

Editor Fights for Press Freedoms



Mónica Quesada | Tico Times

Champion for Free Speech: Press freedom advocate and former editor Eduardo Ulibarri explains why Costa Rica needs press law reforms.

obstacles in its path – there's a reason this reform has been in the assembly for more than six years.

The other problem is that other parties that might not have that attitude, still don't see the reforms as a priority. That's why we think the most convenient way to process this would be to send it to the special commission.

So President Oscar Arias' vow to put it on the extraordinary agenda showed support – but not entirely.

Exactly. It's support we have to thank him for, and I think it's a good attitude. But it's more symbolic than practical, because it would be much more efficient for the Liberation legislators to give their votes so it can be sent to commission.

How would these reforms change jour-

nalism here on a daily basis?

There's a trend in Costa Rican journalism that's not very positive. Lots of journalists and media see public issues as secondary. They have a more frivolous agenda – sports, show business, celebrities – not so much to the work of investigation, which is where this kind of legislation is really important. But I think there are other media where they do think about it a lot.

If this reform is approved more or less as is, it won't open the door for irresponsible journalism, which is what some people say: "They'll do whatever they want." If it's proved that a journalist acted irresponsibly, he or she can still be condemned. What this will do is improve the equilibrium.

Do you see that "frivolous agenda" of some media as the result of the climate of intimidation you've described?

I'd like to say it is, but I think it's not, honestly. And it's not just a Costa Rican tendency. It's part of this whole transition of media and changes in society – a lot of people are out of touch with public matters and are more interested in (lighter topics). And sometimes the press hasn't been conscious enough that there are certain values and journalistic responsibilities that are part of their democratic contract. Many media have subordinated those values just for the sake of circulation or ratings.

This is negative, even from a commercial point of view, because many media end up competing with entertainment, and that's a very difficult area to compete in. It's better to compete in the area of news and information. Of course, media still have to be balanced. One needs to consume information but also have some fun.

It worries me, because if the media don't do their work well, that opens the door to critics, and for those critics not to support a bill like this, or even to create bills that limit the press even more.

It must be interesting, as a Cuban by birth and a defender of press freedoms, to watch the situation of media in that country.

Ah, yes. One of the reasons I ended up as a journalist was all that impact one feels from experiencing an authoritarian, totalitarian regime. During university, it was a challenge sometimes, because I started in 1969, when the university was polarized to the left, sympathetic with Fidel Castro. I felt an urge to defend my principles – I studied to be able to debate with professors and students. That helped me a great deal.

The reason for our departure was political. The reasons for our arrival here were two: I had an uncle who lived here, and also, the Vietnam War was at its peak, and I was 14. My dad wasn't too interested in me going to the United States and ending up in the Vietnam jungle.

I see (going back if the regime changes) as an option... it's like an aspiration of mine. I'd like that. ■

Will Press Bill Move Ahead?

As proponents of the Freedom of the Press and Expression Law continue the struggle to get it to a vote after more than six years in the Legislative Assembly, its fate appears to have come down to the decision of one party: National Liberation (PLN).

To send the bill to the Third Plenary Commission – one of three sub-commissions made up of one-third of the assembly, with the power to vote certain bills into law – at least two-thirds of the 57-member assembly must vote in favor of such a move. Therefore, the support of Liberation's 25 lawmakers are key.

The party is apparently on the fence. According to José Manuel Echandi, the only legislator from the National Union Party (PUN) and arguably the reforms' most vocal advocate in the assembly, Liberation faction head Mayi Antillón has said her legislators need to talk over the idea, though President Oscar Arias has expressed support for the commission approach.

In addition to Echandi, who presented the Plenary Commission idea earlier this year, the 17 legislators from the Citizen Action Party (PAC) firmly support the bill. Echandi told The Tico Times the Social Christian Unity Party (PUSC) and the Broad Front, represented by José Merino, are the other parties that appear opposed to delegating the bill to commission.

Echandi said he's optimistic Liberation will cooperate. However, press-freedom advocate Eduardo Ulibarri (see interview at left) said he's worried that PUSC – the party of both the ex-Presidents whose allegedly corrupt acts came to public attention as the result of stories by Channel 7 TV News and the daily La Nación in 2004 – may pressure Liberation to slow down the bill.

"I'm afraid there could be some type of pressure from Unity toward the National Liberation Party. I hope not, but it's possible," he said.

Antillón and Unity faction head Lorena Vasquez did not return Tico Times phone calls by press time.

–Katherine Stanley

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