

Bolivia's Fight for Sovereignty: Confronting and Transforming the Military

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Speaking to CNN en Espanol on July 27, Bolivian President Evo Morales said “When presidents do not submit to the United States government, to its policies, there are coups.”

His comments are backed by attempts by the US and Bolivia's right wing to bring down his government.

Recently released WikiLeaks cables prove the US embassy was in close contact with dissident military officers only months before a coup attempt was carried out in September 2008.

But the close relationship between the US and Bolivia's military has a long history.

War on drugs

In recent years, the “war on drugs” provided the US with cover to extend its control over Bolivia's armed forces.

As a coca grower union leader from the Chapare region, Morales faced the direct and brutal consequences of the US “war on drugs”.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Chapare region, nestled in the heart of Bolivia, became the site of bloody massacres carried out by US and Bolivian anti-narcotic forces.

As part of its attempts to destroy coca, seen by indigenous Bolivians as a “sacred leaf” and part of their traditional way of life, the US established and funded the Mobile Units for Rural Patrolling (UMOPAR) in the Chapare.

Under the command of US soldiers and working closely with US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agents, UMOPAR was responsible for massacres of local peasants.

This included the gunning down of 12 *cocaleros* (coca farmers) during a peaceful protest in June 1988.

One year later, Morales was brutally beaten by UMOPAR troops, who tried to drag his body into the mountains, believing he was dead.

Protests by fellow *cocaleros* ensured soldiers left his unconscious body behind.

Morales told Telesur on July 27 that the DEA never operated in Bolivia to “fight against drug trafficking, [but] for political ends”.

In late 2008, his government expelled the DEA from the country.

The cocaleros, whose organisations were forged in the struggle against US militarisation, became the backbone of the anti-imperialist Movement Towards Socialism (MAS).

Morales narrowly lost the 2002 presidential elections, during which the US ambassador threatened retaliation if he won. Morales went on to win the December 2005 poll.

Morales concluded his election night speech with: "Long live coca, death to the Yankees!"

Divided military

One of the biggest challenges the Morales government has faced is its attempt to reassert sovereignty over Bolivia's military while ensuring it did not turn against the president as so often had happened to leftist governments in Latin America.

The government was aided by two important factors.

Rising anti-neoliberal and anti-imperialist sentiment at the start of the century found its reflection among nationalist sectors within the military.

In the February 2006 *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Maurice Lemoine said that during a May-June 2005 uprising, nationalist officers asked the MAS to support a civic-military coup that would nationalise gas and organise a constituent assembly two key demands of the rising.

The MAS rejected the proposed coup.

Instead, popular mobilisation forced then-president Carlos Mesa to step down.

After Mesa's resignation, there were two options: either a constitutional handing over of power to the hated right-wing president of the Senate or the calling of early elections.

Lemoine said that when a group of generals met to decide which option to support, "a colonel entered the room, clicked his heels and announced: 'I think you should know that many officers regard the MAS as the only fit representative of our nation's dignity.'"

Differences within the military over how to relate to a possible Morales government, and direct US intervention, led to a second important event.

During his election campaign, Morales revealed the depth of control that the US exercised over the Bolivian military.

Young soldiers supplied him with evidence that the US had successfully decommissioned Bolivia's entire anti-aircraft arsenal without government knowledge or consent.

The evidence came from soldiers who made up part of the Joint Counterterrorism Force (FCTC), set up and funded by the US.

They revealed how US military and embassy officials had ordered the replacement of various heads of battalions, withheld the true nature of the operation to soldiers involved and provided US embassy vehicles to transport the anti-aircraft missiles.

Commenting on the incident in November 2005, shortly before being named Morales' first energy minister, Andres Soliz Rada wrote: "This operation of control over the Bolivian military also included the cleansing and marginalisation of soldiers who demonstrated sympathy to the [call for] nationalisation of hydrocarbons and the anti-imperialist struggle."

Soliz Rada said in the months leading up to the incident, at least a dozen high ranking military officers had either retired, been relieved of duties or relocated.

