

BOLIVIA

JOURNALISM UNDER MULTIDIMENSIONAL VIOLENCE

Executive summary

Bolivia worsens in 2023. It has gone from a partial restriction to a high restriction in the last year. The deterioration of the conditions for the practice of freedom of expression and of the press has followed a negative and alarming trend under contexts of increasing violence, permanent threat, coercion and persecution of journalistic work from the established powers and their allies. Stigmatizing speeches, threats, judicial actions and acts of violence against journalists are part of the strategy of the State, as well as from their associates and irregular groups in search of a gradual silencing of questioning voices and warnings against corruption, violation of fundamental rights and crime. Along with the official advertising fence, these operations have led to the closure of one of the country's main written media and the dismissal of several journalists..

Introduction

In the mid-term of Luis Arce Catacora (2020-2025), the scenario of political and social conflicts has had three fundamental aspects: 1) the country's economic crisis, with enormous public spending on non-productive activities; the fall of international reserves; the sustained subsidized purchase of fuel; the drop in gas exports and sales; the abrupt restriction of the American dollar; job insecurity and growing unemployment, among other signs of the limit to which Bolivia's economy has reached; 2) the internal fight for the leadership of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) between the Arcista factions (allies of Arce Catacora) and the Evista fronts (allies of Evo Morales) that has brought to light serious acts of corruption on both sides; its open division in essential decisions from the legislative field and the frank dispute to establish the next candidate of the political organization in the 2025 electoral scenario; 3) the struggle and confrontations against the abuse of power from political-civic and/or social movements not linked to the MAS (coca growers case in the Yungas area; civic mobilization in Santa Cruz for the National Census or the seizure of the headquarters of the Permanent Assembly of Human Rights of Bolivia, among others).

Impunity and insufficient state action against crime (mainly drug trafficking and smuggling) have also reinforced the pattern of violations of the rights to inform and be informed.

It is in this climate of political polarization and social fragmentation, mobilizations of different kinds (blockades, strikes, marches, occupation of spaces, etc.) have generated the conditions conducive to exercising multiple violence against those who work to inform. Added to this is the police action that has permanently committed excesses, or has remained indifferent – like the judicial body – in the face of physical and verbal attacks from sectors related to the MAS (arcistas or evistas) directed towards journalists or media.

At the same time, from cyberspace, one of the most significant fronts of attack has been strengthened, which includes the cyber boycott of independent information sites, strong threats and campaigns of stigmatization and hatred towards journalists, misinformation and constant harassment by multiple platforms commanded by the so-called digital warriors.

Results Analysis

Bolivia dropped from sixteenth place to eighteenth place out of the twenty-two countries examined. Its score of 33.88 (different from the 42.72 of the previous administration) alerts the progressive deterioration of the conditions to exercise the fundamental rights of freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

The high restriction category is based mainly on the following facts that involve the Legislative Branch (with 3.98), the Judicial Branch (with 4.17) and the Executive Branch (with 5.42). These are responsible for the degree of unfavorable incidence – moderate in the first two and strong in the third. The comparative trends with respect to the 2021-2022 index (in the same order: 4.13, 3.59 and 4.86, respectively) confirm that the executive environment incurs markedly and negatively in the violations of the rights analyzed.

Physical, verbal, psychological, cyber violence, dispossession of materials and equipment, threats, persecution, seizure of property, limitation of official advertising, processes outside the norm and judicial intimidation, are part of the situation of violations in this period.

The government of the Movement Towards Socialism has left unpunished a large number of events that violate and weaken the information work, caused by the government environment itself and its close supporters - in the majority of cases - and by groups opposed to the MAS, in other portion.

The closure of one of the newspapers critical of the government, due to threats, tax coercion and financial asphyxiation, has triggered the dangerous scenario in which Bolivia today drops places in the freedom of expression and press index, and is very close to the lower extremes as well as warning about severe restrictions.

Executive environment: growing multiple violence

Across the four realms established by the Chapultepec Index, it is cross-checked, comparatively verified and observed the increase in negative impact from the executive environment (5.42 in general), with a very high negative influence placement -either very strong or relatively strong- in all the options, informed citizens free to express themselves (6.69); the (free) practice of journalism (8.38); violence and impunity (5.33); and media control (2.81).

