

---

# “We Must Fight Together”

---

GUSTAVO GORRITI

Director Afiliado, *La Prensa*

An Interview by Benjamin F. Moser  
Panama City, Panama, January 10, 1998

*Gustavo Gorriti is no stranger to controversy. The author of a critically acclaimed history of the Shining Path guerrilla movement, Sendero, Historia de la Guerra Milenaria en el Perú, he has been an active investigative journalist both in Peru and abroad. A former Guggenheim fellow, he is one of the foremost experts on Peruvian politics. Arrested along with other journalists after Fujimori's 1992 self-coup, Gorriti has long championed press freedom in Latin America.*

*Last year, he found himself at the center of a battle discussed throughout the hemisphere when he decided to fight a government order refusing to renew his permission to work in Panama as a reprisal for his investigative work revealing corruption at the highest levels of the Panamanian government. Here, he discusses that fight and its implications for journalism throughout Latin America.*

**Journal:** The “Gorriti case” became a *cause célèbre* for press freedom in Latin America last year, with everyone from Hillary Clinton to John le Carré protesting the Panamanian government’s decision not to renew your work visa and in effect to expel you from the country. Can you tell us a little bit about the particulars of the case?

**Gorriti:** Last year the government of Panama decided to expel me from the country and used as a basis for doing so the grounds that there were lots of Panama-

nian journalists who could do my job. And then, when that argument became indefensible, they resurrected a long-dormant, repressive law from the military dictatorship in order to justify their decision legally.

*Journal:* Had that law ever been used before?

**Gorriti:** Not in that sense, not since the downfall of Noriega in 1989. And then we decided that it was clearly a reprisal for the investigative stories that had appeared in *La Prensa* that I had either written, edited or directed. The government wanted to prevent me from doing that kind of journalism. Of course, we saw it as it really was, an unacceptable aggression against press freedom, and also as a blatant violation of international agreements that Panama had signed and that had the force of law. So we decided to resist, and we said that we would not abide by the decision and that I would not leave the country. And so began the confrontation between the government on one hand and *La Prensa* and myself on the other. And many things came out in the confrontation: the government's willingness to use a law from the military dictatorship, used by the president himself to get rid of someone he found irritating while sending in the process a message to the rest of the press in the country. But in the face of the international and national pressure the government relented. This was a great victory for us: a foreign journalist winning such a case against the government was, I think, a triumph of national and international resistance for the cause of press freedom. Also, more important than anything, we showed the strength and the solidarity of organizations in defense of press freedom, such as the Inter-American Press Association, Reportiers sans Frontières, and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

*Journal:* Why did you think that you were in such danger as to have to live here at *La Prensa*?

**Gorriti:** After the first excuses the government gave were completely discredited, Pérez Balladares went looking for more reasons to expel me. There were several cabinet meetings, and during one the President said that the real reason Panama needed to have me out of the country was that Vladimiro Montesinos, the head of Peruvian intelligence, had ordered me killed, and the Panamanian government did not want blood on its hands. But this was transparent, because, needless to say, the government never warned us of this danger or attempted to improve our security. It was a pretext to justify something that was unjustifiable. Before the day I was to be deported, I stayed here at the offices of *La Prensa* in order not to be arrested and deported to Peru. With the support of *La Prensa* we—I and other journalists—led the fight from here.

**Journal:** Nonetheless, you sent your family out of the country. There must have been some danger, but from whom?

**Gorriti:** They claimed that there was a threat from the Peruvian military, but that was not so worrisome. The threat to us was from the government itself, or from people acting as proxies of the government. There was a potential for violence, so I decided to send my family out of the country for the three months that this problem lasted. We were not sure where the danger was from, but we knew that we did not want to take any chances, especially with regard to my wife and my children.

**Journal:** Is everyone in your family Peruvian?

**Gorriti:** One daughter is American, another is Israeli.

**Journal:** Do you see your victory as something that will change the situation in Panama and in Latin America, or as just one more fight in an unending series of struggles for freedom of the press?

**Gorriti:** Again, we did what we had to do, and fortunately we were able to come out victorious this time. But it is worrisome to me and to everyone interested in civil liberties in Latin America because the Panamanian government is not the only one which is trying to coerce journalists. It is a problem many newly democratized governments are having—they are not yet comfortable with the idea of a press that digs around too much. These governments are elected, but we are going to have to continue to educate people in Latin America as to the importance of a free press. It is not something we can take for granted, even in the more stable, democratic countries. And even less in some places, like Peru or Argentina.