A January 18, 2006 online BBC article said that Army Commander Marcel Antezana Ruiz admitted Washington had requested the repatriation of the missiles to destroy them because the US feared Morales would win the elections.

Transforming the military

Once in power, Morales moved quickly to try to turn this situation around. Within a few months, almost 60 generals and admirals, many of them either directly involved in the missile crisis or aligned with US interests, were forced into retirement.

In their place, newer commanders were promoted, bypassing the traditional promotions system.

The notorious FCTC was restructured and a new commander appointed.

This caused a stir within the military and in Washington.

Addressing a peasant congress in March 2006, Morales said "some generals were upset" and had put up "resistance" to the government's attempts to name new military authorities.

He also said the US Military Group in Bolivia sent a letter to his government requesting it replace a military commander.

The letter was later released. It said that in response to government moves to restructure the FCTC, the US military had "decertified" the unit and demanded the return of all military hardware it had provided to it.

Morales said the Bolivian military had an obligation to not hand over any arms to the US. He told the peasant gathering: "We will never change a minister or a commander due to US demands."

"Neoliberalism used the Armed Forces at the service of the transnationals, at the service of external interests," Morales said.

"Now, in this process of change, our Armed Forces is willing to guarantee the Constituent Assembly and above all, to support and help us with the nationalisation of hydrocarbons."

On May 1, 2006, as part of a secret plan involving Morales, the military high command, FCTC and select government ministers, the army occupied Bolivia's gas fields and the offices of transnationals involved in their exploitation.

Morales announced the return of state control over gas.

On February 9, 2007, these scenes were repeated as the military took over the newly nationalised Vinto tin smelter in Oruro.

The Morales government also put the military in charge of 25 technical centers to train future technicians for the mining industry. It also involved the institution in social programs such as tackling illiteracy, providing health care and building infrastructure.

In 2006, the military academy was also opened to indigenous and female cadets for the first time in its history.

Having already announced that Bolivia would stop sending troops to the US Schools of the Americas training camp, in June 2011 Morales inaugurated a new military training school in Bolivia for soldiers from countries such as Cuba and Venezuela that make up the Bolivarian Alliance of Our Americas (ALBA).

Through such actions, the government has tried to “knitting together a military-campesino alliance”, as Argentine journalist Pablo Stefanoni put it.

It is an attempt to forge closer relations between the military and the people, while strengthening the nationalist sectors within the military.

This growing bond was critical to overcoming internal resistance within the military and defeating a coup attempt in September 2008.

The combined mobilisation of the people and the military crushed the fascist uprising and dealt the opposition a blow from which they are yet to recover.

A socialist army?

This process of internal restructuring and transformation was reflected in the Bolivian military’s adoption in March 2010 of the slogan: “Fatherland or death, we shall overcome!”

Later that year, the commanding general of the army declared the military to be “socialist”, “anti-capitalist” and “anti-imperialist”. More recently, he stated the need for closer military ties with Cuba.

For a military whose only victorious war was that waged against Che Guevara and his band of left-wing guerrillas, such statements, while symbolic, represent a stark change from the days of right-wing dictatorships.

However, there is also little doubt that there is still much to do to deepen this process within the military.

Among other things, the military is still part of United Nations forces occupying Haiti, despite official government concerns of US interests behind the mission.

A big factor why this continues is the important financial contribution the military receives from the UN for its services something it does not want to lose.

The military also used its weight to ensure that the section dedicated to the armed forces in the new constitution, adopted in 2009, remained the same.

The military has also been slow to open up its archives to help investigations into the cases of disappeared activists during past dictatorships.

Activists involved in these cases have criticised the government for siding with the military

on this issue.

Many social movements who support and defend the government have taken an approach to the government of pushing their sectoral interests. The military seems to have followed this route.

Given its weight and influence, in many cases it has been in a privileged position to ensure its demands are met.

There is little doubt that changes have occurred. These have been vital to ensuring the survival of the process of change led by the Morales government.

At the same time, there is evidence that there is a long path ahead in the process of transforming the army into one that truly represents the people.

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