Emblematic events such as the kidnapping and violent action against journalists and police authorities as well as justice in the case of Las Londras (Santa Cruz, October 2021) continue to undermine the rights of journalists in the investigation process opened for such case. So far there have been no sanctions of any kind; the main accused were acquitted and the main person accused of kidnapping and torturing press workers has continued to make public threats against journalists. After repeated requests from journalistic unions to dismantle the armed group, no State agency has reacted effectively, so intimidation continues from those responsible for these crimes, who feel protected by entities related to the national government (ANP, August 2022).

The innumerable acts of physical violence against journalists in multiple social conflicts are another point of fragility of the informative practice that has remained unchanged. For the period surveyed, the mobilizations in Santa Cruz demanding the completion of the 2023 Census gave rise to scenes of this type. In the twenty-eight days of civic strike, at least twenty cases of violence against journalists were recorded. The protagonists: those close to the MAS who opposed the strike and the police themselves who launched tear gas projectiles directly at the press workers, or allowed the attacks without doing anything. Also the groups that supported the call of the Civic Committee.

Other similar events were recorded in the city of La Paz in mobilizations of public officials and people related to the MAS that prevented citizen platform marches against the government (January 2023); Moreover in the middle of the takeover of the building of the Permanent Assembly of Human Rights of Bolivia by sectors of the MAS, when journalists were covering, they were violently attacked, preventing journalists from recording or photographing when they were exercising the right to report (July 2023).

The inaction of the government and the police has also allowed a press team from the state channel (BTV) to suffer beatings and the theft of their work instruments, in an ambush of more than two hundred people, while they were reporting on the control of marketing of fuel on the border with Brazil. Attacked by fuel smugglers, they had to flee and take refuge in a military compound (ANP, June 2023). In addition, two journalists had to leave the country due to lack of guarantees and protection against threats and harassment due to journalistic investigations carried out (Mario Méndez Justiniano case, July 2023; Junior Arias, May 2023).

Political pressures as well as economic and tax fences have accompanied the actions of the Executive Branch. Reports of economic suffocation to newspapers have been open. The newspaper Los Tiempos (Cochabamba), in August 2022, protested against the political, economic, judicial and tax pressures of the MAS government with the perverse purpose of taking over the medium. The same was denounced by El Diario workers (October 2022), warning of the limitations and blockages of official advertising from the central government, governor's office and mayor's office, in addition to pressures due to tax debts that limit their survival.

Or the extreme case of the newspaper *Página Siete*, which, after thirteen years of work, definitively closed its edition on June 29, 2023. Through a public letter from its former executive president, Raúl Garafulic, the causes of the decision are indicated: the blockade of official advertising, official public harassment, State audits and fines, judicial harassment, added to the COVID-19 pandemic and the decline in print, the economic crisis and the general advertising cut, in addition to high prices of the paper imported due to the effects of the war in Ukraine. All of this conspired to close and immediately dismiss journalists who, to date, demand payment of their employment benefits.

However, cyberharassment of journalists is the axis that has strengthened the most over time. A report by Meta, parent company of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, reported the deactivation in Bolivia of 1,041 Facebook accounts, 450 pages, 14 groups and 130 Instagram accounts used for offensive, false and harassing messages directed at political opponents, independent media and journalists (Gutiérrez, 2023). Another study, with the observation of 16,079 tweets published from the accounts of thirty Bolivian journalists that generated some 69,396 comments, highlights the negativity and aggressiveness of the words used against journalists, such as: murderer, crazy, sick, *cartel del mentira*, *gangsterismo mediatico*, *fascismo mediatico*, for example. Also the association of the word "journalist" with the adjectives 'pseudo', 'sold out', 'failed' and 'coup plotters'. While for "press" the associatives were 'garbage', 'liar', 'fascist', 'mercenary', 'hitman' or 'sellout' (Uribe et al., 2023). Nearly \$US1.1 million were used in paid advertising messages on socio-digital networks for stigmatization and misinformation

campaigns. Hacks, interventions or digital blocks are added to the accounts or information spaces of independent journalists (case of the digital lobby site <https://www.cabildeodigital.com/> in June 2023 or the Urgente.bo information portal, December 2022).

