

Brazil: Frail freedom of expression

Executive Summary

This report presents the results of the Chapultepec Index of Freedom of Expression and the Press for Brazil between July 2020 and August 2021. Out of 22 countries, Brazil ranks 19th, barely above Nicaragua, Cuba, and Venezuela. Its worst performance refers to the realm of Informed Citizens Free to Express Themselves and to the realm of Violence and Impunity. In terms of the influence of institutional environments discouraging freedom of expression, the role played by the Executive Branch stands out, which exerts a negative influence rated as very high.

Introduction

This report gives an account of the results of the Chapultepec Index of Freedom of Expression and the Press for Brazil. The data refer to the period from July 2020 and August 2021, in terms of the influence exerted by the institutional environment of the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches, as well as four realms, namely: Informed Citizens Free to Express Themselves (Realm A), Exercise of Journalism (Realm B), Violence and Impunity (Realm C) and Control over the Media (Realm D).

While the overall index improved against that of the 2019-2020 report – going from 50.84 to 55.61 on a scale of zero to 100 – that of Brazil worsened: It dropped from 37.2 to 31.60. Out of 22 countries, it ranks 19th, barely above Nicaragua (17.20), Cuba (11.11), and Venezuela (5.71). However, the current adverse context for the exercise of freedom of expression and the press in Brazil has been building over the last decade and has deepened in recent years.

Particularly since the 2018 presidential elections, a process of weakening of the country's democratic institutions, including the media, has intensified. This background takes us back to 2013, when a series of protests overflowed the streets of the country. At the time, these demonstrations were geographically located in the city of São Paulo, coordinated by groups linked to the student movement and motivated by a specific agenda opposing an increase in public transportation fares.

However, police repression and the inability of the São Paulo government encouraged more numerous and decentralized protests. Demonstrations emerged in other cities, fueled by the most diverse agendas and marked by acts of vandalism – without it being possible to identify a political leader responsible for their conduct – in what became known as "June Days" (Harvey *et al*, 2015; Bucci, 2016).

At that time, a rejection of basic democratic principles, among which is the free exercise of journalistic activity, could be detected. Reporters were beaten in the streets, a camera operator was killed and live broadcast vehicles were burned (Rossi & Bedinelli, 2014). This context was mirrored by the political polarization during the 2014 presidential elections, at which Dilma Rousseff, from the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT), was reelected. However, a climate of instability in the relationship between the Executive and the Legislative branches had

solidified, added to a context of economic crisis and street protests against the president, which had wide media coverage, and in an environment mostly unfavorable to PT governments (van Dijk, 2017).

This turmoil worsened in 2016, following a controversial impeachment process – or coup, resulting in Rousseff stepping down from office. Amid these events, the so-called "Operação Lava Jato" (Operation Carwash) went underway, a comprehensive investigation to fight corruption primarily targeting the business and political establishment, and which received extensive positive media coverage (Baptista, 2018; Cioccarri, 2015; Venceslau, 2014; Feres Júnior & Sassara, 2016).

Among the political leaders detained following Judge Sérgio Moro's decision was former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who, as a result, was unable to run for the 2018 presidential elections. Then Federal Congressman Jair Bolsonaro, from the Social Liberal Party (PSL), won this contest by means of a discourse with an authoritarian bias, being the press one of his favorite targets for attacks and slurs.

Two other precedents stand out, both related to the same topic: production and dissemination of fake news and hate speech. The first, within the scope of the Judiciary, regarding Inquiry No. 4781, better known as *Inquérito das Fake News* (Inquiry on Fake News), started on March 14, 2019 on the initiative of then-Chief Justice of the Federal Supreme Court (Supremo Tribunal Federal, STF [Judiciary]), Dias Toffoli, to investigate into crimes against members of the Court. The second, in the Legislative, deals with the creation of a Joint Parliamentary Inquiry Commission (Comissão Parlamentar Mista de Inquérito, CPMI), on September 4, 2019, with the objective of investigating, among other matters, allegations of illegal use of digital social media during the 2018 elections in favor of then-candidate Jair Bolsonaro.

