

# What do we know about **Transnational Repression** in Latin America?





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In December 2022, Bolivia expelled [a Cuban activist](#) living in the country for allegedly discrediting and launching harsh criticisms against the Bolivian government. The activist was also critical of the Cuban regime, and although the evidence is not conclusive, it was argued that given the excellent bilateral relations (a key driver of transnational repression) of the Bolivian government with that of Cuba in the framework of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America-People's Trade Agreement (ALBA-TCP), the Cuban regime would have been involved in the request for the activist's expulsion.

[In February 2023](#), after releasing 222 political prisoners (journalists, religious, businessmen, activists, politicians and students arrested in recent years) and deporting them to the United States, the Ortega-Murillo regime in Nicaragua stripped the 222 and 94 other Nicaraguans already living in exile of their nationality. The deportees were declared traitors to the homeland, punished for different serious crimes, disqualified perpetually from holding public office and were banished. Since 2018, the Ortega-Murillo regime has used various tactics of transnational repression against its alleged opponents in exile. In addition to deportation and banishment as extreme forms of transnational repression, coercion or harassment in Nicaragua of family members of exiles, mobility controls on their critics so that they cannot return or enter the country, and denial of consular services to uprooted Nicaraguans, are other forms of retaliation used by the regime towards opponents who are part of the diaspora.

More recent is the case of the kidnapping and murder in Chile of [Ronald Ojeda](#), a former first lieutenant in the Venezuelan armed forces. Ojeda had been in Chile since he escaped from Venezuela, where he had been detained and tortured by authorities for an alleged failed coup attempt against the Maduro regime. On March 1, 2024, Chilean police officers discovered Ojeda's body in a suitcase buried under cement in Maipú, a commune of the capital Santiago. On the same day, police arrested a 17-year-old Venezuelan youth for the kidnapping and murder. Although so far there is no evidence to confirm it, this case has links to the Venezuelan regime and a Venezuelan transnational criminal group known as the [Aragua Train](#).

The analysis and research on transnational repression in Latin America is sparse. However, these three cases may reflect how transnational repression may be manifesting itself in the region today. The expansive informal networks that operate effectively in Latin America, the lack of formal state presence and institutions in large territorial spaces, inequality and marginalization, formal and informal alliances of governments with organized crime, sophisticated systems of corruption, and openness and transparency in host countries of exiles could be factors of analysis and research in Latin America to analyze their causal links or correlation with transnational repression.

The concept of transnational repression can be understood in different ways depending on the specific context and circumstances. For example, in much of Latin America the concept is associated with the [military regimes](#) of the 1970s, who used a series of transnational tactics and measures outside their national borders to silence, silence and exile their opponents. Transnational repression is not a new phenomenon, although today its extent and intensity are broader and more complex, as reprisals against human rights defenders, journalists and activists have increased and exile and migration have grown. For example, it is estimated that more than [7.7 million people](#) have left Venezuela seeking protection, while the crisis that Nicaragua has been experiencing since April 2018 has led to the departure of at least [605,000 Nicaraguans](#), the largest exodus in its history, greater even than that of the 1980s.

Two important factors today make the phenomenon more worrisome. First, transnational repression can no longer be attributed only to military governments; today different types of authoritarian regimes, whether military or civilian, left or right-wing on the political spectrum, act directly or through others to silence, intimidate and/or retaliate against individuals or organizations outside their sovereign borders. According to [Freedom House](#) transnational repression occurs today all over the world. However, since 2014, 44 governments have used transnational physical repression in 100 host countries. The governments of China, Turkey, Tajikistan, Russia, Egypt, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Belarus, Iran, and Rwanda are responsible for 80% of all incidents of direct transnational physical repression worldwide recorded by Freedom House since 2014. [Journalists](#) have been targeted in 11% of all incidents of transnational repression.

Governments using transnational repression use a range of tactics including assassinations, kidnappings, secret investigations, harassment, and intimidation of those individuals or organizations in another country. Governments have at their disposal a range of transnational repression tactics (some are indirect and non-physical) to attack/threaten exiles beyond their borders. These tactics are designed to have a chilling or signaling effect that extends beyond those directly targeted. That is, to deter free speech and criticism.



*People gather at Trafalgar Square in London for a protest in support of human rights defenders and protesters in Iran on Feb. 4, 2023.*

*(Photo by Artūras Kokorevas/Pexels)*



Second, the use of new technologies for transnational repression. Today, [digital forms of transnational repression](#) are much more common. Digital technology facilitates cross-border communication and civic engagement between exile communities and communities in countries of origin. Non-democratic and authoritarian governments use a variety of ways to silence critical voices at home and in exile, many of them inexpensive and with enormous potential for harm to victims. The menu of tactics for transnational digital repression includes, among others, the deployment of spyware, social media monitoring, smear campaigns and online harassment, and the reporting of dissident posts on social media platforms in an effort to eliminate them and/or reduce their impact.

Although governments such as Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela could be linked to cases of transnational repression in [Latin America](#), and in host countries such as Colombia and Costa Rica, the phenomenon has not been analyzed or investigated more systematically to investigate the extent, depth, networks and other elements that could be part of the dynamics of transnational repression in the region. On the other hand, the behavior of authoritarian regimes in Latin America towards growing activism, migration and digital communications has not been studied systematically or comparatively. One hypothesis is that authoritarian regimes have the incentive to stay in power at any cost, and are threatened by the openness that migrant, exiled and displaced populations find in places that host them that are relatively more democratic to denounce abuses and arbitrariness in their countries of origin. And so, threatened by the openness, they take their repressive tactics underground and make them more invisible. Thus, an entry point for future research could be the informality and clandestine nature of elements and actors related to transnational repression. An increasingly worrisome trend [is the government's use](#) of criminal groups as intermediaries for transnational repression.



In order to generate protection policies against transnational repression, it is important to dimension the problem and its extent. Questions such as, what do authoritarian regimes fear and which exile communities offer the greatest threat? While the cases of Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba merit further investigation, a broader effort could shed new light elsewhere. For example, Venezuelan exiles in Brazil (mostly indigenous); temporary exiles transiting in the Central America-Mexico corridor; the role of organized crime in managing both mobility and repression in the Darien; the level of influence on government decisions to use transnational organized crime repression tactics (Ecuador, Bolivia, Mexico); and the strong collaboration and alliances of authoritarian regimes and their tactical and selective use of mobility control (passports, visas, deportation). [Freedom House](#) has several special studies with some cases, including an upcoming one to be published on August 22 on mobility and controls.

Today, the use of transnational law enforcement is low-cost because, thanks to technology, it can be done by anyone, anywhere, at any time. Governments employ a variety of sophisticated technologies and exploit popular global platforms. On the other hand, responding to transnational repression is difficult and costly. Victims are often unaware that what they are experiencing may be a crime, but are hesitant to report it, and/or are afraid to report it due to their traumatic experience and/or distrust. Digital means of repression and the use of intermediaries make it difficult to link these acts to a government or regime.

It is clear that for the specific case of Latin America a key recommendation is to deepen the research and analysis of cases of how transnational repression may be manifesting itself, and whether the host countries of exiles have clear parameters of what is and is not transnational repression. By understanding the dynamics, their nuances and the handling in host countries, ways can be proposed to reduce the opportunities for governments and regimes to threaten and attack exiles and diasporas. In addition, it is important to promote accountability for perpetrators of transnational repression and for host countries to provide protection to exiles and diasporas at risk.

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