



International Federation of Journalists

Missing Link in Venezuela's Political Crisis

How Media and Government Failed a Test of Journalism and Democracy



**Report of IFJ Mission to Caracas
June 10-12, 2002**

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CONTENTS

1. Introduction	Page 2
2. Background to the Crisis	Page 4
3. April 2002 and the Aftermath	Page 6
4. Conclusions and Recommendations	Page 12
Appendices	Page 17

1. Introduction

The landslide election victory of President Hugo Chavez in 1998 opened up a new and turbulent era in Venezuelan politics. The IFJ and other international press freedom groups have watched with growing unease as journalists have found themselves in the center of the country's most dangerous political storm in more than 40 years. The IFJ has had a close-up view of this crisis; our Regional Office, serving Latin American journalists associations and unions, is based in Caracas.

This report does not examine the roots and causes of Venezuela's wider conflict, but is concerned only with the role and responsibility of journalists and media organisations before, during and immediately after the April 11-13 coup that briefly overthrew Chavez.

Journalism was a key player on this political battleground. Some sections of media were clearly instigators – and some may even have been active participants – in the conspiracy to overthrow Chavez and the rest of Venezuela's democratic order. This political protagonism led to harsh public criticism of media owners and rank-and-file journalists.

Within months after Chavez took office in February 1999, he shepherded in a new constitution and a sweeping package of social and economic reforms. Backed initially by overwhelming support from Venezuela's poor, he attacked some of the country's established institutions – including business, media and labour unions – and tried to create a new social and economic order. These changes met fierce criticism, however, especially from media owners who used their newspapers and television newscasts to rally opposition. Chavez answered the media criticism

with harsh rhetoric of his own, accusing media owners of being part of the “rancid oligarchy” that must be overturned.

The anti-Chavez opposition grew steadily, accelerating when the nation’s economy nose-dived in late 2001 and early 2002, and culminated in the April 11-13 coup. In a bizarre and still largely mysterious series of events, Chavez was ousted by the military high command after 19 people were killed during opposition street protests, then was swept back into office 48 hours later after his angry and confused supporters took to the same streets demanding his reinstatement.

On April 12, the day after the bloody street violence that prompted the military takeover, the IFJ, which had protested earlier about the government’s campaign against the media, issued a press statement focusing on the killing of journalist Jorge Tortoza, one of the 19 killed. The public statements of the IFJ and journalists’ groups in Venezuela and a list of incidents in 2001 and 2002 are attached to this report (Appendix 1).

After the coup, the poisonous hostility between the government and the press continued worsening. As a result, the IFJ decided to send a mission to Caracas to:

- Examine the political and media situation and investigate the role of media organisations during the events of April 9-14, 2002;
- Discuss with journalists and media staff the measures needed to strengthen professionalism, impartiality and journalistic independence.

Immediately prior to the visit, the IFJ Executive Committee, meeting in Washington DC, expressed strongly the IFJ’s support for journalists in Venezuela, and called for urgent actions that will secure greater respect for editorial and journalistic independence.

The IFJ selected high-ranking representatives with professional experience of the region and an extensive knowledge of the problems facing journalists in their daily lives. The mission consisted of three members:

Aidan White	General Secretary of the IFJ
Oswaldo Urriolabeitia	Vice President of the IFJ (Fatpren, Argentina)
Robert Collier	Journalist, San Francisco (TNG-CWA, USA)

The mission members are grateful for the active engagement in the mission’s work by the staff of the IFJ Regional Office and especially by regional officer **Gregorio Salazar**. Their help and support were invaluable in ensuring that the mission was efficient and inclusive.

Aidan White,
General Secretary

Brussels, 21 June 2002

2. Background to the Media Crisis

Venezuela is a country of 23 million people with an oil-rich economy. For most of the first half of the 20th century, the country was ruled by military strongmen. The dictatorships of Juan Vicente (1908-35) and of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1948-58) persecuted and murdered their opponents and proscribed political organisations. However, the dictatorships of Eleazar López Contreras (1935-40) and Isaías Medina Angarita (1940-45) were more open and started the transition to democracy and allowed some social reforms. All of these regimes promoted the oil industry.

