

JOURNALISTS ARE OFTEN AMONG THE first victims of dictatorships; but in some instances – as was the case in Argentina – a number of journalists became complicit in crimes committed by the military regime that ruled the country in the 1970s and 1980s, ANTONIO CASTILLO writes.

Argentinean Journalists Complicit in Crimes Against Humanity

A lot has been written about journalists as victims of the military dictatorships that ruled Latin America for most of the 1970s and 1980s. However, less extensive has been the examination into the role played by individual journalists and media organisations during military regimes – regimes responsible for the death, torture and disappearance of thousands of political dissidents.

Argentina, in contrast to Chile, Uruguay, Brazil and other post-dictatorship countries in Latin America where journalists who collaborated with the military regimes have never been investigated let alone punished, is doing just that.

The first step in the recognition of collaboration has already been taken in Argentina. Claudia Acuña, a journalist and human rights activist, said “the criminal plan of the dictatorship included the participation of media organisations and individuals”. She said the role of the media “was to justify and negate accusations of human rights violations”.

In the last few years, leading Argentinean human

rights organisations – such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and Justice Now – have put in the spotlight the names of a long list of individual journalists who, in an unholy link, collaborated with the past military regime. These are journalists who, in words of these organisations, “betrayed their own people”.

So far, this betrayal has not reached the Argentinean courts. However, it has been publicly exposed in what has been described as a “political and ethical trial.” It is an ethical trial against journalists who became accomplices in the so-called “dirty war” – a vicious military, and illegal, act of extermination of more than 30,000 political dissidents.

One journalist facing this public political and ethical trial is Samuel Gelblung, a well-known magazine editor. He still works in the media in Argentina. Gelblung was, during the dictatorship, at the helm of the magazine Gente (People). This magazine is part of a vast range of titles owned by the Atlántida publishing house, which is owned by the Vigil family, loyal supporters of the military regime.

Atlántida also publishes the now defunct popular



Argentina's last dictator, Reynaldo Bignone, has been sentenced to life in prison for crimes against humanity.
PHOTO: AFP/JUAN MABROMATA

magazines *Somos* (We Are) and *Para Ti* (For You). These three magazines were the key propaganda tool used by the Vigil family to support, justify and hide human rights violations. The collaboration of Atlántida's proprietors with the dictatorship was brilliantly exposed by author Eduardo Varela Cid in his book *Prensa Canalla* (Rotten Press). "The Vigils made up partial stories in collaboration with the navy," wrote Cid in the preface of his book.

During the military dictatorship, Gelblung was not only the star writer for this media group, but he was also a masterful media manipulator (in the 1970s the word spin doctor was not in vogue). After enjoying decades of impunity, and more than 30 years since the end of the dictatorship, one of his "masterful" media manipulations is finally threatening to bring him down.

This is the case of Alejandra Barry Mata. Alejandra was only three years old when her father and mother became part of the long list of victims of the military regime. It was the end of the 1970s and military repression was at its height. Her father, Juan Alejandro, was a political dissident who was killed on December 14, 1977, after he resisted arrest. Her mother, Susana Beatriz, decided to take her own life after being trapped by the repressive apparatus. Alejandra's mother knew that brutal torture was waiting for her if she had been caught alive.

It was a drama that gave Gelblung the raw material for one of the most shameful cases of media manipulation during the dictatorship. On December 30, 1977, Gelblung published in the magazine *Somos* a front-page photograph of Alejandra holding hands with the killers of her father. The story headlines reads: "The children of terrorism". Shortly afterwards, a barrage of similar stories continued in other publications owned by Atlántida and under Gelblung's direction.

On January 5, 1978, the magazine *Gente*, where Gelblung was the director, ran a story depicting the parents of Alejandra Barry Mata as "murderers" who "stopped being parents to fabricate orphans". The headline read:

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"This is also terrorism: Alejandra is now alone".

Almost two weeks after this story, the magazine *Para Ti* published a story whose headline read: "To them Alejandra didn't matter". In the piece, Alejandra's parents were portrayed as "deciding" to leave their then three-year-old daughter an orphan. Nothing was mentioned about the regime of terror imposed by the military.

Alejandra who is now 35, has called for an investigation into the actions of Gelblung and Atlántida. "My case is about shedding light on the role played by civilians during the dictatorship," she said.

In Argentina, she said, "there was a civilian-military dictatorship and a genocide that was not the work of a mad and at loose military, but was a premeditated plan carried out with the complicity of the largest media conglomerates in the country."

