

## **BOLIVIA: ONGOING VIOLENCE, IMPUNITY, AND LACK OF PROTECTION**

### **Executive Summary**

As an evident trend, Bolivia keeps the decline on the conditions for the exercise of freedom of expression and the press, and the right to information. A *high restriction* in this area (32.56 out of 100) is proof of the multiple cases of violence against journalists and the media; of impunity for such actions, of the shutdown of media outlets, and of the increasing restrictions to inform and citizen's freedom of expression. Journalism is the victim of governmental economic suffocation, and the physical, verbal, cybernetic, police and judicial attacks and harassment, among others. This has deepened the vulnerability of the exercise of the profession and violated the democratic right of an informed society with freedom of expression.

### **Introduction**

As Luis Arce's end of term in office closes in (2020-2025), the wave of conflict and polarization in the country grows. During the period surveyed, tensions in the political and social arena have been linked to the census process, the alleged "coup d'état" of June 2024, the structural division of the Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS) and its dispute for the 2025 presidential candidacy; the unfinished process of judicial elections, and the repeated cases of corruption and drug trafficking.

The environmental crisis has created new fronts for the fight. The deliberate forest fires occurring since June 2024, with the purpose of expanding the agricultural frontier, together with the growing contamination from gold mining and other activities, have affected protected areas, indigenous communities, soils, rivers, and the biodiversity existing in these areas, amidst negligence or belated responsiveness by the government.

The *Arcistas* and *Evistas* factions (supporters of Luis Arce and Evo Morales, respectively) have been more concerned about internal fights rather than with public administration. The parliamentary opposition, dissidents and social antagonists to the government, have not been able to do much to divert the attention to core issues such as the economic crisis, fuel shortages, lack of U.S. currency, the increase on the price of goods, domestic commodities, imported food and pharmaceuticals.

Some sectors and regions in the country have raised their voices to protest against the situation, but have not been paid much attention; instead, social protest has been criminalized and leaders have been threatened. In this context, violations of the right to inform and be informed have been permanent through violent actions - whether physical or verbal - against journalists, the media, and citizens.

Thus, with 32.56 for the year 2024, Bolivia positions itself in the highly restrictive range, while showing a slight decrease with respect to the 2023 survey (33.88). This figure expresses a trend on the remarkable lack of protection and the growing violation of the basic human rights of freedom of expression and the press. It upholds the 18<sup>th</sup> position, among the 22 countries in the region surveyed, close to the *without freedom of expression and the press* range.

Social demonstrations repressed, leaders threatened, divided civil organizations, unions and citizen institutions; bureaucratic apparatus used as assault groups against opponents; media and journalists coerced by the economy, harassment by the police, judges, companies or persecution by criminal networks, victims of crossfire between MAS supporters and opposition groups to the government is the amalgamation of the situation that keeps Bolivia's meager rating in the Index.

## **RESULT ANALYSIS ENVIRONMENTS: CENTRAL ABUSERS**

As in previous evaluations, the Executive, Legislative and Judicial Environments are gravitating factors for the decline of the full exercise of freedom of expression and the press. The degree of overall unfavorable influence reaches 5.60 (strong influence) for the Executive Branch; 4.36 (moderate influence) for the Judicial Branch; and 3.61 (moderate influence) for the Legislative Branch.

The Executive Environment is the one displaying the greatest negative impact (7.25 strong influence), with the infringement of citizens freedom to express themselves. Cases that prove this are many: the directors of the National Service of Protected Areas (Servicio Nacional de Áreas Protegidas, Sernap) who were prohibited to provide information on forest fires and fires in general (Los Tiempos, 2023); the exclusion of journalists from official WhatsApp groups managed by police sources for questioning the work of the latter (ANP, 2023); and the attempt by the director of the National Institute of Statistics to prohibit census takers to give statements to the press and to restrict news coverage of the 2024 Population and Housing Census under an alleged "Statistical Secrecy" that provides for the confidentiality of the personal data but not to voice statements to the media (APLP, 2024). This negative score is also backed by the 2023 Situation Report of the National Union of Institutions for Social Action Work (Unión Nacional de Instituciones para el Trabajo de Acción Social, Unitas), where the Executive is pointed out as one of the main violators of freedom of expression. It also confirms that the journalistic community was one of the most attacked sectors and imposed with more limitations for the exercise of their functions (Unitas, 2023).