Democratically elected governments have held sway since 1959. In recent years, the nation's problems have included drug-related conflicts along the Colombian border, increasing internal drug consumption, and an over-dependence on the petroleum industry, which, with price fluctuations, has created constant boom-and-bust turbulence in the national economy.

Because the petroleum sector accounts for roughly one-third of gross domestic product, around 80 percent of export earnings, and more than half of government operating revenues, the fate of Chavez's government, like others before him, was influenced heavily by international oil politics.

Upon assuming office, Chavez carried out a complete reversal of Venezuela's long-time role as OPEC's prime "cheater" (violator of production quotas). Chavez adhered faithfully to Venezuela's quota and rallied other members to do the same. In so doing, Chavez revived the organization's market power and helped raise international oil prices dramatically.

In 1999 and 2000, the rising oil prices flooded Venezuelan government coffers with oil money and caused a brief economic boom. But in 2001 and early 2002, oil plummeted again because of international recession and other factors, thus pushing Venezuela into a recession. The downturn was worsened by severe flooding and landslides in December 1999, which caused an estimated \$15 billion to \$20 billion in damage.

As the economy worsened and opposition complaints grew, Chavez denounced the country's elite and accusing them of having plundered the wealth of oil without industrialising the country. Since his own military adventures – Chavez was involved in two coup attempts in 1992 and spent two years in prison before being granted a pardon – he has held them responsible for 40 years of corruption. Chavez began to alienate people with his bombastic and militaristic style, which has encouraged confrontation, but rendered him high levels of political support among impoverished sections of the population.

In spite of protests from a number of sections of society, the government implemented the policies of redistribution and humanitarian assistance to the population. A Constituent National Assembly approved a new Constitution. As soon as a package of reforms was implemented (most of them contained in the package of 49 laws approved by means of extraordinary powers conferred by the National Assembly) the popular protest movement, headed by business leaders and the country's main trade union group, became more hostile and radical.

Amid this emerging political fight, relations between government and media deteriorated sharply. Several important media organisations, press and private broadcasting, joined a coalition of middle class, business and labour union opposition to the government's reform programme. While large sections of the middle class joined the anti-Chavez lobby, Chavez supporters, from among the poorest sectors of Venezuelan society, remained largely unorganised and lacked the capacity to express themselves.

However, not all media were anti-Chavez. The President has been consistently backed by some major newspapers and broadcasting networks, particularly the state television station *Venezolana de Television* and *Radio Nacional de Venezuela* (RNV).

Role of Journalists and Media

While Venezuelan newspapers, radio and television have always played a sharp-tongued, partisan role in the nation's political battles, the events of April 2002 put an unprecedented spotlight on the role of media and the work of journalists.

Press freedom in Venezuela is secured by two key clauses of the Chavez government's 1999 Constitution. The right to freedom of expression is set out in Article 57 and Article 58 of the Constitution. The right to express opinions freely without censorship (Article 57) and the right to reply (Article 58) are generally in line with international standards.

However, in its 1999 report, the Inter American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) expressed concern about Article 58 of the Constitution, which provides that "*Everyone has the right to timely, truthful, impartial and uncensored information.*" The Commission took issue with the right to "truth and timely" information arguing that this is "*a kind of prior censorship prohibited in the American Convention on Human Rights.*" The IACHR is a principal organ of the Organization of American States (OAS), whose mandate is to promote the observance of human rights in the hemisphere.¹

Arguments over the framing of this Constitution and its contents have been a characteristic of the argument between government and those opposed to the President's economic and social reform programme. The private media

¹ See www.cidh.oas.org

organisations have been among those most critical of the Chavez approach, claiming Chavez was “playing fast and loose with changes in the law” by arbitrarily changing articles, by introducing a Constitutional Council under his own control and by “stealing votes” in the Constitutional referendum.²

Nevertheless, the Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman (Defensoria del Pueblo, or ODP), established under the 1999 Constitution to monitor the application of rights, believes that the Constitution does adequately protect rights to freedom of expression.³ Like all Constitutions, the words are important, but concerns emerge on the interpretation of rights. Only time will tell whether the texts agreed in 1999 underpin freedom of expression.

