el breve" (Pepe the brief).

6. On 23 February 1981, an attempted coup d'état organized by Franquist sectors took place in the Spanish Congress, The leader, Colonel Tejero, held up the members of parliament present at gunpoint and took them hostage as the new president of the government was being sworn in.

7. See <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>, consulted in March 2009

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