In 2014, the administration of President Evo Morales continued to use legal, political, and economic means to place pressure on independent outlets. Morales himself repeatedly criticized private media and stated that there was “no independent media” in Bolivia. Meanwhile, the judicial system countered government actions against journalists in two major cases, upholding constitutional protections for freedom of the press. Attacks on journalists were fewer than in recent years.

Legal Environment

Bolivia’s 2009 constitution protects freedom of speech and of the press, but it also allows for some limitations. While Article 21 lays out an expansive right to communicate freely, Article 107 imposes a duty to communicate with “truth and responsibility.” Article 107 also clears the way for content-based restrictions by stipulating that the media must contribute to the promotion of the ethical, moral, and civic values of the nation’s multiple cultures. Defamation remains a criminal offense.

The country’s regulatory framework continues to be used to limit media freedom. In April 2014, the prosecutor general accused journalist Ricardo Aguilar and editor Claudia Benavente at La Razón of spying and disclosing state secrets in an article on the Chilean-Bolivian territorial conflict. In May, a court ordered Aguilar to reveal his source, a decision that was overturned on appeal in August. In addition, in April the Supreme Court overturned the 30-month sentence issued two years earlier to Rogelio Peláez, editor of Larga Vista, for defamation.

The 2010 Law against Racism and All Forms of Discrimination, which falls under the penal code, attempts to address degrading portrayals of indigenous people in the media and their limited access to media outlets. The law grants authorities the power to fine or shut down news outlets and arrest journalists for published material that is deemed to be racist. Media organizations can face sanctions even if a remark is uttered by a source or interviewee and does not reflect the position of the media organization.

A 2011 telecommunications law established rules for the distribution of television and radio frequencies, the broadcasting of presidential messages, and wiretapping in certain extreme cases. The law allots 33 percent of frequencies to the government, 33 percent to the private sector, 17 percent to social and community-based groups, and 17 percent to “peasant and indigenous groups.” Local journalist advocacy organizations continue to denounce the law, claiming that it restricts freedom of expression by giving too much control to the government.

Bolivia has no law guaranteeing access to public information. A transparency bill was passed in 2013 but never signed into law. One controversial provision would give police, military, and government authorities the power to declare information classified. Representatives of the National Press Association (ANP) have noted that the government hampers journalists’ access to information.

Political Environment

Bolivia’s political environment is polarized, with strong rivalries between pro- and antigovernment media outlets and sporadic threats against government critics by elected officials. The 2014 presidential elections demonstrated increasing state control over editorial direction of the press and greater partisanship in the
media. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal, which monitors elections, required any company or press outlet to register with the government and report methods and data before releasing any poll results. Press groups argued that the measure was a form of unconstitutional “prior censorship.” State-run television, Bolivia TV, gave unequal coverage to the opposition, for example by broadcasting a soccer match in place of a presidential debate that Evo Morales did not join. Journalists often engage in self-censorship.

The Inter American Press Association (SIP) reported several attacks and acts of intimidation against journalists in 2014. In June, a tear gas grenade was thrown into Canal 33’s studios. However, fewer attacks took place than in past years. Press groups have expressed concern about the lack of progress in investigating past cases against journalists, including a brutal 2012 assault on Radio Popular journalist Fernando Vidal, who was set on fire during a live broadcast. In February 2014, charges were dropped without explanation against the two main suspects in the double murder of two journalists in Aymara in 2012.

**Economic Environment**

Newspaper readership is limited due to low literacy rates, and radio is the principal news medium, with community radio stations playing a major role. In addition to the state-owned television station, the government operates a news agency, a weekly newspaper, and community radio stations. Internet penetration is limited but expanding, with nearly 40 percent of Bolivians accessing the medium in 2014.

A substantial proportion of Bolivia’s television stations and newspapers are privately owned, but civil society groups have expressed concern over the significant expansion of state-run channels and the conversion of all public media into vehicles for government influence. The ANP and other organizations have highlighted a “silent strategy” to control media through strategic taxation and buyouts. Since 2008, several major media outlets have been sold following targeted tax audits and corruption investigations that press groups claimed drained them of resources and readied them to be bought out by new, progovernment ownership. In April, journalist Raúl Peñaranda and other media groups alleged that the administration used intimidation tactics to lead the television stations ATB, PAT, and Full TV, plus the largest daily newspaper, La Razón, to be bought out by government allies in the private sector. La Razón has denied the charges, as has the government. Press groups also describe a pattern of government manipulation of the state advertising budget to punish critical outlets and reward friendly ones.