In line with its responsibility the ODP submitted a detailed draft report to the National Assembly on the events surrounding the coup in April 2002 outlining a number of violations of the editorial independence of media by the president and the failure of media to maintain citizens’ constitutional rights to receive information of public interest. (See Section Three.)⁴

As the political crisis intensified, the media maintained a solid front of opposition and converted itself into the centre of protest against the government.

The administration felt that the only form of public expression for the government was limited to radio and television commentaries made by Chavez himself. However, these were by no means insubstantial. Chavez was given to lengthy television appearances, sometimes of up to four or five hours.

He used his legal right to broadcast to the national television and radio audience to the full and more. The abuse of his privileged access (on April 9 Chavez presented himself 17 times on national television screens) has led to severe criticism both internally and externally. It is an issue taken up by the Inter American Human Rights Commission during its mission to the country in February 2002. An additional hurt to the private media was the impact on advertising as a result of the seemingly endless Presidential speeches. Television companies complained of multimillion losses in revenues through loss of regular programming.

Nevertheless, Chavez directed strong fire against his media critics. He accused media of distortion and bias, and he targeted certain individuals, accusing them of lying. This personalised assault angered many journalists and media. (See Appendix One.)

Media and journalists became actively engaged in the emerging political struggle. Journalists themselves were affected by the increasing polarisation of political debate. The elections to the board of the journalists’ union, the SNTP, in

² Interview with Asdrubal Aguiar, lawyer for El Universal, June 11, 2002

³ Interview with ODP Director General German Saltrón, June 11, 2002

⁴ ODP Sucesos de Abril (informe preliminar), May 2002

September 2001, were carried out in the heat of this debate, there was a list belonging to the 'official line' and pro-Chavez, but a balanced and independent opposition list received 80 per cent of the votes maintaining a leadership that strives to steer a course between the Chavez factions.

Journalists say that after an opposition strike December 10, 2001 the president began to "go after journalists in general." On December 17, during a mass meeting with his supporters, he warned journalists over media hostility to government. Several reporters covering the meeting were attacked immediately. A month later, on January 23, 2002, more than 500 journalists signed a public manifesto demanding that Chavez "stop his aggressions."⁵

In this period, journalists also admit that the levels of professionalism in media were falling. In one case, cited for the mission, an unknown caller to the Globovision television station announced that nine taxi drivers had been killed. This unverified information (which later turned out to be false) was broadcast on air, causing panic and an immediate strike, march and protest by taxi drivers.

The poor performance of media exposed professional problems that were taken advantage of by Chavez. He was furious at media coverage, which contrasted blanket, highly favorable treatment of political opponents and highly negative portrayals of the government. The tone of presidential criticism became bitter and insulting. According to journalists' leaders, Chavez "satanised" media and reporters.

The complaints of media about what they said was a presidential campaign against freedom of the press were taken up by the Inter American Human Rights Commission, which carried out a mission to Venezuela in February 2002.

In his preliminary findings, the Executive Secretary⁶ of the Office of the Rapporteur of the IACHR complained about a range of problems including:

1. *The presence of "insult laws" that stifle dissent.*

The Venezuelan Criminal Code and Code of Military Justice contain laws that penalize offensive expressions directed against government authorities and public officials state officials, known as "insult laws" ("*desacato*" laws).

IFJ Note: These laws, which are widely condemned in many countries by global press freedom groups, protect the honor of public officials acting in their official capacity give but give them an unjustified right to protection not extended to other members of society. This distinction contravenes the basic principle of any democratic system, under which government officials are subject to public

⁵ Interview with Gregorio Salazar, General Secretary, SNTP, June 10, 2002

⁶ Santiago Canton, rapporteur on freedom of expression for the Organisation of American States

scrutiny in order to prevent the abuse of power and privilege. Public officials should be subject to closer scrutiny as a guarantee of the democratic system.

