

# BOLIVIA'S SECURITY CHALLENGES AND THE PAZ GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

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On June 2, 2026, Bolivia's [Minister of Defence Marcelo Salinas resigned](#) following more than a month of protests and blockades that cut the capital off from food, fuel, and medical supplies, and disrupted economic and political life throughout the country, threatening to topple the government of Rodrigo Paz. The protests involved a range of issues, including [shortages of dollars](#) and goods, [bad gasoline](#) procured under a state contract, which damaged many vehicles in the country, demands for salary increases, and the reversal of a [new property law, law 147](#).

**Unique to the Bolivian situation however, at the center of the funding, animation and longevity of the protests, was the actions of the country's former president [Evo Morales](#) and the coca growers of the Chapare region. The region and the coca growers are arguably [at the heart](#) of cocaine production in the country, shipped to Europe, Oceania, and other international markets through a web of narco traffickers, some of whom use Bolivia itself as a [base of operations or refuge](#).**



Beyond narco trafficking and other illicit activities, the protests in Bolivia have reached the level of grey zone or insurgent operations by those seeking to bring down the Paz government, although not commonly recognized as such. The actors involved are well funded and coordinated, deliberately seizing or blocking militarily relevant objectives such as key road segments, designed to cut off the capital and shut down the economy. They use highly lethal capabilities such as dynamite and sometimes arms, even ambushing police and other government forces. Meanwhile, the Bolivian government and security forces treat these actors as civilians, not-combatants, worrying about escalation, or being jailed, [as happened before](#), if those political, military or police leaders act too aggressively

The strategically positioned state of Bolivia, in the center of South America, is beset by a range of mutually reinforcing security challenges centered on cocaine production and narco trafficking, illegal mining, and internal unrest by radicalized groups. The recently inaugurated government of Rodrigo Paz is working to address those challenges, in part through a fundamental foreign policy re-orientation to [rebuild cooperation with the United States](#) yet also finding that reorientation is accelerating the mobilization of those seeking to oust his government.

From May 21 through May 31, 2026, the author visited Bolivia during that nation's political, and security crisis, interviewing over 40 Bolivian experts on the challenges in and unfolding situation in the country. This work, one of three produced from those interactions and supporting research, analyzes the nation's security challenges and the work of the Paz government to address them.

## **BOLIVIA'S SECURITY CHALLENGES**

### **NARCOTRAFFICKING.**

Bolivia is currently a [source zone for coca](#), a producer of cocaine, and a [transit country](#) for drugs, as well as a site for money laundering and a refuge for international criminals connected with the drug trade. The country's role in international drug trafficking expanded significantly under leftist populist governments of the Movement for Socialism MAS of [Evo Morales](#), and his successor and later opponent Luis Arce. That role expanded with the Morales government's expulsion of the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) [in 2008](#) based on Morales' accusations that the DEA had surveilled his romantic partners and taken other actions to harm his government. According to those consulted for this report, the absence of the DEA and the elimination of associated US programs to fight corruption within the Bolivian police, including within its counter narcotics force FELCN, led to expanded corruption and decreased effectiveness of those bodies,

In Bolivia, the growing and use of coca leaves in limited quantities for traditional purposes is legal, with the area permitted for such cultivation expanded by Evo Morales through Law 906 [in March 2017](#). Nonetheless, the area that the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) under cultivation in Bolivia, [34,000 hectares](#), significantly exceeds the 24,000 hectares permitted by that law. The area under cultivation in 2024 represented a [10% expansion](#) in just one year from 2023.

Coca production in Bolivia primarily occurs in two regions, the [Yungas](#) and the [Chapare](#) within the Department of Cochabamba. According to those consulted for this work, coca in the Yungas has characteristics better suited for chewing and other human uses, while the alkaloid content and other qualities of the coca in the Chapare is more optimized for cocaine production. Consistent with this, the Chapare has become the epicenter of coca produced for cocaine, as well as its transformation into cocaine through laboratories. The [six federations of coca growers](#) of the Tropic of Chapare, of which Evo Morales is President, have thus arguably become the center of gravity for cocaine production in Bolivia and its ties to transnational criminal networks.

The cocaine and intermediate products produced in Chapare move to markets primarily [in Europe](#) and Oceania through multiple routes, with the help of major transnational organized crime groups. These include the [First Capital Command](#) (PCC) and [Commando Vermelho](#) (CV) among others. The [Sinaloa and Jalisco Nuevo Generacion](#) (CJNG) cartels of Mexico, the [Paraguayan group Insfrán](#), the [Serbian mafia](#), and various Colombian groups among others all have a presence in Bolivia involved with this trade.

Historically Bolivian coca leaves were transformed into coca base, an intermediate product, then flown to the north of Argentina for final processing. Today Bolivia produces much more refined cocaine, which is shipped out through multiple routes. These include movement from the Chapare east to Brazil, or southeast into Paraguay or directly into Argentina. While some of this coca, particularly [poor quality "paco"](#) is consumed in the region, most is loaded onto transatlantic commercial ships in [major ports like Rosario](#) or Buenos Aires Argentina, or Montevideo, Uruguay. Some cocaine from Peru also passes through Bolivia as a transit country following these routes. In addition, a portion of the cocaine coming out of the Chapare also is sent West into northern Chile or Peru, ultimately destined for markets in Oceania or Europe via ports in such as Iquique or Arica, Chile.

