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Issue Brief

Bolivia between Military Coup and Democracy

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S*ummary*

The Bolivian political history can be divided into two clear phases based on the extent of democratically enfranchised citizenship of the Bolivian state—pre & post 1952 revolution periods. The endowment of resources could have led to a shining economic story, but political and social divisions within the country make it a classic case study for understanding various interrelated dimensions of resource curse, imperialism, racism, ideology and regressive political culture leading to military coups.

Bolivia’s President Luis Arce Catacora survived a coup attempt by his dismissed Army General Juan José Zúñiga on 26 June 2024. It was the shortest coup attempt in Bolivian history that lasted only around 3 hours.¹ The timing of the coup by Zúñiga is peculiar as Bolivia is currently in one of the most stable phases of its political history that is dotted with more than 190 successful and unsuccessful coup attempts.²

The coup, its failure, and the aftermath raise several questions on the political and economic transformation the country. The most important questions are: (1) Why has the country acquired notoriety for the highest number of coups?; (2) How should Zúñiga’s coup attempt be read amid the political transformation that the country has been experiencing in the last two decades? This Brief seeks to place in perspective the fundamental reasons for the coups and the democratic tussle in Bolivia.

Democracy in Bolivia

Bolivia has been shifting between military and civilian rule throughout its history. Democratically elected governments were in office only from August 1952 to November 1964 and from October 1982 till now. The military ran the show between 1964 and 1982 with a few brief aberrations of civilian rule. It was forced to go back to barracks in 1982 due to strong civil resistance movement. Outside the two mentioned democratic time periods, there were short periods of elected but weak governments primarily helmed by military leaders and oligarchy.

The Bolivian political history can be divided into two clear phases based on the extent of democratically enfranchised citizenship of the Bolivian state—pre & post 1952 revolution periods. The country experienced several periods of elected governments since independence in 1825. However, any government before the April 1952 revolution led by the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR) cannot be termed democratic as they were oligarchies based on limited voting franchise and citizenship.

The revolution opened the state to democracy for all with a universal adult franchise, including the indigenous tribes in the formal political processes of the state through the new constitution of 1961. However, MNR rule was terminated by a military coup in November 1964 as the government had developed internal ideological and administrative contradictions and a dependence on the military to survive.³ The biggest achievement of the 1952 revolution however was laying the foundations for

¹ Dan Collins, “[Bolivia’s President Accused of Plotting Coup Against Himself to Boost Popularity](#)”, *The Guardian*, 29 June 2024.

² David Biller and Eléonore Hughes, “[How Tensions in Bolivia Fueled an Attempt to Oust President Arce from Power](#)”, *Associated Press*, 27 June 2024.

³ Laurence Whitehead, “[Politics and the Military in Bolivia](#)”, *Bulletin of the Society for Latin American Studies*, No. 26, March 1977, p. 31.

consolidation and transformation of the Bolivian state into a modern nation by giving agency to the indigenous population through their participation in the democratic processes of the state.

The second phase of democracy is still unfolding since 1982 with occasional hiccups of military interference, civil resistance and authoritarian turn. The democracy however is highly polarised and contested along ideological lines. The politics is fragmented and there are four main factors that work towards military interference, coup, or an authoritarian turn in Bolivia:

a) Legacy of Colonisation and Ideological Polarisation

The Bolivian state, while it broke-off from the Spanish empire in 1825, did not break the social and political structures of colonialism immediately as the drivers of the cessation from Spanish Empire were quite different from the drivers of the independence movements of Asia and Africa in the 20th century. The state was run by Silver and Tin mining oligarchies with little regard for the common masses, disenfranchised indigenous people and their welfare.⁴ The ruling elites, whether of European or Mestizo descent, perceived themselves as distinct from the indigenous people and workers in the mines. Given the high inequality in income distribution and living conditions between the ruling elite and the masses, the tensions between the mining workers' unions and the corporations were framed by the radical left-right ends of the ideological spectrum. Che Guevara also chose Bolivian conditions for his mission to mobilise the peasants of the country to unleash a left revolution.

Interventions by the United States to benefit from the Bolivian mines and contain communism by supporting the military and mining barons further abetted the radicalisation of mine workers and farmers who primarily identified themselves as indigenous. The ruling elites used military repression to deal with workers' discontent rather than democratising the state, as this would have altered the power status-quo given the numbers of the disaffected disenfranchised people in the country. The state faltered on delivering general prosperity and dignity to the people and focused on oligarchic benefits aided by the mining barons, military and the United States (US). The legacy of imperial and racist mindset as well as the Cold War conditioned the Bolivian ideological tussle between the common people and the oligarchic governments.