2. State interference in private broadcasting

The state-owned networks have forced other mass media outlets to interrupt their scheduled programs in order to transmit information imposed on them by the government. During the visit, the IACHR saw the use of mass media outlets by the state-owned networks for a duration and with a frequency that could be construed as abusive because the information disseminated in this way might not always be in the public interest.

The IFJ mission was given the opportunity to witness some of these presidential broadcasts. They were often highly critical of media including personal attacks using intemperate language, which, while not of itself beyond the bounds of free expression, certainly contributed to the creation of a confrontational atmosphere between media and government.

3. Lack of Access to Information

The IACHR complained that while it is generally recognised that the right of access to information is important to strengthen democracies and to ensure transparency and open government through oversight of government administration, there are no adequate mechanisms to ensure the effective exercise of this right in Venezuela.

4. Fears Over a “Media Content Law” That Could Permit Censorship

The IACHR was told of the existence of a proposed “content” law, which some observers warned could contain provisions that might affect the exercise of the right to freedom of expression, including provisions that could permit cases of prior censorship.

However, the IFJ has been assured by the president of the National Assembly⁷ that despite some discussion among pro-government deputies about a so-called content law to govern media, *“no such legislation has been introduced or is expected to be introduced.”*

5. Discrimination in The Distribution of State Advertising

Media have complained strenuously about unfair discrimination by the state in the award of advertising material. In particular, the daily newspapers *El Universal*, *El Nacional*, *Tal Cual* and *La Razón* complain that the Chavez administration was penalising them by denying them access to government advertising. The IACHR recommended that government agencies establish clear,

⁷ Willian Lara, interview June 12, 2002

fair, and objective guidelines on how state advertising is distributed and that advertising should never be used with the intention to harm any media outlet or favor one over another.

The conflict between Chavez and the media had been made worse by high-ranking government leaders' criticisms of the mass media and investigative journalists. These official criticisms, said the IACHR, "could lead to acts of intimidation or self-censorship to the detriment of the full exercise of freedom of expression."

Press freedom groups reported that many reporters, camerapersons, and photographers have been the target of physical and verbal attacks. The incidents recorded include threats, physical assaults, damage to professional reputations, and fear on the part of social communicators to identify themselves when they cover government events in case of reprisals.⁸

3. April 2002 and the Aftermath

From December 2001 through the first months of 2002, journalists' groups and the major journalists' trade union issued a number of warnings and protests about the nature of pressure on their members. Some of these are attached to this report. Even the ODP intervened in January 2002 to ask President Chavez to moderate his language when dealing with his opponents in public. During this time, there was virtually no expression of concern from the press freedom community or human rights watchdogs about the quality of media coverage, which was stridently critical of the government, with some media corporations and owners placing themselves squarely within the political camp preparing the *coup d'etat*.

It need hardly be said that by the beginning of April 2002, the hostile and confrontational political atmosphere had made the capacity for impartial reporting of the Chavez administration difficult, if not almost impossible.

On April 11, a major protest demonstration and stoppage of work in Caracas called by the Workers Confederation of Venezuela (CTV) in support of the national strike in the oil industry led to a bloody confrontation and the *coup d'etat*.

The CTV has been a severe critic of the Chavez government. The President threatened to "demolish" the union when he was running for election and the new government insisted that union elections be overseen by the federal election commission, which then refused to validate election results. The CTV has complained bitterly, pointing out that such bureaucratic meddling violates International Labour Organisation conventions that have been signed and ratified by Venezuela. The CTV has been fully supported by the International

⁸ Annual Reports IAHR 2000, 2001

Confederation of Free Trade Unions. Now, even after the failed coup, the CTV remains a hard-line opponent of Chavez, refusing to negotiate with his government and calling for a general strike to help force Chavez from power.

Earlier, as the situation deteriorated, the President insisted on taking over public and private television to speak directly to the people. He made a reported 17 interventions during programming April 9 to air his own opinions about the political crisis.