**Journal:** Why do you think that you ultimately came out victorious?

**Gorriti:** The advantage we had, that journalists in some other countries don't, is that the government in Panama is still a democratic government. It has its problems, certainly, and that is why we got in trouble with them. But the government is sensitive to international public opinion, and we were able to gather enough support to force the government to back down.

**Journal:** What do you see as the international implications of your victory in Latin America? Are other governments going to be more reluctant to take on the press, or are they going to get worried that journalists need to be neutralized before they themselves have a Gorriti case on their hands?

**Gorriti:** We, the democratic elements of society, have a duty to make sure that our countries remain democratic. We must fight together. Globalization has finally reached the world of journalism, and I think that we have a growing awareness that when one of us is attacked, no journalist in Latin America can remain immune. In some countries, we are under attack from criminals and drug traffickers who do not want to be exposed. This is true in, for example, Mexico and

---

**Globalization has finally reached the world of journalism, and when one of us is attacked, no journalist in Latin America can remain immune.**

---

Colombia. And in some places, like Peru and Argentina, but also in Venezuela and Brazil, the press is under more and more pressure from the governments. Not under

attack, like in Peru, but under increasing pressure designed to make journalists reluctant to delve into complicated stories. The result, though, is the opposite, and that is what the governments need to realize. The more they attack the press, the more powerful the press becomes, because it becomes a focal point, a symbol of the government's abuses. So at the end of it all the government of Panama really won this fight, although not in the way it had hoped, because Panama will now have a freer press that will help the government attend to its business. If Pérez Balladares is a serious democrat, he will realize that he should not confuse his own interests with those of the nation. The nation has an interest in a clean, responsible government, and experience has of course shown that that is impossible without a free press.

*Journal:* Does your case, and the difficulty with which you won it, points to a warning for other journalists in the region? That only those who really are ready for a fight should challenge the government?

**Gorriti:** Yes, I think that is part of the message that Pérez Balladares is trying to send, that any journalist is susceptible to the arbitrary decrees of the government. And he is certainly not alone in trying to send this message. Several governments have been trying to do the same thing, with different devices: harsh libel and defamation laws, limiting the number of newspapers that are issued print licenses, and so on. But I also think that, as I have said, we have a significant advantage here, which is that Panama has a democratic government, in spite of its flaws. We, the press, are also responsible for making sure that citizens understand their rights under such a government. So I think that one of the most important roles this affair has had in Panama is to educate people as to the role that the press plays, and to the need to defend their right to live in a country with a free press, because they cannot count on the state. I think it will now be harder, rather than easier, to harass journalists, because people have seen that they can win fights against the

state. This is not just true in Panama; I think that our case, and others like it, have a continental effect. Things like the case of Baruch Ivcher in Peru, although he lost that battle, have put the media on alert throughout Latin America. I am going, for example, to Mexico to investigate the assassination attempt against a Mexican editor who had reported on corruption and the impact drug traffickers had on the government. I will be joined by many other journalists from throughout Latin America. We are going to send the message that when one of us is attacked, all of us are going to respond, internationally. We have seen this kind of solidarity in Argentina, after the assassination of photographer José Luis Cabezas.

**Journal:** Do you think that governments themselves still represent the major threat to civil liberties in Latin America, or have other forces become equally worrisome, especially to investigative reporting?

**Gorriti:** Journalists in Latin America face two major threats, I think—drug traffickers and governments would both like to see us take a smaller role in reporting on corruption. Many of these countries have elected governments, but have not lost the old, authoritarian ways of the past. This coincides especially in the case of the “war on drugs,” which is so important to a country’s image abroad, but which can provide such rich profits for politicians involved in it. Journalists often get caught between the drug traffickers and their clients in the government. This is happening increasingly in Mexico, and is a principal reason why so many journalists are being killed there.

**Journal:** You mentioned the Ivcher case, in which Baruch Ivcher, an Israeli-born naturalized Peruvian, was despoiled of his property, Canal 2 in Lima, lost his citizenship, and was deported from the country. As in your case, this was allowed to happen because of laws of dubious legality and a subservient judicial system. What do you think of the responses of the Peruvian press to Fujimori’s abuses?

**Gorriti:** There are still many people fighting for a free press in Peru, and I think that the Fujimori government is going to have a harder and harder time dealing with them, because he no longer enjoys popular support as he had before. He is going to have to rely on brute force, and I don’t think he’s going to have very much luck. This is primarily because of the courage of some journalists who are determined not to let him get away with anything else, if they can help it. I think that Fujimori should take a warning from what happened to me. If anything happens to any of the opposition journalists in Peru, all of the organizations that helped us in our struggle are going to rally in a much stronger way. This is one of the positive changes we have seen due to the globalization of journalism. When any single journalist is attacked, we all know about it, and we all have a chance to react to it. 