Judicial environment: the perfect ally of violations and impunity

The judicial environment has not been left behind, in fact, it has acted in collusion with the executive to persecute and harass media and journalists. Although its negative influence is moderate (4.17), since its lowest indicator is “Media control” (1.31), its maximum negative influence reaches realm B, “Practice of journalism” (7.50 out of 10), even violating the rules themselves in search of subduing journalists.

Examples of what is stated are the repeated requirements for the identity of information sources to be revealed, a right to source secrecy protected by the State's own Political Constitution (2009) and the Printing Law (1925). It also includes the accusation of journalists who worked on the state channel, during the period of Jeanine Áñez, for alleged irregular hiring of a television presenter (August, 2022). The judicial system acts as an ally and in coordination with the Executive Branch.

Attacks from the central, departmental or municipal executive, allied with the judicial system to violate this right, as in the case of the mayor of Yacuiba (Tarija), Carlos Brú against the journalist Roberto Puma, to reveal his source in the case of poor condition of school breakfast products, with a period of ten days (September 2022). Or the journalists Javier Colque and Robert Valdivia summoned to testify about the violent events of 2019 in Sacaba, under threat of being arrested if they did not appear (September 2022).

Or the action of the Chuquisaca police prosecutor who sent requests for journalist Santos Mamani to reveal the source of information about the death of a person in police cells in that department (September 2022).

The Court of Second Instance of Santa Cruz ordered the preventive detention of the cameraman Sebastián Méndez, for thirty days, accused of causing alleged damage and criminal acts at the peasant headquarters, in the conflicts over the National Census in Santa Cruz, implanting false evidence to imprison him (November 2022). Meanwhile, a case was opened against journalists Marco Zabala, Ariel Vargas and Alberto Ruth (April 2023) for publishing photographs of a woman victim of violence by a former authority. The process violated the installation of Printing Courts and in addition the members of said instance resorted to artificial intelligence systems to analyze the case and issue a sentence (April 2023).

The scenario of judicialization and criminalization of journalistic work has led international organizations to speak out against these abuses. This is the case of Human Rights Watch (HRW), which warned about the abuse of preventive detentions, which put democracy at risk by persecuting and censor journalistic work (September 2022). The calls also from the special rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Pedro Vaca, when requesting guarantees for the press, in the midst of serious threats against journalists in the conflict of the Departmental Association of Coca Producers of La Paz (Adepcoca by its acronym in Spanish) and in the face of state inaction and indifference (September 2022). Or the concern expressed by the Inter-American Press Association regarding the economic asphyxiation exercised by government agencies (August 2022). All of the above is a sign of international concern.

At the moment there is not a single sentence that sanctions crimes committed against journalists in the exercise of their work, which demonstrates the bias of the judicial environment by installing processes against journalists and leaving violations against freedom of the press unpunished. “The weak state institutions, particularly the judicial one, result in victims not being able to access prevention or justiciability mechanisms” (UNITAS, 2023).

Legislative environment: censorship attempts continue

Meanwhile, the legislative environment presents for this analysis the lowest of the moderate negative incidences (3.98), whose maximum values also fall in realm B, “Practice of journalism.” This is equivalent to a concentrate of negative incidents from the three environments on said realm, nothing casual, but rather systematic and structural.

The legislative body, which had a terrible performance in the previous period, with bills that violated freedom of expression and of the press, the right to secrecy of sources and actions to obstruct the work of reporting, this time continued with bills of law such as 305 on “Compliance with international commitments regarding human rights” which, with paragraph III of article 281 (VII), sought to annul the special jurisdiction for workers and owners of media outlets when crimes of dissemination and incitement to violence, racism or discrimination are committed. (April 2023). Once again, pressure from trade organizations pushed back the approval of the standard and others that had similar intentions (April 2023).

Realm A: right to information, without guarantees and at risk

The index marks an alarming 6.50 out of 23.00 in this realm, whose axes of “information flow” (2.50 out of 11.00) and “freedom of expression” (4.00 out of 12.00) are seen increasingly threatened, putting the foundations of the democratic system on alert.