In both cases, groups directly or indirectly linked to the President of the Republic began to be investigated – some individuals arrested – on charges of feeding a network of dissemination of disinformation and hate speech, possibly aiming at catalyzing the breakdown of normal democratic institutional activity. The already contentious relationship between the president and the media intensified, during the arising coronavirus pandemic, resulting from the positions on both sides.

Results Analysis

This results analysis is based on the reporting of data regarding four realms and eight sub-realms. Realm A on Informed Citizens Free to Express Themselves, subdivided into Information Flow and Free Speech; Realm B concerning the Exercise of Journalism; Realm C regarding Violence and Impunity based on data on protection, persecution, impunity, and violence on record; finally, Realm D covering Control over the Media, through the sub realms of Direct and Indirect Control.

This report also includes data regarding the unfavorable influence exerted by the institutional environments (Executive, Legislative and Judicial) on each of these realms, which poses a threat to freedom of expression. On a scale of influence levels, we have: mild influence, from 0.1 to 2.5 points; moderate influence, from 2.51 to 5; strong influence, from 5.01 to 7.5; and, finally, very strong influence, from 7.51 to 10.

In Realm A, Brazil achieved an index of 5 points, from a maximum possible of 23; in Realm B, 5.14 from a maximum possible of 10; in Realm C, 9.46 from a maximum possible of 42; and in Realm D, 12, from a maximum possible of 25. As for the influence of the institutional environment, the Executive branch prevails, with a strong level of overall influence, being very strong specifically in Realm B, while the Judicial and Legislative branches totaled 4.46 and 4.73, respectively. These data are detailed in the sections below.

Environments: The Executive stands out

The Executive stands out among the institutional environments in terms of the extent of unfavorable influence on freedom of expression. On a scale from 0 (very mild) to 10 (very strong), it obtained 6.13 points as an overall index, qualifying as strong influence, a lower figure against the 2019-2020 report, when it totaled 8.39. As in the previous report, the most significant impact was found in Realm B (Exercise of Journalism): 8.0; that is, very strong influence. Then, there is Realm C (Violence and Impunity), at 7.29, a strong influence; Realm D (Control over the Media), 5.0, a moderate influence; and, finally, Realm A (Informed Citizens Free to Express Themselves), at 4.21, a moderate influence.

The result for Realm B is not surprising. President Jair Bolsonaro already had a history of hostile attitude towards journalists and news media throughout his activity as a legislative representative (Mesquita, 2017). This behavior continued even after his inauguration as president of the Republic; there is the case of an official event in São Paulo on July 25, during which he shouted at a CNN reporter and called her an idiot when she asked him about allegations of delay in the procurement of COVID-19 vaccines (Albuquerque and Valença, 2021). A week earlier, the president had called members of the press "scoundrels" when a reporter inquired him on not wearing face covering ("Bolsonaro ataca repórter...", 2021).

Bullying journalists for their work is not limited to the president himself. It is also a practice of his supporters, as happened on February 27, 2021, in the city of Rio Branco, capital of Acre State, at the north of Brazil. Reporter João Renato Jácome, who worked as a freelancer for the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo* during the presidential visit, asked a question at a press conference regarding a decision by the STF that broke the bank secrecy of one of Bolsonaro's children (Senator Flávio Bolsonaro), being investigated on corruption charges. The question infuriated the president and the reporter, who was also a city government official, was fired after the episode ("Jornalista é demitido...", 2021).

The Legislative environment exerts a moderate unfavorable influence on freedom of expression, with an index of 4.73, twice as much as that on record in the 2019-2020 report, when this environment had a slight influence, 2.46 at that time. Realm B (Exercise of Journalism) stands out, with an index at 6 points, qualifying as having a strong influence, while in the other realms there is moderate influence: Realm A (Informed Citizens Free to Express Themselves) with 4.79; Realm C (Violence and Impunity), at 4.76; and Realm D (Control over the Media), at 3.36.

