

The Red and the Black

Por Mac Margolis

Here's a puzzler. Latin America has never been more democratic: of 34 nations in Central and South America and the Caribbean, all except one (Cuba) are constitutional democracies, with laws guaranteeing open elections, independent courts, legislatures, and freedom of expression. So why do so many governments still trample on citizens' rights, bully journalists, harass private business, and generally lord over hearth and home?

Incidents in just the last few weeks range from the grave (the Argentine government's order to shut down the main Internet provider in retaliation to criticism from its owner) to the ridiculous (a Brazilian law banning parents from spanking kids). But the breadth of official incursions into citizen's lives has sent out distress signals from Patagonia to the Antilles. In early August, after a shower of lawsuits filed by indignant politicians, the Brazilian Electoral Court ruled that television and radio comedians may not make fun of candidates in the coming national elections. The Argentine government declared war on its two largest independent media groups, Clarín and La Nación, which have been acid critics of president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's strong-armed rule. In Venezuela, where the homicide rate is soaring, the government reacted by getting a court to ban news media from publishing "violent, bloody, and grotesque images." Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua have passed new media laws—all of them aimed at clipping the wings of privately owned news sources—and the call for "social control of media" is viral among lefty groups. (It was unanimously endorsed, for instance, by participants at an August confab in Argentina of regional leftist parties—which now govern 11 Latin American countries—called the São Paulo Forum.) "The threat to freedom is all around," says Amaury de Souza, a Brazilian political scientist. "And it's growing."

The clampdown has the pundits and pols buzzing. To some, this is a relic of authoritarian culture dating from the time of military dictatorships, which between 1960 and 1990 kept many



Latin nations in check with a boot and a gag. To others the habit dates to colonial times, when paternalistic monarchs ruled. No political party or ideology has a monopoly on the new authoritarianism; rank self-interest united Brazil's politicians—from left, right, and center parties—in their effort to outlaw sendups by satirists that could make them look bad before millions of voters. And in Mexico, where drug lords are spreading terror and have killed 56 reporters since 2000, the latest threat is "narcocensorship," in which drug cartels kill nosy reporters.

But it's no surprise that the worst offenses have emerged in the most volatile flank of the region—in the Andean nations of Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia—where the push by charismatic leaders like Hugo Chávez to reinvent their societies through “21st-century socialism” has produced economic dysfunction, hardship, and political strife. And where neo-despots are against a wall, they strike back in time-honored fashion—doctoring numbers, manufacturing applause, and crushing dissent. Populist Bolivian President Evo Morales has proposed a media law that calls for punishing news organizations that criticize candidates during an election year. The last time the Venezuelan government announced crime statistics was in 2004.

Meanwhile, the trouble in Argentina started in 2008, when Kirchner, looking to top up government coffers, slapped a 35 percent surtax on grain and food exports, which infuriated the country's growers. The media took up the farmers' cause and drew a swift response from the president, whose popularity is now wavering—just as she ramps up the dynastic plan to elect her husband, former president Néstor Kirchner, to succeed her in 2011 (just as she succeeded him in 2007). Ever since, she has spared no effort in trying to break up Clarín and its rival La Nación. This month, the row came to a boil when Kirchner ordered Argentina's largest Internet service provider, Fibertel, to shut down on the claim that the parent company, Clarín, was violating its user license and building an illegal monopoly. Meanwhile, a million Internet users received notice they will have to find a new server. Then, on Aug. 27, in a clear move to muzzle dissent, she demanded that congress nationalize the country's leading newsprint company, Papel Prensa, which is jointly owned by Clarín, La Nación, and a third paper.

That was not the first effort to spin the news in Buenos Aires. In 2007, with the economy faltering, Kirchner took control of the country's statistics bureau, Indec, replacing its director and firing top staff. The move was seen as a thinly veiled attempt to cook the books and has since thrown a pall over Indec's numbers. Officially, prices are rising in Argentina at the pace of 7 percent per year, while independent estimates put the number at twice that, with inflation heading to 20 to 30 percent over the next two years.

The spin is even more aggressive in Venezuela, where recession, spiraling prices, and the worst murder rate in the hemisphere (75 per 100,000 residents—three times the Brazilian homicide rate and nearly twice that of Colombia, a country still under siege by guerrilla insurgents) have pushed President Chávez's approval ratings off a cliff. With congressional elections scheduled for late next month, the Venezuelan strongman has lashed out. Deploying the courts, the cops, and even loyalist mobs, he has muscled one independent media channel after another off the air. Those he cannot bully into silence, he buys. After hounding Guillermo Zuloaga, the director of the scrappy news channel Globovisión, into exile—“Why has he not been arrested!” the president publicly demanded—Chávez's handlers picked a new manager and are now proceeding to purchase controlling shares in Globovisión in the name of the Bolivarian revolution.

Not all Latin Americans have been cowed into silence. Chile, Colombia, and Peru—all nations that have lived through brutal episodes of terrorism and censorship—are increasingly demanding transparency and democratic freedoms. On Monday, Argentina's lower house denounced Kirchner's move to shutter Fibertel as an assault on “democracy and the rule of law.” And even where authoritarian reflexes linger, the most vibrant democracies are fighting back—and winning. Last week, after a flood of writs and a jocular street protest by cranky Brazilian comedians, a supreme court judge suspended the gag order on campaign humor. The ruling: constitutional rights are no joke.

Fuente: Newsweek, 31/08/10.