The power scheme of the political party “Movimiento Al Socialismo” (MAS) has ratified the violent ways of silencing voices of criticism and opposition to the government and its alliances. The street mobilizations have been tinged with confrontation between political, union, civic, union, and institutional actors, against MAS groups and fractions always ready to attack opponents and disarm their protests. The police have been the ally to cover up the pro-government aggressors (from either side: Arce's renovators or Evo's radicals) and repress the circumstantial protesters. The attacks on journalists in the midst of these conflicts, which are increasingly becoming more violent, have prevented the free exercise of reporting and the right to be informed.

Beatings, death threats, violent persecutions, situations of high risk to life, kidnapping and destruction of equipment and materials have made the right to inform impossible. If we add the illegal detentions, processes outside the norm and closure and coercion of media, the result is a citizenry with fences and limits on their right to receive information, and coerced and afraid to demonstrate in the streets or on digital platforms due to the permanent physical, verbal and cyber harassment and violence.

Leaders such as those of the Departmental Association of Coca Producers of La Paz (Adepcoca), for example, critical of the government and its actions, have been arrested and imprisoned without further legal grounds or with false accusations, in a strategy of criminalization of the protest and judicial lynching of opponents.

Realm B: Journalism, the main enemy

In the same line of decline and worsening, this realm obtained less than half of the assigned score (4.00 out of 10.00 compared to the previous 5.3). The journalistic sector has become the biggest target of threats, violence, hate speech and death; insults, beatings, destruction of property, kidnapping of equipment and information material in different social conflicts, both by third parties and by the police themselves. These events are part of the list of violations without investigation or sanction from the State.

Authorities, political leaders (such as Evo Morales), former authorities, union leaders, among others, have taken on the task of openly attacking the press and even personalizing offenses and insults against practicing media or journalists.

The official discursive generalization against the media and journalists continues the diatribe of "sellouts", "gangsters", "sewers", "coup plotters", "liars", aimed not only at undermining the credibility and solvency of their work, but also to point them out as targets of be attacked by other sectors.

Realm C: multiple violence and sustained impunity

In this realm, Bolivia (8.00 out of 42.00) is placed at the lower limit that indicates violence and severe restrictions against journalists and media, along with impunity in cases of violations of the right and freedom of information. Unfortunately, the country is closer to the group of nations without freedom of expression according to the general table of the twenty-two countries analyzed.

The State, its offices, levels and apparatuses, have become the main transgressor of fundamental rights. Persecution, intimidation, stigmatization and hatred, threats and intimidation of all kinds against journalists and media have characterized this first part of Arce Catacora's management.

State protection of journalistic work, within the framework of international commitments, is at zero level. As is also the area of administration of justice in cases of violations and crimes against journalists and media. No measures or regulations have been adopted for prevention, nor for investigation, much less for reparation of attacks, threats, violence, destruction, directed at journalists. Impunity reigns and aggressors feel increasingly confident and protected.

Verbal, physical, psychological, economic, political, and cyber violence are assembled to exert pressure and submission on journalistic work..

Realm D: disappearance and closure of media

Media control is not new in the country, it is just that its mechanisms and forms have been changed and accentuated. Among the direct and indirect controls from the Bolivian State towards the media, a value of 14.88 out of twenty-five is reached.

Direct control (9.63 out of 19.00) refers to one of the greatest pressures that the State has exerted against the media, with fences and blocking of official advertising. The newspapers El Diario, Los Tiempos, Página Siete, have denounced at different times tax pressures, lawsuits, audits and fines from government agencies, among the main factors that trigger the weakening and, in extreme cases, even the closure of one of these diaries.

In the area of indirect control (5.25 out of 6.00), the pressures that the government exerts on other companies or private institutions so that they do not place advertising in certain media are counted. Additionally, mechanisms of indirect control are cyber attacks and hacking of digital media accounts, aimed at silencing them.

Conclusions

Bolivia is experiencing a context made fragile by the economic crisis, political polarization, fragmentation and social conflict. The media and journalists have been a permanent target of attacks and threats from the state itself, the allies of the ruling party, the political and civic opposition sectors and even from criminal groups.

The violence has been multidimensional: from physical and verbal – with beatings, persecution and insults and threats – to digital, with cyberbullying, stigmatization, hate speech on socio-digital platforms, along with hacks and blocks in cyberspace; going through the economic with advertising financing blocks. A set of attacks that has even led to the closure of one of the main print media in the country.

