

Dominican Republic: New government, freedom of expression free of threats

Executive Summary

The victory of the Modern Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Moderno, PRM) and the inauguration of Luis Abinader's presidential term on 16 August 2020 reopened the floodgates of freedom of expression in the country. Journalists critical of the government defeated at the polls, from the Dominican Liberation Party (Partido de la Liberación Dominicana, PLD), witnessed how threats against them, issued by officials and followers of the previous regime, ceased to be a danger to their professional practice. This renewal that reached the congressional sphere and part of the Judiciary redefined the government media landscape. At the same time, social media solidified their place as platforms of expression for citizens and independent journalists, alongside the traditional media.

Introduction

The period covered by this report is framed in a historical process of the Dominican democracy: A party – the PLD – was subjected to handing over the Executive after controlling it for 16 consecutive years. This electoral defeat, which occurred on July 5, 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, obliterated the bid on continuity implemented by the government and its president Danilo Medina with aggravating practices aimed at the field of freedom of expression. Journalists who questioned the strategies of the PRI government to remain in power and had to take refuge in alternative media, primarily social media platforms, managed to develop successful business models to fund their activity. In the months covered by the study, there was a consolidation of programs by independent journalists – with daily broadcasts – by receiving contributions from their viewers, allowing them to survive without government advertising (El Antinoti, 2021; Sin Maquillaje, 2021; Somos Pueblo, 2021).

In the tapestry of social control exercised by journalists from traditional and alternative media, government advertising remained as a key factor to be followed up. The PRM government has maintained millionaire advertising budgets, benefiting journalists who were previously deemed as *bocinas* (loudspeakers) for the past government (Rodríguez, 2020).

It is also noteworthy the fact that aggressions from government power circles against journalists have been reduced to insignificant levels. Only one instance in a community near the capital, where a police officer hit a journalist in the face, has gone on record.

Dominican journalists, as well as healthcare staff, and agencies linked to armed forces, benefited from the priority vaccination against COVID-19 funded by the Dominican government. The main offices of the Dominican Association of Journalists (Colegio Dominicano de Periodistas, CDP) became, for weeks, a vaccination center. This allowed the journalists and media crews most exposed in news coverage during the pandemic to fulfill their duties with less risk.

Massive layoffs of journalists, because of the impact of the economic crisis on the media stemming from declining advertising, affected the practice of journalism in the private sector, even though the pandemic caused an exponential increase in ratings. (CIC-Funglode, 2020). The CDP expressed its concern for the loss of jobs of reporters, camera operators, and photographers (Hoy, 2020).

Results Analysis

The assessment of the Dominican Republic in terms of freedom of expression shows a very favorable variation with respect to the previous period surveyed (July 2020-August 2021). Among the 22 countries reviewed by the Index, with 77.91 points, it managed to advance ostensibly from the 47 achieved last year. The country moved up closer towards the top, holding the fourth position, three places behind Uruguay, which achieved the highest score: 84.10.

The experts' appraisal of the Dominican Republic shows the improvement made during the period under analysis in all realms: Citizens Free to Express Themselves, Exercise of Journalism, Violence and Impunity, and Control over the Media. In the Legislative, Judicial and Executive environments, it yielded a result of slight influence, with ratings of 0.97, 0.71, and 1.30 points, respectively.

A climate of freedom brought about by the change of government in all matters related to the practice of journalism was witnessed with few ups and downs, even during the curfews and restrictions on mobility resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Environments: Dominican journalists saw a decrease in attacks from the echelons of power

Regarding situations unfavorable to freedom of expression in the Dominican Republic, the Executive environment had a moderate influence, which on average reached 4.14 points out of a maximum 10.

