

Bolivia: different policies between two administrations

Executive summary

Bolivia ranks among the middle positions of the Chapultepec Index of Freedom of Expression, not because it has had a moderate behavior in the twelve months under study, but because that period covers six months of Evo Morales's government and six months of the administration that emerged, as a constitutional solution, after the Morales's resignation. Therefore, the Index – as an average – is comprised of two starkly opposite situations, to the point that the report could be divided into two different parts, the first of which could hypothetically resemble the conditions in Venezuela, and the second one, those in Chile.

Introduction

The study period includes the last six months of Evo Morales's mandate, marked by his ouster in the wake of a nationwide protest against the fraudulent electoral process of October 20, 2019, corruption, and violations of the constitution and laws. Additionally, this study includes the first six months of the government of Jeanine Áñez, the senator in charge of filling the vacuum left by Morales's sudden flight, and tasked with calling for new elections.

Regarding freedom of expression, the change was radical. Almost overnight, on November 12, when Morales left the country, the violations to the freedom of expression, persecution of journalists, and abuse against of the Law of Printing (Ley de Imprenta), in force since 1925 in Bolivia, ceased.

The advent of the new government, which guarantees freedom of the press, means that independent media benefit from this new situation. However, concurrently, the media acquired or launched by Morales's administration can continue to operate, benefitting from the currently existing guarantees, which are standard in a full democracy.

La restaurada libertad de expresión beneficia incluso a los medios alineados con la gestión pasada. Esto último ocurrió con los medios acaparados por aquella, incluyéndose un medio adquirido bajo presión -según la denuncia del empresario Abdallah Daher sobre la supuesta extorsión para obligarlo a vender el canal Periodistas Asociados de Televisión (PAT)-, así como las 130 radioemisoras que usan equipos obsequiados por Hugo Chávez y un canal de televisión obsequiado por la dictadura iraní. Algunos medios que habían gozado de los favores durante el gobierno de Morales y son seguidores del partido del coccalero exigieron al nuevo gobierno que les asignara el cupo de publicidad de que gozaron, y alegaron que de lo contrario se estaría violando la libertad de prensa.

The restored freedom of expression benefits even those media that are aligned with Morales's Administration. This occurs with the media monopolized by the previous Government, among them a media supposedly acquired under pressure -according to the complaint of the businessman Abdallah Daher about the alleged extortion to force him to sale the television channel *Periodistas Asociados de Televisión* (PAT)-: 130 radio stations operating on equipment given away by Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and a television channel given by the Iranian dictatorship. Some media that had enjoyed the favors during the Morales's government and are allegiant to the party of the *cocalero* (coca grower) have demanded that new government allocate the advertising quotas that they enjoyed, since – they argue – the freedom of the press would otherwise be violated.

Con 39,8 puntos sobre 100, la calificación de Bolivia no parece juzgar bien a los dos extremos, pues por un lado beneficia a la administración de Morales que podría haber tenido niveles como el de Venezuela, pero por otro lado no hace suficiente justicia al mejoramiento que se dio el 12 de noviembre, cuando inició una gestión que hipotéticamente merecería una calificación alta, más similar a la de Chile. Este informe trata de dar cuenta de dos realidades diferentes, de dos países diferentes. Los seis meses del nuevo gobierno, hasta abril, ayudaron a que mejore la calificación de Bolivia en el índice, compensando las condiciones que habían existido en los seis meses anteriores: Mr. Hyde y Dr. Jekyll, en ese orden, para la libertad de expresión.

Report

With 39.8 points out of 100, Bolivia's rating does not seem to fairly assess both sides, since, on the one hand, it benefits an administration that could have achieved a score similar to that of Venezuela; but, on the other, it does not do enough justice to the improved scenario underway since November 12. Therefore, the government that followed would hypothetically deserve a higher rating, rather similar to that of Chile. This report attempts at giving an account of two different realities, two different countries. The six months of the new government, until April, helped improve Bolivia's rating in the index, offsetting the conditions that had existed over the previous six months: Mr. Hyde and Dr. Jekyll, in that order, regarding freedom of expression.