Attempts to violate the right to secrecy of sources have not ceased. The Executive Branch and the Judicial Branch have formed a common and articulated front to go against journalists, with ongoing processes that circumvent the Printing Law itself and with special courts for these cases.

This situation has negatively and progressively influenced the exercise of informed citizens free to express themselves; in addition to a free practice of journalism, without censorship or restrictions. The violence exercised and the impunity for such actions are invariable in the current scenario.

The perspective of the previous 2021-2022 report already showed the risk and threats to the rule of law that have been aggravated in the current 2022-2023 administration, placing the country in the lower limit range, close to countries without freedom of expression.

References

Asociación Nacional de la Prensa de Bolivia. (2022a, August 3). *En medio de enfrentamientos fue herido el periodista Nicolás Sanabria*. Anp-bolivia.com. <https://anp-bolivia.com/en-medio-de-enfrentamientos-fue-herido-el-periodista-nicolas-sanabria/?fbclid=IwAR21kkjFW4k0xTmvyu0Bvyl8EuXvPC4P9vGMv7TPIXqDI1SYr61Fydkeehw>

Asociación Nacional de la Prensa de Bolivia. (2022b, August 11). *Diario Los Tiempos ratifica denuncia de asfixia económica para “obligar” a la venta del medio*. Anp-bolivia.com. <https://anp-bolivia.com/diario-los-tiempos-ratifica-denuncia-de-asfixia-economica-para-obligar-a-la-venta-del-medio/?fbclid=IwAR3RrNruclnDY8Gb5lBwgLKF0FyooOteiJjDRXfhwSSF04XPU-coO2DIJTk>

Asociación Nacional de la Prensa de Bolivia. (2022c, December 2). *Trabajadores de Los Tiempos marchan contra presión judicial*. Anp-bolivia.com. <https://anp-bolivia.com/trabajadores-de-los-tiempos-marchan-contra-presion-judicial/?fbclid=IwAR2KphYSoHLiCy-wpdU2H7hm50NMGOfdAmw941AQ0mUu7OCXNVhpsU1RUaI>

Asociación Nacional de la Prensa de Bolivia. (2022d, December 18). *Periodistas exigen a la policía que cesen sus ataques contra reporteros*. Asociación Nacional de La Prensa de Bolivia. <https://anp-bolivia.com/periodistas-exigen-a-la-policia-que-cesen-sus-ataques-contra-reporteros/?fbclid=IwAR0S6tSbFP8sEueuTJVRpmFcxctXtmiSe6pn32TXv8qFCmBlmGdgP1cTgAA>

Asociación Nacional de la Prensa de Bolivia. (2022f, December 16). *Director del portal informativo Urgente.bo denuncia intento de silenciamiento en redes*. Anp-bolivia.com. <https://anp-bolivia.com/director-del-portal-informativo-urgente-bo-denuncia-intento-de-silenciamiento-en-redes/?fbclid=IwAR1Xhwl67Z6LpfM0j4SMJeWAKHik2FnX6wuWC6KT7eINBXeQS02WB3qMD B8>

El Diario. (2022, October 21). *Trabajadores llaman a defender al periódico centenario*. El Diario. <https://www.eldiario.net/portal/2022/10/21/trabajadores-llaman-a-defender-al-periodico-centenario-el-diario/>

Gutiérrez, A. (2023, August 5). *Guerreros digitales: Una granja de Trolls contra la libertad de expresión*. CEBID. <https://www.cedib.org/noticias/dos-millones-de-cuentas-en-las-redes-sociales-para-desinformar-y-atacar-a-periodistas/>

Red UNITAS. (2023, July 3). *Informe de Situación 2022. Red UNITAS - Bolivia*. Red UNITAS. <https://redunitas.org/download/informe-de-situacion-2022/>

Uribe, J., Ojeda, Á., Peredo, V., & López, E. (2023, July). *Violencia digital contra periodistas en Bolivia*. Chequea Bolivia https://chequeabolivia.bo/sites/default/files/2023-07/Violencia_Digital_Periodistas_ChequeaBolivia-Capir-2023.pdf

