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## Covid-19 and Civic and Democratic Space

# BOLIVIA

In March 2020, Bolivia's interim government declared a national emergency in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, followed by the closure of borders and imposition of a national lockdown. A rerun of Bolivia's disputed October 2019 election was due to take place in May 2020, but was postponed twice on the grounds of public health considerations related to pandemic. Luis Arce of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) party won the election on 18 October 2020 by a wide margin, replacing interim President Jeanine Áñez.

In addition to the national lockdown, the interim government imposed a mandate to wear face masks, a nightly curfew, restrictions on domestic travel and a ban on public gatherings. In June 2020, the national lockdown ended and responsibility for imposing restrictions on movement shifted to departmental and municipal governments based on local risk assessments. In September 2020, the interim government announced the start of a "post-confinement" phase, signalling the relaxation of some Covid-19 measures.

## FACTS AND FIGURES



Covid-19 cases (as of 18 May 2021):

**334,824<sup>1</sup>**



By 29 September 2020, **50,824** people had been arrested for violating Covid-19 quarantine requirements.<sup>2</sup>

Protestors at a pro-choice rally.  
Photo Credit: Centro de Promoción de la Mujer Gregoria Apaza



The Attorney General's Office reported more than **20,000 cases of violence against women** from January through August 2020.<sup>3</sup>



In June 2020, the interim government said as many as 3,500 detainees would be released from prison to reduce overcrowding in response to the pandemic, but a month later only about **300 prisoners had been released**.<sup>4</sup>



In the first five months of 2020, more than **13,000 pregnancies** were recorded in girls and adolescents up to 19 years old, amid a rise in gender-based violence.<sup>5</sup>

Credit: Alianza por la Solidaridad/AA Bolivia

## HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT OF COVID-19 MEASURES

### Freedom of Expression and the Right to Information

Bolivia's interim government imposed emergency decrees during the pandemic that curtailed the right to **freedom of expression** by, for example, criminalising “spreading wrong information” about Covid-19 or “generating uncertainty in the population”.<sup>6</sup> In March 2020, the Interior Minister announced police “cyber-patrols” to identify people spreading misinformation, warning opposition politicians.<sup>7</sup> In April 2020, the government announced that 67 “political actors” had been arrested for spreading Covid-19 misinformation or inciting public gatherings. After public outcry, the government repealed the decree provisions violating the right to freedom of expression.<sup>8</sup>

The interim government failed to ensure adequate **access to information** about the pandemic, particularly regarding emergency purchases of medical equipment. Former Health Minister Navajas was arrested after revelations that the interim government had purchased ventilators at highly inflated prices.<sup>9</sup>

### Freedom of Movement and Assembly

The **Covid-19 lockdown, prohibition on public gatherings and nightly curfew** limited freedom of movement and the right to peaceful assembly. Violations of Covid-19 restrictions on movement were punished as “crimes against public health” with a maximum sentence of 10 years’ imprisonment. The Ombudsman’s Office criticised this over-reliance on criminalisation, which resulted in the arrests of protesters and large numbers of poorer people, who faced hunger and deprivation if they remained at home.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the prohibition on public gatherings, including political events, there were protests against the interim government’s Covid-19 response and its postponement of elections during the pandemic. In early August 2020, the interim government announced it would file a criminal complaint against two prominent activists for “**crimes against public health**” and other offences for their involvement in anti-government protests, which included extensive roadblocks.<sup>11</sup>

The **closure of borders** left at least 1,300 Bolivians, including older people, children and pregnant women, stranded in Chile. Many had travelled to Chile as seasonal agricultural workers or longer-term migrant workers and were trying to return home due to the lack of work in Chile. After spending weeks in camps near the border with inadequate access to food, water and warm clothing, they were allowed into Bolivia and placed in quarantine.<sup>12</sup>

## Economic and Social Rights

Bolivia's public healthcare system lacked sufficient resources and capacity to uphold the **right to health** during the pandemic. Bolivia had 490 intensive care beds in March 2020 and had only added 30 by August.<sup>13</sup> In June and July 2020, several hospitals reported being at full capacity. President Áñez refused to enact a law, passed by Bolivia's parliament, to compel private hospitals to accept patients referred by the public health system and to provide care for Covid-19 patients.<sup>14</sup> Healthcare and other frontline workers protested the lack of personal protective equipment.

