

# Ecuador: Correa pushes free speech, challenges ‘media dictatorship’

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The decision by WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange to seek asylum in Ecuador’s London Embassy triggered an international media campaign that highlighted the “hypocrisy” of his decision to choose a country condemned for supposed attacks on press freedom.

The campaign reached a fever pitch following Ecuador’s decision to grant the dissident journalist asylum on August 16. Commentators used the opportunity to stick the boot into both Ecuador and Assange.

Peter Hartcher, the political editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, headlined his August 21 attack: “Hypocrisy ends hero’s freedom to preach.”

Assange was previously a “principled and plucky champion of freedom of speech”, Hartcher said, but “the moment Assange decided to seek shelter in Ecuador ... he betrayed the principles he claimed to represent ...

“Why? Because Ecuador, under its President of the last five years, Rafael Correa, has become one of the world’s leading oppressors of free speech.”

This showed that “the cause of principle was just a flag of convenience for Assange. He is now just a sad and desperate fugitive.”

However, as Correa has noted, the very fact that Assange has had to seek refuge in Ecuador shows up the claims of respect for free speech by so-called democratic Western countries such as the United States, Britain and Australia.

A closer look at the international media campaign against Ecuador shows has “free speech” is being used, again, as a smoke screen to protect powerful interests — in this case, a media dictatorship.

Like the campaign against Assange, the corporate media campaign against Correa is driven by the threat the example of his government poses to the powerful.

Hartcher trotted out the same smears repeated ad nauseam — without the slightest attempt to investigate their veracity or explain the real circumstances surrounding the allegations.

Hartcher accuses Correa of having shut down media outlets willing to criticise his government. Yet no radio station, television channel or newspaper has ever been closed by Correa for what they said.

Some have had their broadcasting licences revoked because they refused to pay their

licence fee or were operating outside their legally allotted frequency.

Hartcher also referred to a libel suit pursued by Correa against a journalist and three executives from the *El Universo* newspaper, but makes no mention of what was at stake in the case.

After years of constant media barrage accusing Correa of everything imaginable, the Ecuadoran president finally demanded last year a retraction and apology for an article that not only stated he was a “dictator”, but falsely accused him of ordering soldiers to indiscriminately fire upon innocent civilians in a hospital.

The article referred to events that occurred on September 30, 2010, and which at the time was widely denounced by governments across the region as a coup attempt against Correa.

In the days leading up to the failed coup, various media outlets — including *El Universo* — had called on police officers to rebel against the government, with the hope that these actions could bring down the democratically elected president.

When a police mutiny erupted on September 30, Correa was taken hostage by rebel police officers. In response, many poor Ecuadorans — who have benefited from the rise on social spending under Correa — marched to support the president they placed in office.

Loyal soldiers finally broke into the hospital where Correa was being held hostage.

Unsurprisingly, Ecuador’s independent judiciary ruled the accusation that Correa — the victim of a coup plot — was in fact the culprit, was libelous.

Under the guise of standing up for free speech, Hartcher defends the right of media outlets to illegally avoid licence fees, and having no accountability for lies they disseminate.

As is often the case, such journalists use the banner of “free speech” to defend a media dictatorship. In this case, the domination of Ecuador’s media by the oligarchy, which is bent on monopolising control of information for its own economic and political interests.

On the other hand, Correa and the Ecuadorian people have not been afraid to challenge this media dictatorship.

Far from restrict free speech, the Correa government has sought to extend it by democratising the media.

He explained in an interview with Assange on Russia Today, that his government’s media policy is not anti-free speech.

Rather, it opposes media corporations that, through their monopoly on information, have tried to “destabilise our government to avoid any change in our region and lose the power that they have always flaunted”.

“The private media are big business with lucrative aims,” Correa said. “They have always attacked governments who want to change, governments who seek justice and equity.”

Such views were, in part, shared by the US embassy in Ecuador.

A US embassy cable from March 2009 released by WikiLeaks said there was some truth to

Correa's claim that "the Ecuadorian media play a political role, in this case the role of the opposition".

The reason was evident: "Many media outlet owners come from the elite business class that feels threatened by Correa's reform agenda, and defend their own economic interests via their outlets."

Faced with this scenario, the Correa government, with the backing of its people, has sought to break this monopoly.

One way has been through the establishment of a public TV channel and giving support to community-based media outlets. This has been done via granting them licences and providing them with necessary equipment.

Another has been to democratise the existing media set-up.

In 2008, Ecuadorians voted overwhelmingly for a new constitution that, among other things, bans bank owners from having business interests in the media industry.

Last year, voters approved changes to the constitution that prohibits media corporations from owning or having shares in business interests in other industries, thereby avoiding potential conflicts of interest in reporting news.

The government has also tried to pass a new media law that would break up the corporate media monopoly. The law is being blocked by right-wing forces in parliament.

Under the new law, private media ownership would be restricted to 33% of all media outlets, with the state controlling a further 33% and community media having the largest share — 34%.

It is these attempts to break the media dictatorship, democratise the right to information and ensure media corporations are not beyond the law, that explain the international media campaign to brand his government an "enemy of free speech".

That Hartcher, like many other journalists across the globe, would come out against Correa and in defence of this media dictatorship is no surprise, as Ecuador's media is merely a reflection of media ownership everywhere.

The *SMH* likes to portray itself as the intelligent and balanced alternative to the News Ltd media empire that controls 70% of Australia's metropolitan press. But they are simply one more pillar of Australia's profit-driven media dictatorship.

One example is *SMH's* dealings with WikiLeaks itself.

When *SMH* signed an agreement with WikiLeaks to have exclusive access to leaked embassy cables, the newspaper's editor-in-chief Peter Fray justified its decision to withhold the cables and the information contained in them on the grounds that "to put the material online would be to give access to our competitors in the local market".

*SMH's* right to make money trumped any right of the rest of society has to access the information.

This was not an exception. Fairfax's director of organisational effectiveness, Mark Scott, explained in 2002, the driving philosophy behind the Fairfax media empire was its "strategy to create editorial to support maximising revenues from display advertising".

Above freedom of information and speech, comes freedom to make as much money as possible, no matter what.

That is why, just as the US hates Assange for releasing information they wanted to keep secret, media corporations hate Ecuador for challenging their right to control information.

As long as a tiny handful of media corporations control this information and use it to pursue their own economic or political interests, their cries of "free speech" will continue to ring hollow.

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