Environments: All the power of the State against freedom

During the first six months of the period covered by the study, all the media in Bolivia had to comply with Law 164 of October 2012, whereby they were under the obligation of broadcasting, free of charge, all of the rulers' speeches and addresses, or otherwise be penalized with fines or the shutdown of their media

outlets. The speech of Evo Morales on August 6, 2019, the anniversary of Bolivia, was broadcast on a mandatory basis, so were his media campaigns.

On January 22, 2020, at a press conference, President Jeanine Áñez announced that she had repealed the provision under which broadcasting government addresses was mandatory for the media. She did so during her speech honoring the restoration of democracy.

A campaign by Morales government was aimed at dubbing a "cartel of lies" the media broadcasting the opposition's whistleblowing on the February 21, 2016 referendum. With their votes, citizens decided that Morales could not run for office over again. *Página Siete* (Page Seven) newspaper, *Fides* radio station, as well as journalists Carlos Valverde, Raúl Peñaranda, Andrés Gómez, and Amalia Pando were singled out as members of the so-called "cartel" by the powerful government media system.

In the period covered by the study, journalists Juan Pablo Guzmán and Erwin Valda had to quit their television shows and the program *Pares Opuestos* (Opposite Pairs) under government pressure, as denounced by them and by journalists' organizations. Carlos Valverde, a radio host from Santa Cruz, was forced into exile after threats by the government, so was Wilson García Mérida, who had blown the whistle on Minister Juan Ramón Quintana for smuggling. This reporter was forced to print his newspaper, *El Sol de Pando* (The Sun of Pando), from Brazilian territory.

Since he took office, Morales endeavored to seize control of flagship media. Both *La Razón* (The Reason) newspaper and ATB (Bolivian Broadcasting Association [Asociación Teledifusora Boliviana]) television channel were bought out by Carlos Gill Ramírez, a Venezuelan national, and then put at the service of the government. Businessman Abdallah Daher denounced in 2019 that he was forced to sell his stock in PAT (Associated Journalists Television [Periodistas Asociados Televisión]) television channel to a high-ranking government official, because his son had been kidnapped by those interested in the buyout, all of them with close ties to the regime.

The management of the TV channels of Morales administration, including the state-owned media outlet, fled the country along with Morales in November and are now his advisors in exile. They have worked from abroad on building an image that Morales's flight from Bolivia was the product of a "coup d'état" and they receive the support of foreign media aligned with the China-Russia-Iran axis. On social media, a tweet set the record straight on Morales's ouster: "It was not a coup d'état, it was a kick in the a...", grounds not included among the causes for deposing a ruler.

Realm A: Bolivians have lost the habit of obtaining information

The hostage taking of the media by Morales government also included hiring teams of journalists willing to bow down to the demands of the authorities. This persisted for six months of the study. Radio news programs became mere spaces for spewing propaganda on government projects, and political topics were excluded. Political commentary shows on television channels, such as *El Abogado del Diablo* (The Devil's Advocate), on Unitel channel, were canceled and, in their stead, this channel had to broadcast shows covering crime news; or soap operas, usually of Turkish origin, were featured.

This made Bolivians turn to the Internet to get news, thereby engaging in social media. The mainstream media had ceased to serve as an avenue of information for the people. It was by means of social media that the unprecedented nationwide protest from October 20 to November 12, 2019, was organized. Mainstream media remained silent over the issue.

By pressuring with tax penalties or by extremely curbing government advertising for critical media, the government managed to get the most critical columnists expelled. Santa Cruz newspaper *El Deber* (The Duty) had to provide permanent office space for two internal revenue service officers to work from its premises, a sign of constant threat, so that neither news nor opinions would be critical. *Los Tiempos* (The Times) of Cochabamba had to remove columnists critical of the government from its opinion pages.

Realm B: Conditions for the exercise of journalism

The exercise of journalism in these two very different stages of the Bolivian outlook showed starkly opposite conditions, with constrained reality in the first six months, and the reality of more freedoms in the remaining six. This allowed fellow newsmen gripped by fear, accustomed to a yoke, to adjust to a new reality.

Over the second semester of the study period, it was notorious that, in certain media outlets, some journalists had remained well settled, acting as "political commissars", in charge of censoring their colleagues, avoiding news reporting on issues contrary or sabotaging the publication of opinion columns penned by personalities critical of the regime.