In the Free Exercise of Journalism area, the indicator is also alarming (4.67 moderate influence) due to the pressure, intimidation or attacks against journalists. The newspaper *La Palabra del Beni*, in the city of Trinidad, was subject to threats and harassment by officials of the government of Beni who demanded a retraction for a publication on child abuse in an institution managed by that departmental government (APC, 2024); in Oruro, the governor of that department asked to "limit" the statements of a journalist of the Unitel Network by threatening to use legal proceedings to accuse her of harm to his dignity and image (Hualpa, 2024).

Bolivia's score is also negative in the area of Violence and Impunity (4.88 moderate influence). Journalist, Noelia Flores, and cameraman Kevin Rodas, of Red ATB in Santa Cruz, were assaulted by police officers on duty in the Santa Cruz Governor's Office when they were preparing to cover an inspection of that office by representatives of the Public Prosecutor's

Office (El Diario, 2024). To date, the investigation is not making headway and the names of the aggressors are kept concealed.

On its part, the Judicial Environment has an important weight in disinformation and coercion to the freedom of expression (6.04, strong influence); unfavorable due to the control over the media (2.83, slight influence); and due to violence and impunity by failing to punish many wrongful deeds against the work of journalists (4.21 moderate influence).

Cases of prosecutor's requests from journalists to testify in criminal proceedings, threats of judicial actions, imprisonment, no convictions or culprits in cases of attacks against journalists; all this summarizes the performance of this environment. In the animal slaughter case taking place in the community of Tihumayu, in Chuquisaca, journalist Reynaldo Zelaya was forced to testify as a witness, without realizing that this did not correspond to him (APCH, 2024); the prosecutor of Pando Department, Rolando Sánchez, effected prior censorship, threats and intimidation against the reporting team of Televisión Universitaria, Canal 21, forcing them to erase images of the police operation in nightclubs and motels in the city of Cobija, in which a teenage girl working in a brothel was tracked and detained (Erbol, 2024).

The Legislative Environment, on the other hand, represents an area of frequent and uncivilized fights between the arcismo, evismo, and the opposition, with negative tendency against the Informed Citizenry of 5.25 (strong influence); a blockade against the Exercise of Journalism and Control over the Media with 2.33 (slight influence); and Violence and Impunity with 3.25 (moderate influence). As a result of the open confrontation between the two sides of MAS, there was a hunger strike by the pro-evista segment in the Chamber of Deputies. The arcista segment accused pro-evistas of obstructing the work of the press by expelling journalists from the strikers' area (Vargas, 2023). During the implementation of exams for the candidates to the Judicial Branch, a MAS senator was filmed subtly helping one of the candidates by providing the answers. This led to the senator to accuse journalist Jhon Arandia of being paid by the government (APSC, 2024).

Defamation, vilification and threats against journalists have become commonplace among politicians, authorities, and other leaders. Institutional environments influence the deterioration of the conditions and the obstruction the job of journalists. The abuse of power against journalists and the media reveals the structural misunderstanding of the right to information and the limitations to this democratic exercise.

## **REALMS**

### **DISINFORMATION AND CONSTRUCTION OF POST-TRUTHS STRATEGIES**

The pressure and conditioning of the work of journalists limit the right of citizens to access useful, truthful, timely and free information. Different social, business, union, political-partisan representatives, and authorities at different levels, among others, prevent the press from carrying out coverage on a daily basis. For the scores of the 2024 measurement, the realm of an Informed Citizenry and Freedom of Expression is in the red band (no freedom of expression, with 5.25 out of 30).