Media responded in kind April 11 by splitting the screen to show opposition marchers on the street while the President was speaking during the last of his television interventions on that day. As the moment of crisis approached, Chavez took all the private television stations off the air. Only the public broadcaster was allowed to continue transmission.

Moving quickly to take advantage of events, the military high command forced Chavez from power and replaced him with Pedro Carmona Estanga, the president of Fedecameras, Venezuela's leading business association. Within hours, the private media were back, the public broadcaster was closed and Carmona issued a decree giving himself dictatorial powers – firing Chavez's cabinet, dissolving the National Assembly, dismissing the Supreme Court, abolishing the Constitution and giving Carmona the right to fire any elected municipal or state officials.

These extraordinary and undemocratic events were fully reported. On April 12 broadcast media covered live the bizarre scene in Miraflores as Carmona was swearing himself in as President, and where a frenetic and delirious audience furiously applauded all his emergency measures, no matter how absurd, irrational or undemocratic. The story was told vividly by both broadcast and print media.

Alarm bells began to ring immediately, even within the opposition camp. Teodoro Petkoff, Editor of the daily *Tal Cual*, who holds a firm line of criticism to government, was withering in his criticism. He denounced the coup.

However, many media organisations appeared to lose all sense of professional responsibility. On the morning of April 11, television stations (in connivance with the military) began to censor opinions favoring Chavez. They abruptly cut a press conference on April 12 in which the General Attorney was denouncing the violation to the Constitution. On April 13 as opposition to the coup mounted there was clear and unambiguous censorship by television stations.

While pro-Chavez protests began to spread April 13, mainstream media completely ignored these events. Astonishingly, they showed only soap operas and films as thousands of Chavez supporters took to the Caracas streets demanding Chavez's return. Their actions led to violent attacks on media buildings.

The protests built momentum against the coup that eventually, thanks to a *volte-face* within the armed forces, led to the reinstatement of Chavez and the arrest of Carmona. The coup leader was placed under house arrest, then he was granted political asylum in Colombia – from where he argued, extraordinarily, that he had not taken part in a coup at all. “There was simply a vacuum of power and somebody had to fill it,” he told the media.⁹

Nevertheless, the human rights community rapidly condemned the undemocratic and unconstitutional acts of his momentary administration.¹⁰

The interim ODP report confirms violations of press freedom by government, private media and the Carmona administration.¹¹ The report states:

April 9, two days prior to mass anti-Chavez protests:

- Chavez repeatedly used the presidential right to broadcast on radio and television outlets to speak out against the growing general strike led by Fedecameras and CTV;
- Private television stations regularly interrupted their programmes to broadcast anti-government information in favour of the opposition;
- No circulation of major newspapers, in support of the opposition’s general strike.

April 11, day of protests leading to *coup d’etat*:

- Continuous, blanket coverage by private media of the opposition protests and virtual cheerleading of the protest leaders’ decision to redirect the masses toward Miraflores presidential palace (where the clash with police and armed Chavez supporters took place);
- Coverage by state television of growing support for the government
- Interruption of the transmission signal of private televisions on the part of the government during the President’s address
- Blackout of state television during the night by police of the pro-opposition Miranda state government.

⁹ New York Times, June 2nd 2002

¹⁰ Press Release IAHRIC April 14th 2002

¹¹ Sucesos De Abril (Informe Preliminar), ODP May 2002

April 12 – 14:

- Coup government imposes controls on community broadcasters such as *TV Caricuaio*, *Catia TV*, *Radio Catia Libre*, *Radio Perola* and *Radio Alternativa de Caracas*, and shuts state television altogether;
- Private television, radio and newspapers give extremely positive coverage of the coup government, openly supporting the breaking of the constitution;
- Self-censorship by private television and failure to report the pro-Chavez demonstrations and military counter-coup on April 12-13. Television stations played no news whatsoever on April 13, and most newspapers chose not to publish on April 14, after the return of Chavez.