It should be noted that the leadership of Brazil's Federal Legislature underwent major changes in early 2021. On February 1, Senator Rodrigo Pacheco, from the Democratic Party (DEM-MG [Minas Gerais]), was elected president of the Federal Senate and Congressman Arthur Lira, from the Progressive Party (PP-AL [Alagoas]), was elected Speaker of the House. His run for the post was supported by President Jair Bolsonaro, so his victory was read by the media as a victory of the Federal Executive (Schreiber, 2021a; Shalders, 2021; Weterman, Sabino & Moura, 2021).

This alignment between the Legislative and the Executive may have impacted the increase in the extent of unfavorable influence on freedom of expression from Legislative environment.

Early in his term, Lira decided to change the location of the press room for journalists covering the activities of the House of Representatives, so that reporters would no longer access the House floor directly. This measure was widely reported and viewed as retaliation for media coverage critical of the government (Calgaro & Clavery, 2021). This measure was questioned by opposition congresspersons as an example of an attack on the exercise of journalistic activity and, consequently, on the freedom of the press ("Parlamentares questionam Lira...", 2021). The reaction led the Speaker of the House to reverse his decision ("Arthur Lira recua...", 2021).

At the same time, it is possible to identify a defense of the work of the press on the part of the Head of the Senate. Pacheco even publicly criticized President Jair Bolsonaro when he attacked the journalistic coverage regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. The senator even stated that "the press should be respected and free to fulfill its duty to inform, even in dissent" ("Senadores lamentam ataques...", 2021).

The relationship between the President of the Republic and the Federal Senate does not seem as harmonious as that between the President and the Federal House. Media coverage in the federal capital has reported clashes between Pacheco and Bolsonaro (Bonin, 2021), which ultimately provides some balance to the relationship between the Executive and Legislative branches. It should be noted that the standoff between President Bolsonaro and the Senate has intensified since the installation of the Parliamentary Investigation Commission (Comissão Parlamentar de Inquérito, CPI) on April 27, 2021, aimed at investigating corruption in the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil (Vasconcelos, 2021).

As for the Judicial environment, the lowest rate compared to the other branches of government is noticed: 4.46, also much higher against that in the 2019-2020 report, which achieved 2.86 at that time. Again, Realm B (Exercise of Journalism) stands out as the most unfavorable index, at 5.86 points, a strong influence; followed by Realm C (Violence and Impunity), at 4.48, a moderate influence; Realm D (Control over the Media), at 3.93, a moderate influence; and, finally, Realm A (Informed Citizens Free to Express Themselves), at 3.57, a moderate influence.

In the context of Brazil's conflict among the branches of government, there is an intense confrontation between President Bolsonaro and members of the STF. This is evident in divergent positions on various issues, including those related to the work of the press. For example, the Brazilian Press Association (Associação Brasileira de Imprensa, ABI) filed a lawsuit with the STF against Bolsonaro accusing him of threatening the freedom of the press, journalists and encouraging censorship. The STF requested clarifications from the president ("STF dá prazo...", 2021).

Another central issue in the defense of freedom of expression and the press found by the STF is that understood as the "right to be forgotten". The Brazilian Supreme Court considered that banning the disclosure of old-time facts would put the right to information at risk, existing the possibility of censorship ("STF vê risco...", 2021). Finally, it is worth mentioning Inquiry No. 4781, better known as the Inquiry on Fake News, started with the objective of investigating the existence of deceitful news (fake news), slanderous allegations, and threats against the Court, its justices and their family members ("Plenário conclui julgamento...", 2021).

This investigation and its aftermath led to the arrest of Bolsonaro's allies, which further fueled the animosity between the Executive and the Judiciary ("Entenda o que são...", 2021).

The president's supporters, on the other hand, argue the opposite: With these actions, the STF would pose a threat to freedom of expression (Schreiber, 2021b).