The list of journalists who became accomplices of the Argentinean dictatorship is long. They were key players in the propaganda apparatus of the military legitimising the appalling human rights abuses committed in this country.

Two of these journalists – Rolando Hangling and Mariano Grondona – are symbols of this collaboration. Both writers became the loudest defenders and advocates of the military regime.

In the 1970s, Hangling was a prolific opinion writer for *Somos* magazine. In the magazine Hangling was given unlimited space to persuade the international community – that by then had become increasingly critical of

the escalation of human rights violations – about the positive actions taken by the military in rebuilding the country. In his stories and commentaries Hangling devoted long pieces to castigating international leaders and organisations for what he considered an "external anti-Argentinean campaign".

Hangling was not alone in this pro-dictatorship media crusade. He was accompanied by the notorious Mariano Grondona, whose support for the military regimes goes back to 1962. Grondona was well rewarded for his loyalty. Dictator Juan Carlos Onganía

Carballo, who ruled the country from 1966 to 1970, appointed Grondona as an ambassador. Years later, he became director of *Visión* – an ultra right-wing magazine owned by the Somoza family, the infamous clan of dictators in Nicaragua.

In the context of increasing international condemnation of the atrocities committed by the military dictatorship, Grondona was a passionate defender of the regime. When in 1979 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Argentina's leading human rights figure Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, Grondona's articles furiously attacked the decision.

In an uncanny resemblance to the Chinese reaction after a similar award was given to dissident Liu Xiaobo in 2010, Grondona wrote that the Nobel committee's decision "distorted seriously the truth about Argentina". Human rights organisations in Argentina have ranked Grondona among the "top ten" journalists who collaborated with the dictatorship.

It was not only collaboration, as media organisations also profited from the dictatorship. When Argentina's president Cristina Fernández last year accused the country's two largest newspapers, *Clarín* and *La Nación*, of complicity and profiteering during the military dictatorship, she was stating a well-documented fact.

The profiteering conduct of these two papers during Argentina's dirty war was well-documented in *Papel Prensa: La Verdad* (Printing Paper: The Truth), a document released in August last year by President Fernández. The document exposes the close ties between *Clarín* and *La Nación* and the military dictatorship.

The 400-page document shed light on one of the most obscure cases involving the media and the military dictatorship. *Papel Prensa* is the only company that produces newsprint in Argentina. It is a monopoly, owned since the dictatorship by *Clarín* and *La Nación*. There is also a third proprietor, a newspaper called *La Razón*.

For a very long time this company was owned by the Graiver family. During the military regime, this family became part of the long list of enemies of the dictatorship. The family was accused of connections with left-wing armed groups and *Clarín* and *La Nación* played a central role in this accusation. These newspapers – published, almost daily, front-page stories accusing the Graiver family of connections with radical groups. The strategy worked.

In mid-1976, several members of the family were detained and taken to clandestine detention centres. After a dubious military trial, the company was illegally

confiscated by the military and then sold at a laughable prize to *Clarín*, *La Nación* and *La Razón*. The whole process was done with the full cooperation of these newspapers' owners.

Despite the arrival of democracy in 1983, the ownership of *Papel Prensa* is still under the control of *Clarín* and *La Nación*. They have a total monopoly on printing of newspapers and as President Fernández said: "it determines who it sells to, how they sell and at what price." In a frontal attack to this monopoly gestated during the dictatorship, President Fernández also said: "whoever controls it, controls the written word in Argentina."

The government is determined to put on trial the owners of *Clarín*, Ernestina Herrera de Noble and Héctor Magnetto; and the director of *La Nación* Bartolomé Mitre. President Fernández, who promised to hand over the case to the courts, said that the judiciary should decide whether these key figures of the media in Argentina should be charged with crimes against humanity.

Argentina is going through a major human rights legal process – called megacausa (mega-trial) – a trial that is exhuming Argentina's era of state terrorism, murder and torture. In this megacausa some of the key perpetrators of crimes against humanity are being taken to court one by one. Some of them, such as former dictator General Reynaldo Bignone, are already in jail.

They are mainly military though. Civilians who collaborated with the military regime have not been made accountable yet. Among these civilians are journalists, like Samuel Gelblung, Rolando Hangling and Mariano Grondona, whose crimes have not been punished in a court of law.

Not yet. But things are changing. "I'm certain that in times to come – soon – we will also see journalists put on trial for their justifications of torture," said Hebe de Bonafini, the leader of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. It seems that those journalists who "betrayed the people" finally will be made accountable for their willing and unflinching collaboration with Argentina's dictatorship, one of the worst of its kind. **R**