As the country is rich in mineral resources, external interventions by resource-hungry nations and multinational corporations along with commodity demand and price cycles have historically put the country in a vicious state. It has seen intense political upheavals and movements, like a plethora of military coups, repression and civil resistance corresponding to the changes in these cycles. These pressures have shaped the political discourse and ideological divide in contemporary Bolivia. So

⁴ Herbert S. Klein, *A Concise History of Bolivia [Third Edition]*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2022, pp. 89–208.

much so that in the age of the domination of economic liberalism and admiration of market forces, the people of Bolivia have shown an inclination for nationalisation of mines and their development by the state. The Bolivian military rulers, aided by the US, financially and otherwise, have generally been against socialist forces which have shaped the indigenous movement. However, there have been a few military enthusiasts who toppled governments and adopted socialist policies as well. They were quickly ousted by countercoups.

b) Ideological Fragmentations within the Military

The military in Bolivia has traditionally been conservative and inclined to protect the interests of the elites since independence. It had traditionally worked as the protector of the propertied oligarchy and corporate interests aided by the US. But the 1952 revolution brought fundamental changes in the composition and education of the military. The MNR introduced political education in military while integrating hitherto excluded indigenous and common masses into it.⁵ The recruitment of indigenous people and their training as part of the military institution could not be resisted by the traditional forces within, as they had earned the displeasure of people due to their failure in the Chaco War (1932–35) with Paraguay. Setting up of party cells in the military organisation let the entry of the leftist influence in the military rank and files.⁶ The military was now exposed to the debates and developments with diverse and sometimes competing sentiments on various social issues. The country in the past has also seen military coups against another military regime due to the political fragmentations within. The military has not yet been depoliticised with reforms, and it is still fragmented on political lines.⁷

c) The Bolivian Identity Crisis and Caudillo Culture

The Bolivian independence was a product of rebellion against the Spanish indifference to the creoles who wanted their fair share of power and respect in the administrative and social system in Spanish America. It was not an inspiration of a strong national or homogenous ethno-cultural identity mobilised against the colonial power. Long-term indifference of the Spanish Empire to the issues of taxation in Spanish colonies along with unequal treatment of creoles and the fall of Madrid in the Napoleonic War instigated the Latin American war of independence by different juntas led by a caudillo (a strongman). It was Simon Bolivar in the region that we know as Bolivia today.

Bolivar, who constituted Bolivia by military power riding on anti-Spanish sentiments and benefitting from Napoleon’s subjugation of Spain, was skeptical of the state holding together due to rampant factionalism among the creoles of the region.

⁵ Laurence Whitehead, “[Politics and the Military in Bolivia](#)”, no. 3, pp. 24–43.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Huáscar Salazar Lohman, “[Military Interference and Political Decay in Bolivia](#)”, Ojala, 5 July 2024. See also Laurence Whitehead, “[Politics and the Military in Bolivia](#)”, no. 3, pp. 24–43.

Therefore, he advocated a centralised and strong state with limited republicanism.⁸ Bolivar delivered an oligarchic state which required to be built into a nation as the Bolivian independence did not coincide with the consolidation of the Bolivian national identity in true modern terms. This led to an ambiguity in the common imagination of its national boundaries. The immediate Bolivian state required force, a strongman or caudillo, to hold together and subdue factionalism to survive, justifying bigger role and interference of military in state administration in the name of state stability.

The peculiarities of the Bolivian constitution promulgated by Simon Bolivar are testament to the crisis of the Bolivian state identity and survival. The 1826 constitution had provisions for lifelong presidency, limited voting rights, and power concentrated in the institutions of the president and military.⁹ Bolivia was primarily ruled by caudillos till the late 19th century (1880) when a new constitution was adopted to give the country a technical resemblance of democracy.¹⁰ The military caudillos posing as protectors of the Bolivian state rather than the curators of the Bolivia as a nation problematises the history of democratic Bolivia as a modern republican nation-state.