In the Mid-Year Report of the Inter American Press Association (IAPA), a direct aggression against a journalist while conducting news coverage was reported (IAPA, 2021). Journalist Dulce Glorían García Robles suffered injuries to her face when she was hit with a revolver by a National Police officer on October 18, 2020. The incident occurred while she was reporting on a protest staged by broadcast announcers in the province of San Pedro de Macorís. The confrontation took place during the pandemic curfew. The journalist sustained injuries, as denounced by the National Press Workers Union ([Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Prensa, SNTP] *El Nuevo Diario*, 2020).

A month later, the Office of the Chief Inspector of Police (Inspectoría General de la Policía) issued a report claiming that the incident involving the journalist occurred during her participation in an assault on a precinct of that law enforcement body. The journalist and two announcers, according to the report, were trying to release a journalist arrested on orders from a prosecutor (*Diario Antillano*, 2020).

The IAPA report mentioned another incident involving a police colonel in the tourist community of Boca Chica during the first week of January 2021. There, Officer Nerys Aguilar prevented Marcelino Celedonio, a producer for local Channel 3, and other journalists from working during restricted mobilization hours due to the curfew in effect to address the pandemic. The CDP contested this decision (Últimas Noticias, 2020). The colonel was removed for his actions and journalists were reassured that they could work without restrictions (Al Momento, 2020).

On October 26, 2020, President Luis Abinader welcomed the members of the CDP and SNTP boards at the National Palace. During the meeting, the head of State accepted pension requests for affiliated journalists who had been unable to exercise their professional duties for years (El Caribe, 2020).

As regards the Legislative, changes in the internal makeup of the Senate of the Republic and the House of Representatives following the defeat suffered by the PLD had no negative repercussions on journalists' coverage. The majority achieved by the PRM in Congress and the resignations of members of the PLD to join the Fuerza del Pueblo (Force of the People) party – founded by former President Leonel Fernández after his departure from the PLD – did not cause any confrontations or clashes with traditional and alternative media.

The inauguration (for the first time in the Dominican Republic's recent democratic history) of an independent Attorney General's Office (Procuraduría General de la República) reduced the frictions and threats frequent from within that body of the Judiciary in the previous period. Miriam German, a prominent former judge, was appointed on 16 August by the President of the Republic (Listín Diario, 2020). Conversely, in August 2020, a sister of the former prosecutor had dismissed an injunctive relief filed by a recognized journalist critic of the previous government, Marino Zapete (El Nuevo Diario, 2020).

Realm A: more information flow and less friction with the powers that be

Regarding the information flow and citizens' freedom to express themselves, the experts inquired raised the country's approval ratings compared to the previous index. With 18.56 points, out of a maximum 23, Dominican society witnessed an improvement in the climate of freedom. The greatest influence noticed in this realm was from the Legislative, with 1.36 points, which constitutes a slight influence.

The assessment regarding the Executive showed a result also qualifying as slight influence, with 0.82 points out of a maximum 10. Per inquiries and records in connection with this outlook, the growth of citizens' opinions circulating on social media and opinion platforms enabled by mainstream media during live streaming broadcasts stands out. Protests by citizen movements demanding that the National Congress approve three grounds for abortion stood out in this period, with no attacks on those critical from the power elite (El Caribe, 2021).

Similarly, the appraisal on the Judiciary yielded a result of slight influence with 0.61 points achieved. The multiple court actions filed by the new authorities of the Attorney General's Office have been conducive to greater engagement with citizens, informed of these proceedings by means of official press releases and intense media coverage. The reactions of Dominicans are evident in digital platforms and call-in radio shows.

Realm B: Safer exercise of journalism, but with fewer jobs

During this period, the exercise of journalism was rated at 7.43 out of a maximum 10 points. The lowest scores were from the Executive, an environment achieving 4.14, which is considered a moderate influence.

In context, the rapprochement of President Luis Abinader to members of the Dominican Society of Newspapers, leaders of the guilds and unions gathering journalists and media crewmembers is noteworthy. There was a turning point on March 17, 2021. During a meeting at the National Palace, the President pledged to respect freedom of expression and journalists' activities, in addition to proposing funding training programs (Presidencia, 2021).