Realm A: Commitment to Information Flow and Free Speech

The index for Realm A (Informed Citizens Free to Express Themselves) addresses government actions or omissions of the State regarding the citizens' right to be informed and to express themselves freely and is formed by two sub-realms: Information Flow and Free Speech. On a scale ranging from 0 to 23 points, Brazil achieved 5.0, an even worse figure compared to that obtained in the 2019-2020 report, namely 6.2.

This drop reflects, primarily, the degradation of one of the sub-realms that make up Realm A: Information Flow. In this regard, Brazil scored 1.86 points out of a possible 11. In the previous report, this figure was 3.6. Here we may underscore actions of the Executive regarding the control of information unflattering to the government (Freire, 2021) and direct interference of Brazil's public TV system, as it was accused of censorship by Empresa Brasil de Comunicação (EBC) staff ("Funcionários da EBC relatam...", 2020).

On the other hand, in the Sub Realm of Free Speech, there is an increase from 2.6 points last year to 3.14 in 2020-2021. It is also worth noting the initiative of the Executive to restrict the removal of posts and profiles from social media, based on the defense of freedom of expression. However, this proposal is rather viewed as aimed to protect the possibility of spreading disinformation and hate speech (Vargas, 2021).

Uruguay, holding the top position the Index, scored 21 points out of a possible 23 in this realm. At the bottom of the list in this regard, holding the 22nd position, is Cuba, at 0, outranked by Venezuela, at 1.57, and Nicaragua, at 2.71. Ahead of these countries is Brazil, with 5.0, immediately behind El Salvador, with 6.57, and Guatemala, with 11. This comparative outlook shows to what extent Brazil is far from a more favorable reality, being at the same time close to countries with starkly authoritarian realities.

Realm B: source confidentiality guaranteed

Realm B (Exercise of Journalism) refers to regulation or other actions affecting the independence, plurality, and protection of information sources. On a scale of 0 to 10 points, Brazil obtained 5.14, a lower number compared to that in the 2019-2020 report, which was 6.6. The top-ranking country in this realm is Uruguay, at 9.43, while the last, in the 22nd position, is Cuba, at 0.57. Brazil, at 5.14, is in the 19th position, ahead of Cuba, but not so far from Venezuela, with 3.43, in the 21st place, and very close to Nicaragua, in ranked 20th, at 4.86.

This realm includes the requirement of a degree to practice journalism. In this regard, an episode occurred in Santa Catarina State stands out, where the High Labor Court (Tribunal Superior do Trabalho, TST) reaffirmed the exemption of a university degree to work as a journalist. Case No. 1787-41.2016.5.12.0003 highlighted that "there is established jurisprudence in the TST, agreeing with the understanding of the Federal Supreme Court (STF), that the obligation to be trained in Journalism for the exercise of such profession is unconstitutional" ("Enquadramento profissional como...", 2021).

Also noteworthy is the debate on source confidentiality. Regarding this issue, in February 2021, the STF dropped a lawsuit filed in 2011 whereby the Federal Attorney General's Office demanded that a reporter disclose the source behind information leaked from a Federal Police investigation into corruption in São José do Rio Preto Municipality, deep in São Paulo State (“Supremo encerra processo...”, 2021). The reporter refused to reveal. By closing this case, the STF guaranteed the journalistic source confidentiality provided for in the Brazilian Constitution.

Realm C: Journalism under attack

Realm C (Violence and Impunity) addresses actions or omissions from the Government regarding the protection of journalists, the prevention of attacks and aggressions against journalists and the media, as well as initiatives to fight impunity of crimes against journalists and media companies. On a scale of 0 to 42 points, Brazil obtained 9.46, a higher figure than in the 2019-2020 report, when it achieved 6.0. It is therefore ahead of Nicaragua, with 8.69, Cuba, at 7.68, and Venezuela, with 0.71.

There are recurrent episodes of offenses against the press committed by the president of the Republic as well as by his sons and cabinet ministers, with women journalists being the targets of choice (Xavier, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, these crimes intensified, as the press adhered to a scientifically informed stance in the vaccination campaign (“Consórcio de veículos...”, 2021), while the president consolidated his image as a vaccine denialist, the objective of a CPI investigation (Amado & Barretto, 2021).