The conditions and the foundations of the establishment of the Bolivarian state are rooted in the dynamics of imperialism and militarism. The imperialist structures within the society led to the racist and capitalist domination of an oligarchy over the indigenous masses who were excluded from the state political processes as they were denied voting franchise in a democracy that Bolivia claimed to be before 1952 revolution. A nexus between the traditionally privileged social groups and military carried them forward well beyond 1952 through military coups and suppression of democracy. An adult franchise in 1952 meant alteration in social and political power dynamics, which was repeatedly avoided by the entrenched right-leaning interest groups with the help of military. With a long history of primacy of military in the Bolivian state, the caudillo culture has persisted and has been seen by the traditional elite, who identify with the state, and sometimes the marginalised people within the state aspiring for strong Bolivian identity, as the necessary instrument to protect themselves from disorder.

d) Military as Source of Nation Building, Belonging and Inclusion

‘Domestication of a territory’ (invoking emotional attachment) by a group of people identifying with it is essential in the process of nation-building. The state of Bolivia was prior to the Bolivian nation and its domesticated boundaries that are identified with it. The nation has evolved out of a conflictual and complex social process

⁸ [“Bolivia of Simón Bolívar”](#), *Britannica*, 20 July 2024. See also [“Simon Bolivar - Thinker Liberator, Reformer”](#), *Bill of Rights in Action* by Constitutional Rights Foundation, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2012.

⁹ [“Simon Bolivar - Thinker Liberator, Reformer”](#), no. 8.

¹⁰ [“Constitutional History of Bolivia”](#), *Constitution Net*, 1 July 2024.

between the traditional oligarchies and the workers and peasants within the country. The military force of a state creating territory for itself gave a sense of its domestication to the people living within. The special status of the military in the creation and maintenance of the state made it a prominent source of the Bolivian identity.

The provision of conscription and linking livelihoods and routine services to the ‘military service booklet’ acquired by the conscripts after completing their compulsory service has, over time, created a sense of belonging to the military institution, especially among the poor and indigenous people who feel included and more respected in the national and social hierarchy.¹¹ These booklets are indispensable for both personal and professional lives. Government and private employers perceive the booklets as a kind of basic and minimum guarantee for the applicants to be professionally viable and trustworthy.¹²

Masculinity in general has also been culturally associated with the process of conscription, and young men are to prove their initiation into mature and responsible manhood by listing themselves with the military.¹³ This corresponds to the caudillo culture at the grassroots levels in the Bolivian society. The idea of national identity, social status and superior cultural values of masculinity have been intricately woven together to give primacy to military in the national and political discourse.

Coups in Contemporary Bolivia

Democracy in the country has shown resilience since 1982 and a coup by right-wing military rebels, supported by US failed in 1984, as it could not gather support of the larger section of the armed forces. The elections, barring a few exceptions, are conducted regularly and generally considered to be free and credible.¹⁴ Twenty-first century Bolivia has also seen the victory of the left-leaning Movement for Socialism (MAS) under the leadership of Evo Morales since 2006, the first indigenous and the longest ruling president of the country. He was the first president who could be labelled as having true democratic mandate as he was the first to ascend to the post with more than 50 per cent of votes.¹⁵ None of the presidents prior to him could do that, and all of them were finally recommended by the Congress. Morales ushered in a new era of democracy in Bolivia by curating a new constitution in 2009.

¹¹ Lesley Gill, “[Creating Citizens, Making Men: The Military and Masculinity in Bolivia](#)”, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 1997, pp. 527–550.

¹² Elizabeth Seshko, *Conscript Nation: Coercion and Citizenship in the Bolivian Barracks*, University of Pittsburg Press, Pittsburg, pp. 20–21.

¹³ Lesley Gill, “[Creating Citizens, Making Men: The Military and Masculinity in Bolivia](#)”, no. 11.

¹⁴ “[Freedom in the World 2024: Bolivia](#)”, *Freedom House*, 1 July 2024.

¹⁵ Cydney Banks, “[Democratic Erosion in Bolivia](#)”, *Democratic Erosion Consortium*, 27 February 2024.

The role of military, however, was in the spotlight again when Evo Morales attempted to get elected for the constitutionally prohibited third presidential term. Morales refused to respect the limit claiming that it was his human right to get elected as many times as he willed. Moreover, his 2019 election was disputed by the opposition with charges of rigging.¹⁶ Amid protests led by the opposition, the military became instrumental in Morales’ exit by strongly advising him to resign from his third term. This forced Morales into a self-imposed exile to Mexico and later in Argentina. Morales termed it a coup which led to an unconstitutional succession of Jeanine Áñez, then president of the senate chamber and an opposition leader, as the next president.¹⁷ However, civil resistance, Áñez’s unpopularity and international opinion forced an election in 2020 which saw comeback of the MAS and appointment of Luis Arce as the president of Bolivia supported by Evo Morales from exile.