The free information flow (2.50 out of 11 points) is systematically violated by the denial of access to public information; government officials and their different institutions avoid voicing statements; the systems of public information have limitations of access to information or the information that is supposed to have full coverage for being of public interest is not available. One example of this, was the suspension since 2023 of the weekly reports of the country's

International Reserves as issued by the Central Bank of Bolivia. To date, after reformulating those reports every four months, there is no clear details of the movement of such reserves. “There is no public information on the quantities and price at which gold was bought in the domestic market, and under what conditions, or on the price, quantities and to whom our gold reserves were sold in the international markets” (Romero, 2024). There is no clear information on the amount of land (forests and grassland) that have been burned so far.

In the area of Freedom of Expression (2.50 out of 9 points) the panorama does not improve. In the midst of a growing conflict (demonstrations, civil protests, blockades), polarization and intolerance have intensified. Self-censorship serves as an element for preserving physical safety or preventing attacks. The repressive measures taken by the government, the violent behavior of the MAS factions in conflict, the diversity of confrontation: Between the ruling and opposition caucus in the Legislative Assembly, the social movements of one side or the other in the streets, the different sectors seeking attention to their demands; are implicit demonstrations of inflexibility, of the poor capacity for dialogue, and of the exercise of pressure and violence as instruments of power.

Additionally, the government has done nothing to address disinformation and, on the contrary, uses it as a strategy to demobilize the opposition or to implement official narratives or post-truths. The value on the scale reaches 0.25 out of 10. An example is the yet-to-prove failed “coup d'état” of June 26, 2024; an action that still remains unclear whether it was orchestrated with the government to increase support for Luis Arce, as declared by the leader of the coup, the former Army Commander, Juan José Zúñiga.

The government permanently makes use accounts in social-digital networks and governmental media to promote hate speech and threats against adversaries (including opposition, *evista* factions, and sectors critical to the current administration). This was revealed by the publication *Digital Mercenaries (Mercenarios Digitales)* (Centro Latinoamericano de Investigación Periodística-CLIP, 2023), whose article focused on Bolivia and entitled “Artificial fan base sustains Luis Arce's popularity on Twitter” (2023), which not only reveals false or real accounts (of public officials) with inauthentic operations directed and oriented to approve and praise the administration of the president. It also reports on the replication and dissemination of false and distorted information by digital media like *La Zurda Radio* and *La Resistencia*, which received support through official advertising or opinion content from MAS operators and public officials.

## **VIOLENCE AND IMPUNITY: AN INSTITUTIONALIZED NORM**

The multidimensional violence and continued impunity described in the 2022-2023 report are hereby ratified as a trend. In this survey, the value reaches 14.18 out of 40 points (high restriction), that is, very restricted conditions, even annulled, for a free and dignified exercise of journalism, with prevention and protection measures for their work, in addition to sanctions against attacks.

Protection is none: The score is 0.38 out of 10. The government keeps a radical negligence towards the protection of the exercise of journalism and the media; even more, the government itself is one of the main aggressors through the use of police, associated corps, militants of MAS factions, and public officials who act as assault groups at demonstrations. The Environmental News Agency (Agencia de Noticias Ambientales, ANA) was pushed and intimidated by the Mining Jurisdictional Administration Authority (Autoridad de Administración Jurisdiccional Minera, AJAM) to reveal their source of information regarding mining rights for a report on exploitation with Chinese dredges in La Paz department (Erbol, 2023).

Some examples: A group of arcistas kicked a journalist out the radio station *Kawsachun Coca* in the Abaroa square. *Kawsachun Coca* is the media outlet of the six Federations of Producers of the Tropic of Cochabamba, a union organization in which Evo Morales is a leader and from where he broadcasts a weekly program (Urgente.bo, 2024); Edgar Salazar, president of the pro-government Permanent Assembly of Human Rights of Bolivia, that is, the parallel organization affiliated with the government, described the press as extortionist (APCH, 2023); mining cooperative members attacked six national and international journalists and photojournalists in the midst of demonstrations for demands for that sector; while drunk, they pushed, threw stones and bottles and accused journalists of being “sellouts and liars” (Erbol, 2023).