Sanitation workers were not provided with adequate personal protective equipment, so had to purchase this material themselves or rely on donations.

"[We] have had to manage donations through international cooperation, specifically with CAFOD... [we] have managed to obtain biosecurity material and fortunately now it is being sent to more than 6,000 workers in many corners of the country." – **Alfredo Cahuaya, Urban Program Coordinator & Daniel Espinoza, Head of the Observatory of Human Rights Defenders, UNITAS network in Bolivia.**

The authorities failed to ensure the **right to health of prisoners and indigenous people** in particular. Detainees staged protests in prisons over a lack of healthcare and measures to protect them from the virus.<sup>15</sup> The Ombudsman's Office criticised the lack of targeted public health measures to protect indigenous peoples.<sup>16</sup>

As part of the right to health, the right to legal interruption of pregnancy was a violated during the pandemic.

"In this period there has been an increase in the demand for medicines for the termination of pregnancy, and this was very difficult, it was not known which clinics were operating, many public health services were collapsed and patients were afraid get Covid-19 in the health centers. For this reason, many women turned to pharmacological treatments, looked for information and ways to get the pills, risking their lives ". – **Anonymous group of women organised to accompany safe abortions in La Paz, 2020**

The Covid-19 lockdown had a significant economic impact on informal workers, who are disproportionately women and youth, and small-scale producers in rural areas.<sup>17</sup> The government agreed to pay electricity bills for 3 months for consumers with low consumption and 50% of the potable water and gas bills for all households. Emergency cash transfers helped millions of Bolivians struggling with the impact of the pandemic, but were insufficient relative to the scale of the economic downturn.<sup>18</sup>

"As for the workers in the cleaning sector, many of them are young people... and have been kept in precarious working conditions, with high exposure to the virus... Similarly, the vast majority of sweepers are women, with a high proportion of older women. These personnel receive a minimum wage, are not paid on time and do not have the necessary coverage. They are also exposed to risky conditions because they work directly on the streets." – **Alfredo Cahuaya & Daniel Espinoza, UNITAS network**

## Women and Girls

In the context of the pandemic, women and children are among the most affected, from economic, health to psychological problems. This is expressed in the rise in maternal and neonatal mortality, unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortions, the spread of sexually transmitted infections and violence.

“Another case that has been attended is that of a woman who was a victim of rape, who did not want to report it because the rapist was a person from her own job. As an organization, we have accompanied this woman to do the necessary treatments for an abortion and prevention of sexually transmitted infections. Added to this was the difficulty of getting tested for HIV or other possible diseases as soon as possible, considering the collapse of laboratories due to the pandemic and the restrictions on people’s mobility (at that time, there were only a few hours a week to circulate on the street)”. – **Anonymous group of women organised to accompany safe abortions in La Paz, 2020**

Restrictions on movement to slow the spread of Covid-19 and increased economic stress contributed to an increase in **violence against women**. Although the government issued a guide for dealing with cases of violence against women during the pandemic, civil society organisations criticised the government for not taking sufficient measures to protect women and children from domestic violence.<sup>19</sup>

Access to **sexual and reproductive health** was limited due to restrictions on freedom of movement during the Covid-19 pandemic. In March and April 2020, there was a decrease in use of sexual and reproductive health services by 44% compared to the previous year.<sup>20</sup>

## NATIONAL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Bolivian government should:

- target women and informal sector workers with financial support and services, acknowledging they are impacted first and worst by the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns;
- take measures to prevent violence against women including funding sufficient numbers of appropriate shelters, in cooperation with relevant non-government organisations;
- ensure restrictions on freedom of movement do not impede access to sexual and reproductive health and rights for women and girls;
- ensure full and timely access to information, including regarding Covid-19-related procurement and expenditure; and
- ensure that any restrictions on rights for public health reasons are lawful, necessary, and proportionate. They must be based on scientific evidence, neither arbitrary nor discriminatory in application, of limited duration and formulated narrowly and precisely.

## Endnotes

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