During the national celebration of Journalists' Day (Día del Periodista), President Abinader issued Executive Order No. 109-21, whereby he granted a special government pension of DOP 40,000 (Dominican Pesos) per month to 44 journalists (Diario Libre, 2021). This was a response to a long-standing claim and proof of the precarious conditions of jobs in the Dominican media.

In the Judicial and Legislative environments, those surveyed gave a rating of 2.14 and 2.43 points, respectively. This translates into a slight influence. Journalists, in general, exercised their coverage and gave their opinions on issues in a climate of freedom, free of evident threats.

Realm C: Journalism free of significant pressure and violence

Violence and impunity did not form a significant part of the conflict inextricable from journalistic duties in a society that has seen both phenomena grow in recent decades. Out of a maximum score of 42 points, the Dominican Republic obtained 29.77 in this category.

Given the virtual absence of clashes with the activity of journalists and the media in the form of incidents during the coverage of or criticism over the Legislative and Judicial environments, the experts gave a score of 0.10 points. This translates into minimum values for which they are deemed slightly influential. The Executive also achieved a good score, with 0.24 points. The minimum score to qualify for slight influence in this realm is 1 point.

The reading of the results becomes even more relevant when compared to the previous period, during which a climate of violence and impunity against journalists was reported for this realm. Journalistic work, which faced challenges posed by the pandemic and restrictions on citizens' free mobility, did not become an obstacle for media professionals and independent journalists.

Realm D: Journalism released from the burden of control by the power elite

The best scores achieved by the country in the Index are those relating to the realm of Control over the Media. Out of a theoretical maximum of 25 points, the score was 22.14. From this total, 16.43 correspond to Direct Control and 5.71 to Indirect Control.

The experts inquired gave the best scores, 0.00 out of a maximum possible 10-point appraisal, considering the actions from the Legislative, Judicial, and Executive environments to be excellent. The summary notes that the main bodies of the branches of government have

distanced themselves from the quest of private media companies and independent professionals for influencing news content.

The result cannot be disassociated from the change brought by the demise of the PLD government, which stepped down after 16 years of continuity, as mentioned above. The restrictions imposed by the pandemic did not become a means to restrict the role of the press even amid the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there was no lack of one instance of criticism: The Dominican Society of Newspapers warned about the danger of government advertising concentration (Listín Diario, 2021). The Office of the President's Director General for Communications (Dirección General de Comunicación, Dicom), Milagros German, requested that the agency be audited in defense of her tenure (Listín Diario, 2021).

Conclusions

The climate of freedom in the Dominican Republic underwent a great change during the period under analysis, both in terms of the exercise of journalism and the possibilities for citizens to voice their demands to government authorities and bodies, without getting their physical safety or mental wellbeing jeopardized.

The election results of July 5, 2020, which removed the PLD from power after 16 consecutive years of rule, constituted the closing of a cycle of official threats to the independent press. The role of social control exercised by journalists has been preserved and consolidated.

Official actions, in general, did not hinder or threaten the work of journalists. The change in attitude during the period surveyed was a step forward for the free expression of thought in the country.

In the outlook reviewed, the loss of jobs caused by the pandemic is relevant, due to a significant decrease of advertising in the media. Journalists and crewmembers of the media sector were victims of the pandemic and its economic implications, even though there was an exponential growth in the consumption of informative contents.

The allocation of government advertising, on the other hand, continues to be a pending task that has not been solved by the Executive. A lack of regulations promoting greater equity in the allocation of government advertising is noticed to guarantee greater pluralism in news output.

The consolidation of independent journalistic projects, with the support of voluntary contributions from viewers, has resulted in a greater pluralism of opinion spaces for citizen demands. Social media consolidate their position as the platforms *par excellence* to boost the success of journalistic ventures by news men and women of different generations.

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