Bolivia after Zúñiga’s Coup Attempt

Arce faced Zúñiga’s coup attempt amid a growing perception of his waning popularity. Zúñiga, before his arrest, claimed that the coup attempt was an *autogolpe* (self-coup) plot by president Arce to increase his popularity and take control of the government more effectively. The unfolding of the set of events during the coup attempt and its instant failure revealed absolute lack of planning and understanding among the troops. Several of the officers and troops involved showed ignorance about any such plot and said that they were under impression of participating in an exercise. However, Evo Morales as well as the opposition choose to believe General Zúñiga’s allegations, and are inclined to take political advantage of the situation. Whatsoever be the truth about the motives and reasons for the act, the coup attempt by Zúñiga highlights the fragility of the Bolivian state and democracy due to the impact of a regressive history and political culture.

However, people of Bolivia through civil resistance to authoritarianism are emerging as the custodian of democracy and stability in the country as even Morales failed to get the approval of the people to abolish limit to presidential terms in a referendum. His insistence on his right to contest for a third term and get elected as president has relatively waned his popularity and distanced many of the grassroots left and indigenous allies whose support had catapulted him to his historic presidency. This episode has created a major rift between Morales and President Luis Arce. The MAS seems divided and the infighting has come to the public as Morales eyes to contest for presidency in 2025 elections.¹⁸

¹⁶ [“Evo Morales: Overwhelming Evidence of Election Fraud in Bolivia, Monitors Say”](#), *BBC*, 6 December 2019.

¹⁷ Raghu Malhotra, [“Explained: Why was Bolivia’s Former President Jeanine Áñez Jailed, What is the Political Controversy Surrounding It?”](#), *The Indian Express*, 18 June 2022.

¹⁸ [“Bolivia’s Left Wing is at War with Itself”](#), *The Economist*, 30 May 2024.

Assessment and Conclusion

Bolivia is resource-rich and depends highly on earnings from exports as it has annually contributed around 30 per cent to its GDP for the last two decades.¹⁹ The resources of the country have always been an attraction as it has transited from exporting Silver and Tin in the past to Natural Gas and Hydrocarbons in the present. This has made the country an object of interference by external powers in the region. It is also sitting on the world's largest deposit of Lithium,²⁰ the key to manufacturing electric vehicle batteries and also termed as the white gold. Nevertheless, Bolivia is one among the poorest countries in Latin America. The endowment of resources as in relation to the population of Bolivia could have led to a shining economic story, but political and social divisions within the country make it a classic case study for understanding various interrelated dimensions of resource curse, imperialism, racism, ideology and regressive political culture leading to military coups.

Whether Zúñiga's attempted coup was an *autogolpe* or a misguided attempt to topple MAS from power, the instant dissipation of the military build-up after President Arce's orders to the troops to demobilise suggests political fragmentations within the military. The composition and the allegiances of the Bolivian armed forces in the 21st century are more inclusive and diverse. But political leanings within the military complicate the polarised political processes of the country as they prompt civilian leadership, once weak, to look towards the military for support. The caudillo culture and ideological impulses however also induce the military to toy with the idea of political interference. The establishment distrusts the abilities of civilian leadership and inherits a politico-cultural sense of entitlement to interfere in the government affairs as the guardian of stability of the state.

Inequality in the country has historically polarised the political discourse dotted with violent repression by state and struggles of the workers and peasant movements. The situation, however, has improved with the Bolivian democracy gaining confidence since 1982. The election of Evo Morales in 2006 with unprecedented support of the masses was a historic moment but his will to hold to power has problematised the continuity of a genuine process of democratisation in Bolivia. The democratic spirit of the constitution that he curated must be preserved to sustain the inclusive and participatory momentum the Plurinational State of Bolivia has acquired.

¹⁹ [“Exports of Goods and Services: Bolivia Data”](#), *World Bank*, 1 July 2024.

²⁰ Nicolás Devia-Valbuena, [“In the Global Rush for Lithium, Bolivia is at a Crossroads”](#), United States Institute of Peace, 12 December 2023.

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