The journalists who had criticized Morales began demanding punishment for those who had helped the *cocalero* or had been his servants; but then they realized that democracy and freedom of the press protect even those, still operating from certain media outlets, who supported him.

Realm C: Violence and Impunity

Civil society organization *Voces del Sur* (Voices of the South), according to newspaper *Página Siete*, found that, in 2018, the cases of attacks on the press reported in Bolivia reached 65. With 21 alerts, the most frequent type of attack is "stigmatizing speech". This category implies invectives or attacks by major public officials or personalities on the reputation of journalists or the media. It also includes systematic campaigns aimed at discrediting them. In this regard, 12 instances of abuse of government power and three access to information cases also got on record in Bolivia. According to the report, in 46 cases (out of a total 65) the perpetrator was the State.

During the study period, none of these cases was investigated by Morales's administration, which also failed to respond to complaints filed by the National Press Association (Asociación Nacional de la Prensa, ANP) regarding the "asphyxiating" situation in which the government had left uncomfortable media outlets. Deputy Communications Minister Isabel Fernández revealed that 94% of the advertising budget benefited media outlets owned by their shareholders themselves or by front men, as is the case of *La Razón* newspaper, owned by Venezuelan-born Carlos Gill. In early 2019, this businessman admitted before a group of Bolivian journalists that he was not privy of how this morning paper, which at the time was the most important in the country, was being managed.

Página Siete newspaper and *Fides* radio station filed complaints against the government's allegations that they were part of the "cartel of lies" for reporting on the defeat of *cocalero* Morales in the referendum of February 21, 2016; but the justice system would not hear these complaints.

From the Legislative, there were, even during the period under review, several attempts at drafting and passing a new Law of Printing to replace the one of 1925, claiming that, at that time, there were no radio or television stations, let alone Internet.

Officials of the Morales's government argued that the establishment of special courts could not be tolerated, that journalists should answer to the Law for the crimes that they had committed, but not to courts that could let those crimes go by, to the detriment of citizens. The government that followed, on the other hand, gave full guarantees of respect for freedom of expression. The press conferences held by Ms. Áñez opened the possibility for journalists to ask questions and no one was offended, in contrast to the *cocalero*'s style.

Realm D: Control of media

The Morales's period first move on the media was to create a powerful ecosystem of state-owned radio stations and television channels, in addition to print media buyouts. This system has remained intact in the study period.

To this end, it counted on the help of Hugo Chavez, in the form of equipment for 130 radio stations sent into Bolivia. The Bolivian government had to award them to organizations of loyalists named "farmers' communities". The most powerful equipment was given to coca producers, Morales's associates, who established *Kawsachun Coca* ("Long Live Coca" in Quechua) radio, with a wide network of relay stations. The bills for the electric power consumed by this equipment are paid by the Bolivian state, even after Morales left the country.

The regimen of Iran gave the Morales government equipment for a very powerful television channel, *Abya Yala* ("Land in Bloom" in Guna), which still operates, without the democratic government having done anything to silence it. These "journalists" have opted to demand the respect for the freedom of expression not shown by them during Morales administration, and have pointed fingers at the democratic government for committing abuses against them, accusations that have only been echoed by foreign media with authoritarian views or international organizations of socialist leanings.

Conclusions

Bolivia freed itself, last November 12, from a government aligned with the São Paulo Forum, the 21st Century Socialism or, as named by Colombian President Ivan Duque, the "organized crime multinational". That administration had, up to the last day, the same attitude towards the media that the governments of China, Russia, Iran, Venezuela, or Cuba have had.

The advent of other government put an end to this situation and its practices of disregard for freedoms, starting with freedom of expression.

In October, Bolivia will hold general elections. The party that embodied Morales administration will have a candidate.

The National Association of Journalists (Asociación Nacional de Periodistas) and the National Press Association – the latter affiliated to the IAPA – played a major role in defending freedom of expression during the Morales government. More than once, their leaders announced the intent to bring complaints against his administration up to international bodies, including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

The advent of the transitional government, headed by Jeanine Áñez on November 12, 2019, was a godsend for Bolivian journalism as it put an end to the abuse against freedom of expression. She took office with the approval of the

parliament, where two thirds of the representatives and senators are members of the party of Morales. This denies that a coup d'état ended his government.

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