The persecution of journalists and media critical or dissatisfied with the government also adds to this array of violations. The government of Luis Arce has favored the violent action of his close associates, many militants or public officials sent to marches, blockades or public gatherings to attack journalists. The value achieved is 1.63 out of 14. One example: an independent journalist was detained, for no good reason, outside the Central Bank of Bolivia when he was covering the exchange rate and the shortage of dollars in the country (APLP-ANPB, 2024). In Oruro, transport drivers in conflict with neighbors and university students over the increase in fares, attacked journalists covering the confrontations (APO, 2024). Stigmatization, defamation and hate speech against the media and journalists have set in the country like a norm.

A real estate company filed defamation and slander lawsuit against a journalist for giving voice to different sources where the company name was mentioned (APLP, 2024).

In a report on the violations of the human rights of journalists, the Ombudsman's Office reveals through interviews to 329 media employees that “...organizations and movement groups; their employers, political leaders, public entities and public forces are recognized as the main oppressors of journalists' rights” (2024, p. 39).

Impunity is also undeniable; the measure scored 1.88 out of 16. Journalist associations often report the attacks and have even started judicial processes, but at the moment there are no sentences or sanctions for the culprits (Rosales, 2023). The institutionalized indifference to protect journalists or to issue sanctions for crimes against them or against the media is commonplace in the analysis of the situation.

The violence perpetrated against journalists of the television networks (UNITEL and Red Uno) went unpunished. During the coverage of the MAS congress, in the area of *Lauca Ñi*, the so-called “union guard” prevented the television transmission, pushed and assaulted the journalists and cameramen and even splashed them with beer (APSC, 2023).

There is no specific legislation to punish crimes against journalists. The judicial system, in general, is one of the most corrupt and the public does not trust it. “Mistrust in justice, fear of retaliation and practical limitations, such as lack of time, resources and the knowledge on how to the procedure of filing a complaint are some of the reasons recognized by respondents for not reporting violations” (Ombudsman's Office, 2024, p. 39).

## **MULTIPLE FORMS OF CONTROL OVER THE MEDIA AND JOURNALISTS**

In the realm related to the Control over the Media and Journalists, the country does not escape from a negative value: 13.13 out of 30 (in restriction).

In direct control, the score is 6.00 out of 14. The mechanism of official advertising keep being a strategy for controlling the media. The economic crisis has affected the income of the media and

the government's own control -via official advertising- has suffered the consequences. According to journalistic reports, the governments of MAS, namely Evo Morales and Luis Arce, benefited 28 related media with USD 500,000 (Lanza and Chuquimia, 2024); whereas the media managed by the government received 91 million bolivianos (Bolivia's currency) in 2023 (ANF, 2023).

The newspaper *La Razón*, which has been identified as being aligned to MAS and which has admitted having received permanent financing for more than a decade (up to 20% of its budget), announced the cessation of its print edition on August 31 and its conversion to a digital newspaper. It is worth mentioning that even the politically affiliated media are suffering the effects of the restriction of public resources, and this is a lot much worse for media that are banned or that receive little conditioned income through that mechanism.

But control can also be exerted via the administrative control of the license of operation. On March 6, 2024, the independent radio station, FM Bolivia, located in the Yungas, La Paz Department, was silenced by resolution of the Telecommunications Authority (Autoridad de Telecomunicaciones, ATT). In February 2024, ATT had also imposed a heavy fine; its director, Galo Hubner, credited the measure to the coverage of coca leaf farmers' protests against the governments of presidents Evo Morales and Luis Arce (Erbol, 2024). In the same coca-growing area of Yungas, the equipment of Radio Activa (La Asunta) was confiscated for not having authorization to operate and fined with USD \$4,300; similarly, Radio Yungas de Chulumani ceased broadcasting after forty years, since its license was not renewed by the ATT (ANP, 2023).

Another form of control and censorship was the cancellation of television programs such as "No mentirás", broadcasted through on *PAT* network, whose board of directors includes Carlos Romero, former minister of Evo Morales. This program interviewed Juan José Zúñiga, a major player of the "coup d'état" attempt of June 2024. Days later, the program was cancelled in the station (Tarija en línea, 2024).