The ODP report acknowledges that the government abused its right to make broadcasts and accuses the majority of media of failing to inform the public at large about the situation. Private media justified their failure, saying that they were afraid of attacks given the violent atmosphere. However, the report notes that some international media – *CNN* in Spanish, *Telemundo* and *Radio Caracol* – gave full coverage. On April 12, notes the Report, when Attorney General Isaias Rodriguez surprised broadcasters during a live television address by denouncing the *coup d'etat*, his statement was interrupted and he was not allowed to finish his appeal.

In the days after the IFJ mission rumors of another coup d'etat have multiplied exponentially and the major media play an increasingly - and apparently conscious - role in destabilizing the situation and, some would say, cheerleading for a coup. A review of newspapers and television coverage in the period of the mission reflects the dismal reality that all sides in the crisis are not looking for mediation, but are intent upon further confrontation.

Press freedom groups and those protesting against the actions of government run the risk of being targeted as anti-Chavez and are accused of taking sides. Willian Lara, the pro-Chavez president of the National Assembly, heavily criticised the IFJ for its report on Venezuela in February 2002, denouncing it as biased, erroneous and incomplete.¹² Although it must be said that some details that might be incorrect or incomplete, it is an exaggeration and personal insult to the officers of the IFJ to seek to characterize this report as "lies." Unfortunately, Mr. Lara, like many in this political confrontation, is prone to use unnecessarily confrontational language.

The mission was pleased to learn that the National Assembly is not considering, nor is it expected to consider, any legislation that would allow the closure of TV stations. This puts in perspective the threats made by Chavez on June 9 to close

¹² Interview June 12th 2002

media. We are also encouraged to learn that, in spite of suggestions from some pro-government deputies, there is no legislation introduced or expected to be that would lead to the a Content Law governing media.¹³

The tone of Chavez's criticism of the media and his other opponents moderated somewhat following the mission. On June 13, he again criticized the media, though he carefully distinguished between journalists and media owners and made no specific threats. He emphasized, *"It's not the fault of the reporters or the camera operators, because they send the news and it's twisted by their bosses."*

Nevertheless, the main private TV stations presented his words as constituting yet another threat to press freedoms Their concerns were reflected by the International Association of Broadcasters, which issued a declaration from Montevideo condemning Chavez for his threats against TV stations.

The need for Venezuelan media to take a balanced and professional perspective as events continue to develop remains more crucial than ever.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Actions of Government

The IFJ strongly believes that the conflict between Chavez and media has been exacerbated by the president's intemperate language and his failure to encourage dialogue. Chavez's abuse of authority has contributed to a hostile atmosphere in which media staff and journalists have been targeted and subject to intolerable pressure, including threats of physical violence.

There have been numerous calls for a change of mood and a reduction in the temperature of the exchange between media and government. We believe it is essential to make fresh efforts to have positive dialogue and to create a non-threatening environment in which journalists can work safely and in which the role of media can be properly discussed.

We note that more must be done to create a legal and policy framework which lifts obstacles to freedom of expression, including issues relating to distribution of state advertising, clarification of Constitutional rights to free expression, governmental access to private media and the independent editorial status of public broadcasting.

We call on the President and the Government to repudiate strategies of confrontation and to encourage greater dialogue among media professionals in

¹³ See IFJ Press Release June 11th 2002 and section 2 of this report

order to restore public confidence in media – both public and private – as a bulwark of the democratic process in Venezuela.

We are particularly concerned by the failure to find those responsible for the killings on April 11, and we insist that the authorities redouble their efforts to identify and bring to justice those responsible for the killing of journalist Jorge Tortoza on that day.

Media Violations of Press Freedom

Despite the government's inappropriate pressure on anti-government media (see Appendix One), it is undeniable that some sections of media failed to serve the interests of democracy and the people's right to know by full and impartial reporting of events on April 11, 12 and 13. These omissions constitute an intolerable violation of press freedom. They also put at risk the journalists and media staff in their employment.

At the moment when the people of Venezuela were most in need of independent and impartial journalism about what was happening in their country, sections of the media abandoned all professional responsibility and engaged in censorship of vital information about the unfolding crisis.

Censorship of information by media owners constitutes a breach of the trust that must exist between the public and media if democracy, pluralism and press freedom are to survive.

