

Guatemala | Attacks against journalists and human rights defenders evince the need for a protection policy

Author Tess McEvoy

‘Human rights defenders are a fundamental pillar to the construction and protection of the nascent democracy that exists in Guatemala. That is why in 2014 the [Inter-American Court of Human Rights ordered the State to implement a comprehensive public policy for their protection](#).’ says Carlos Martínez, a lawyer at Bufete de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala, an organisation that has represented human rights defenders at national and international levels.

‘Almost seven years since that decision, and such a policy has not materialised. The fact that journalists and defenders continue to carry out their work despite increasingly adverse conditions is a testament to their courage.’ added Martínez.

During the past few months, there have been multiple reports of harassment of Guatemalan defenders. While this is not new, the direct participation of government agents in cases of reprisals has raised alarms. Four exemplary cases that occurred during the months of May and June are set out below:

- A member of the Supreme Court of Justice [harassed](#) a Guatemalan correspondent for [CNN](#) by [taking and sharing pictures](#) of her during an official event.
- The [irregular](#) detention and [arrest](#) of [anti-graft crusaders](#) Juan Foppa and Aníbal Argüello under disproportionate [charges](#) for allegedly ‘falsifying documents to form a political party’.
- [Accusations](#) of [gender-based psychological violence](#) and [restraining orders](#) against [journalists](#) Marvin del Cid and Sonny Figueroa following their [investigations](#) into claims of corruption and [orchestration](#) of defamation campaigns by important political figures.
- The [arrest](#) and [use of excessive force](#) when [detaining](#) 21 Maya Q’eqchi’ defenders of the Chicoyogüito Community, who were peacefully reclaiming their [ancestral land](#).

The need for an HRD protection policy

These cases provide clear examples of where government agents have ordered, aided and/or permitted attacks and reprisals against human rights defenders.

‘It cannot be said that these are isolated incidents, as the government has not shown any interest in protecting human rights defenders’ said ISHR’s Javier Urizar. ‘The national protection agency was inexplicably eliminated [5 days](#) after its [creation](#), even when [prisoners of conscience](#), such as [Bernardo Caal](#), are still serving unjust sentences’ he concluded.

National civil society has expressed its concern about the lack of protection of HRDs, lamenting both the absence of an agency, as well as of a public policy for the protection of defenders.

Jorge Santos, General Coordinator of Unidad de Protección a Defensores y Defensoras de Derechos Humanos de Guatemala (UDEFEUGUA) indicates that ‘It is necessary that the Guatemalan government facilitates a setting of State-building and institutional rescue that respects, protects and guarantees human rights, particularly enabling the freedom to exercise the right to defend rights. A first step would be to resume the necessary work to design the public policy for the protection of human rights defenders’.