As for the sub-realms that make up this realm, Impunity stands out negatively, with 0.4 on a scale ranging from 0 to 8.5 points. In this sense, there are some noteworthy legislative initiatives, such as the proposal (Draft Bill 2874/2020) by Senator Weverton (PDT [Partido Democrático Trabalhista]-MA [Maranhão]), increasing the penalty for crimes committed against journalists, and Senator Paulo Paim (PT-RS [Rio Grande do Sul]) (Draft Bill 205/2015), advocating that media companies obtain life insurance for news professionals (“No dia do Jornalista...”, 2021). There is also a draft bill by Senator Fabiano Contarato (Rede [Rede Sustentabilidade]-ES [Espírito Santo]), which proposes to make a crime of hostile acts against media professionals in the exercise of their duties (“Projeto torna crime...”, 2021).

Realm D: Censorship and selective advertising

Realm D (Control over the Media) encompasses issues relating to actions or omissions involving government control over the media, based on two sub-realms: Direct and Indirect Control.

Overall, Brazil obtained an index of 12 points on a scale of 0 to 25, a figure lower than that on record in the 2019-2020 report, when it reached 18.4. The current report's index is 8.57 for Direct Control, on a scale of 0 to 19; and 3.43 for Indirect Control, on a scale of 0 to 6. Holding the 19th position in this realm, Brazil is again ahead of Venezuela, with 0, Cuba, at 2.86, and Nicaragua, with 2.

Two facts help illustrate this outlook, both regarding the Executive environment. We can notice direct government control over the management of EBC, as its proposal for a public communication system is being gradually transformed into a project of coverage of the Government, with a positive bias towards it (Mendes & Melo, 2021). There are also complaints of censorship and harassment made by EBC staff (“Repórteres Sem Fronteira denúncia...”, 2020). Indirect control, in turn, can be noticed in the form of selective allocation of government advertising funds on a political basis, in disregard of technical criteria (Lucas, 2021).

Conclusions

The information regarding Brazil collected in this report depicts a frail outlook regarding free speech. The comparison between the 2019-2020 report and the current one shows that the scenario has worsened. This environment discouraging an informed citizenry, the exercise of journalism, media independence, the fight against violence and impunity against news professionals and media companies is not, however, precisely new. It is connected to a process of frail institutions and basic democratic principles.

This process, albeit historical, intensified as of 2018 with the election of President Jair Bolsonaro and, consequently, with the worsening of institutional conflicts directly or indirectly linked to the exercise of freedom of expression and the press. Journalists and the media, with rare exceptions, were named by the head executive officer and his supporters as the adversaries to be confronted. Episodes of attacks on journalists and media companies have become recurrent, as well as the implementation of a selective policy of allocation of advertising funds and brazen control of public media outlets as if they were the administration’s property.

Groups linked to the federal government claim the right to freedom of expression and seek to position themselves as its defenders. However, they have become the object of investigation on charges of encouraging the disruption of the democratic order by promoting anti-democratic actions and disseminating hate speech. Under this scenario, the COVID-19 pandemic became one more trench: on the one hand, health authorities, the media, the STF, a significant section of the National Congress and state governors; on the other hand, the federal government.

In a pandemic context, the press has fulfilled its role of fighting disinformation and providing services of public interest, despite the hostile stance of the president and his allies. It is not by chance that this report highlights figures of unfavorable influence of the Executive environment on free speech, prominently regarding Realm A (Informed Citizens Free to Express Themselves) and Realm C (Violence and Impunity). It is no coincidence that Brazil is among the countries with the lowest scores – in 19th place – only ahead, in the overall index, of Nicaragua, Cuba, and Venezuela, and far behind the first place, Uruguay.

The outlook highlighted by this document was already anticipated in the 2019-2020 report, to the extent that Brazil maintained its position among the countries reviewed. What is proven, however, is what we would expect: In a context of crisis, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, the process of degradation of guarantees to freedom of expression has deepened.

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