Some media have, by the nature of their engagement in the political process, added to the limitations on the independence and freedom of journalists created by the administration. This created the perception among large sections of the public that there is no press freedom or at least that media have compromised their democratic responsibilities.

Journalists must be free to report and to express ideas freely without suffering arbitrary consequences or acts of intimidation. Above all, they must work in an environment conducive to the full exercise of freedom of expression and that includes the freedom to oppose the manipulation of journalism for political reasons by owners.

All international media organisations in the Americas and worldwide must repudiate unprofessionalism by media employers and insist that media should not be used as weapons for the illegal overthrow of elected government.

Protests and Response by Media Staff and Journalists

These actions have led, not surprisingly, to a professional backlash among media staff.

The trade union (Sitranac) representing media staff at one of the most important newspapers in Venezuela, *El Nacional*, released a statement on June 9, 2002, warning media owners that *"we will no longer allow ourselves to be used"* in the ways that occurred during the attempted *coup d'etat*:

It says, in part:

"It was made abundantly clear from the disastrous image of those days of disinformation, in which the majority of employees, reporters and journalists put our lives on the line only for media owners and board members to decide not to publish anything and hide from the public the serious events that were taking place in the streets, while mainstream TV channels aired old movies as if nothing was happening.

" We all must assume those days of confusion, tensions, interests, and mistakes with courage and rectify with deep sincerity. No more manipulation. We workers say firmly and responsibly that we will not accept such behavior again."¹⁴

The position of media staff is not shared by journalists on the paper who have always maintained that they report objectively. In the issue of 12 April, the day following the coup, the journalists showed in their coverage considerable balance and impartiality, something particularly acknowledged by Willian Lara, President of the National Assembly when he met with the mission in 12 June.

The Sindicato Nacional Trabajadores de la Prensa and the Colegio de Periodistas have also strongly opposed the manipulation of media by all sides in the recent conflict and are calling for a renewal of professionalism and new initiatives to create editorial standards that will stand up to political and commercial pressure from owners and politicians alike.

We echo the sentiments expressed by journalist Elys Riva in *El Globo* who, writing at the time of the mission, said: *"It is necessary to change the political speech on both sides, which must be less aggressive, more conciliatory and lead towards a search for mediation between different sectors."*

Criticism of IFJ

The mission rejects the allegation that IFJ is an anti-Chavez organisation. It is an organisation neither for nor against government of any political colour. The IFJ's aim is to reflect a professional balance in matters of politics and to be partisan only in defence of the physical safety and the professional and social rights of journalists.

¹⁴ Statement issued June 10th, reported www.narconews.com

Nevertheless, the IFJ, like other press freedom groups, must exercise caution in interpreting events and should respond to them in a balanced and professional manner. The initial responses by the IFJ to the events of April 11 reflected professional concerns, but did not adequately draw attention to the role of media during the chain of events leading to the coup and the restoration of lawful government.

Support for Journalists

During the visit, mission members had the opportunity to discuss the situation with more than 40 persons, most of the active, working journalists and some officials.

The IFJ recognises that many Venezuelan journalists have shown extraordinary courage, dignity, and professionalism. Reporters, writers and editors as well as camera crews and photographers, who, despite the intimidation endured in recent times, continue daily to carry out their work of disseminating information to the benefit of the whole of Venezuelan society and the international community.

The majority of journalists that we met and discussed the crisis with were in favour of a clear, unequivocal stance rejecting this politicized role.

The IFJ calls for a debate among Venezuelan journalists about professional standards and true independence from all political forces, both government and opposition.

The mission believes that the wider trade union movement must support media professionals and give support to staff striving to maintain journalistic integrity in the face of intolerable pressures.