Indirect control scores 5.00 out of 6 points. Cyber-attacks against digital media have not stopped. The web page of the newspaper *El Deber*, of Santa Cruz, was object of cyber-attack resulting in the loss of access to the site and the publication of hate messages and aggressions against government officials. The media declared: "It is not the first time that they try to silence our voice. For a long time *El Deber* has been enduring attacks from the so-called digital 'warriors' and groups of power, which, with smear campaigns, not only seek to affect the credibility of this multimedia group, built during 71 years of hard work, but also to put an end to one of the few independent media that still remains in force in Bolivia" (ANP, 2024).

In the sub-realm of control of the exercise of journalism, with 2.13 out of 10, there are no regulatory actions or practices to promote media plurality and access to public information. On the contrary, in some of the cases reported, journalists have been asked to reveal their sources of information. There is obstruction to obtain information through the assault of journalists who request for interviews. For instance, the case of an official of the Santa Cruz government who verbally assaulted a journalist of the Unitel network with whom he had previously agreed a live coverage at a site where dikes were being built to prevent flooding in Montero and San Lorenzo. However, the official later questioned the presence of the journalist and the television crew (ANP, 2024).

## CONCLUSIONS

All of the above demonstrates the unfavorable weight of the environments and realms that undermine the acceptable conditions for journalism. The indicators are more alarming for the Executive and Judicial Environment that by means of actions, inactions, and the promotion of violence or impunity, restrict the exercise of journalism. The context shows multiple forms of censorship, harassment, intimidation, attacks, controls and pressures against the right to information and the right to express oneself freely.

The climate of growing conflict, the clear polarization in the midst of a political crisis, in addition to an economic and social crisis, has increased the violence and attacks against journalists and the media. Government agencies represent permanent instances for threats, defamation or stigmatization of the labor of communication. Prosecutor's requirements to reveal sources of information; threats to take legal actions, abusive detentions, verbal aggressions, physical attacks, confiscation of equipment, uninvestigated reports, unpunished culprits, among others, have consolidated cycles of systematic violence and normalized impunity that discourage the work of journalists and undermine confidence in the system of justice, protection and security for journalists and the media.

The role of the government in the violations against the journalistic and media sector is critical and multifaceted. Among the most relevant aspects are:

- 1) Inaction and lack of protection, with radical disregard for the mechanisms that guarantee and protect the work of journalists. The various government agencies are not fulfilling their duty of safeguarding freedom of expression and the press.
- 2) Direct or indirect attacks from the government and associated sectors. The main aggressor is the government itself, through the police, related sectors or even the very public officials deployed as assault groups. The atmosphere of journalistic coverage is surrounded by fear, repression and attacks.
- 3) The encouragement of violence, promoted by different social sectors, political players, authorities, companies, and public agencies, seems to be coordinated as a block to prevent the free exercise of journalism. There is a normalization of violence and the government seems to have some complicity or, at least, it fails to condemn the parts that incur in crimes against the media and journalists.
- 4) Censorship and control. The limitation of access to public information, the avoid giving to statements, the selection of specific media and journalists to offer interviews or news coverage; the distribution of official advertising; the cancellation or suspension of operating licenses for television or radio media; cyber-attacks, among others, are mechanisms frequently used to exert pressure and control over mass media operators.
- 5) Impunity that discourages and demobilizes people from denouncing and seeking sanctions against aggressors of the media and journalists. Fear of processes where time and money are invested without sanctioning consequences for the guilty parties.
- 6) Defamation and the direct or indirect vilification coming from different sectors, from the government, its political operators, associated and opposing social movements, the struggling factions of the "masismo", as well as the so-called "digital warriors" are also a permanent mark that creates a hostile climate. Hate speech and accusations that harm the morale and dignity of journalists are practices that further deteriorate their situation.

In short, the government, companies, different kind of social organizations, among others, are part of the obvious aggressors in a progressively deteriorating atmosphere where freedom of expression and the press are constantly threatened and violated. The lack of guarantees for the full exercise of the right to inform and be informed undermines not only the rights of journalists, but also those of all citizens and, therefore, damages the democratic foundations.

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