In order to strengthen the quality and independence of Venezuelan journalism we recommend that a number of confidence-building measures should be considered in the near future:

1. Clause of Conscience for Venezuelan Journalists

The clause of conscience, which gives journalists the right to resist instructions to act in an unethical manner, should be introduced into collective agreements or forms of self-regulation. Such a clause of conscience could include the provision that journalists have the right to refuse an assignment or to undertake any task if the action breaches recognised professional standards. This can be an important safeguard against proprietorial abuse of power. Many owners oppose such

clauses, but for journalists, the right to act according to conscience is the bedrock of ethical conduct.¹⁵

Venezuelan media should consider the adoption of such a clause or an editorial charter of rights respecting editorial independence and providing a system of accountability to protect journalists from victimisation or unfair treatment if they insist on maintaining ethical and professional standards in their work.

2. Professional Dialogue to Protect Ethical Standards

The IFJ believes that an urgent dialogue between government, media and journalists' leaders is needed to restore public confidence and to maintain professionalism.

We believe that an internal debate is needed to protect the editorial independence of journalists from undue pressure – whether from external or internal sources. We recommend strongly that urgent initiatives are taken to strengthen journalists' groups including:

- a) A national symposium organised by journalists to discuss ethical and professional issues arising out of the conflict with government and to establish a framework for editorial independence;
- b) The involvement of journalists groups in the national dialogue meetings being planned by the Office of the Defensoria del Pueblo to promote wider respect for democratic values and human rights.

¹⁵ In some countries, such as France, journalists have the legal right to claim compensation from employers if the editorial policy line is dramatically changed in a manner with which they profoundly disagree following, for instance, a change of ownership.

Appendix One:

Attacks on the Media 2001-2002

Below are some of the incidents and protests that have caused media concern in the last two years. Attached are some of the public statements by the journalists' unions SNTP and the Colegio Nacional des Periodistas.

2001

Protests on February 13 and 20 and March 1-2 over deteriorating relationship between Chavez and press.¹⁶

- March 22: President Chavez denounces existence of a “media conspiracy”
- April 3: President Chavez denounces *El Universal* Editor as a fraud and spokesperson for international interests.
- May: President Chavez denounces communications professionals as “pirates”, warning of “emergency measures” to counter media criticism.
- June 12: IFJ Regional Officer Gregorio Salazar expresses publicly concern over repeated verbal attacks on major daily newspapers.
- June 20: President Chavez calls on journalists to stand up to media owners
- July 25: President Chavez says Venezuela would soon have a “law on content” to regulate programming on television and radio.
- October: Protests over Chavez attack on private news channel *Globovision*

2002

- January 7: Protests over government supporters who lay siege to daily *El Nacional* after Chavez criticises the newspaper.
- January 10: IFJ protest after President calls for “overthrow of media dictatorship”.
- January 20: Newspapers report mob attack on journalists covering broadcast by President Chavez.
- January 31: Bomb attack on daily newspaper *As es la Noticia*.
- February 23: IFJ protest letter to President Chavez over attacks on media
- March 15: IFJ Condemns “Vicious” Presidential Campaign against media
- June 10: IFJ Urges President Chavez to Lessen Criticism of Media

¹⁶ See International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) www.ifex.org

Appendix Two

Selection of Interviewees

Pedro Estacio	Journalist	Communications Corporativas
Katia Gil	Programmes Director	Inter-American Regional Organisation of the ICFTU
Taynem Hernandez	Journalist	<i>El Universal</i>
Carolina Hidalgo	Journalist	<i>El Globo</i>
Riazabel Diaz Acero	International Officer	Office of Defensoria del Pueblo
Asdrubal Aguiar	Lawyer, former Minister	Representative, Venezuelan Editors and publishers
William Becerra	Public Affairs Director	Office of Defensoria del Pueblo
Levy Benshimol	President	Colegio Nacional de Periodistas
Eligio Rojas	Journalist	<i>El Mundo</i>
Willian Lara	President	National Assembly
Rodolfo Escanio	Labour Director	National Assembly
Gregorio Salazar	General Secretary	Venezuela Journalists' Union, SNTF
German Saltron	Director General	Office of Defensoria del Pueblo
Adele Seol	Journalist	<i>El Nacional</i>
Claudio Vitale	Director	UNESCO office
Manuel Cova	Secretary General	Workers Confederation of Venezuela (CTV)