**Of the two major Brazilian transnational organized crime groups operating in Bolivia, the PCC concentrates on route smuggling cocaine in a southeasterly direction, while CV tends to concentrate more on those in the north including through the department of La Paz and Pando to Brazil.**

In recent months, major transnational organized crime figures have been found operating out of Bolivia. Most notably, these include [Sebastian Marsett](#), head of the First Command of Uruguay (PCU), a subsidiary of the PCC, as well as [Gerson Palmero](#) of the First Capital Command. Both were seized in Santa Cruz. Marsett was living comfortably in the elite [Las Palmas neighborhood](#) alongside Bolivian business and political elites and being an owner of a major soccer team in the Department.

## ILLEGAL MINING.

Beyond cocaine, Bolivia has a substantial illegal mining industry, a subset of the poorly regulated but widespread informal mining sector in the country, part of the more than 80% of the Bolivian economy [which is informal](#). The relative economic importance of such mining has expanded with the price of gold, [approximately \\$4,500 an ounce](#) at the time of this writing, making illegal mining in Bolivia more lucrative than narco trafficking in many cases.

As a reflection of the size of the informal mining sector, Bolivia is currently the largest importer, as well as exporter of mercury [in the world](#). The use of mercury in the informal mining sector has devastating consequences on the environment, including lethal contamination of water, vegetation and animal life.

Illegal mining has also been used to [launder proceeds from narco trafficking](#) and other illicit activities; particularly insofar as informally mined gold is most commonly purchased in cash.

As with cocaine, there is a synergy between illegal mining and Bolivia and Peru. When the latter has clamped down on illegal mining or increased controls over the origin of its gold, some Peruvian gold [is smuggled into Bolivia](#) where it is considered easier to obtain forged papers showing the gold coming out of Bolivian mines. Conversely, when the Bolivian central bank has [purchased informal sector gold](#) to increase its reserves at market prices, Bolivians have smuggled that gold into Peru to sell it at higher prices in the illicit economy.

As in Peru, Chinese organized crime elements also have a [presence in Bolivia's informal and illegal gold sector](#) as purchasers of the product, as well as suppliers of dredging equipment and materials such as mercury, among other roles.

## INSURGENCY VEILED AS PROTEST.

Beyond organized crime, Bolivia illustrates an extreme in the blurring of lines between legitimate political and social protest, and insurgency. The previously mentioned six federations of cocaleros of the Tropic of Chapare have played a key role, along with the [Committee of Bolivian Workers](#) (COB) and the [Tupak Katari](#) workers federation, in protests against right wing Bolivian governments, in defense of governments or policies that will impinge upon their production of coca and de facto transformation into cocaine. The role of the cocaleros in the May 2026 Bolivian protests is, in part, based on the government's [arrest order against Evo Morales](#) for not showing up in court to face charges of sex trafficking with minors, based in part on the child he had out of wedlock with Gabriela Zapata, then age 14.

The enormous quantities of revenue generated by cocaine production in the Chapare arguably provides the resources used to transport protesters to specific locations, pay for their food, cash stipends, and other benefits. As a compliment, the use of dynamite in the mining economy has made explosives ubiquitous in Bolivia in protests, including at a level that presents a danger when thrown to even armored police and military vehicles.

According to those consulted for this work, over the years, the ideological allies of the populist leftist governments of Evo Morales have helped bring members of guerrilla groups such as the [revolutionary armed forces of Colombia](#) (FARC), and reportedly also the Colombian National Liberation army (ELN), the Shining Path of Peru, [and the Cubans](#) among others, to provide military and other forms of training.

In recent protest actions in May 2026, as before, the combination of resources, lethal capabilities, and military training available to the cocaleros and other protesters have led their actions to resemble low-level insurgency. During the May 2026 efforts to destabilize the government of Rodrigo Paz, for example, protesters deliberately blockaded strategic routes controlling access of food, gasoline, medical supplies and other needed materials into and out of the capital La Paz. They even blocked the limited roads connecting the city [to the International Airport and other parts of El Alto](#), the city located at the top of the plateau connected to La Paz, and sought to [shut down the cable cars](#) circumventing the roadblocks connecting the two.

When government forces sought to move in an armored convoy to unblock one of the routes to create a humanitarian corridor, protesters armed with dynamite and arms ambush the government convoy forcing it to turn back. In the process, the Minister of Public Works [Mauricio Zambrano](#), was separated from the convoy, with his life reportedly at risk as he was hunted down by protesters seeking to kill him, just as protesters had previously ambushed a convoy and killed a government minister in the same area years before.

Elsewhere in the country, when Bolivian police sought to disk blockade a critical road going from Santa Cruz to Cochabamba, they were [ambushed by protesters throwing dynamite](#) from carefully selected elevated positions.

In the department of Santa Cruz, protesters blocked a strategic highway at San Julian and brought in thousands of reinforcements when they heard that members of the Youth League from Santa Cruz, were planning on marching to the site [to remove the blockades](#). The protesters at San Julian had reportedly set up sharpshooters on the road in anticipation of the arrival of the UJC, a situation that would have resulted in a massacre had the Santa Cruz civic committee not [called off the planned March](#).

In traditional [counterinsurgency \(COIN\) analysis](#), the effort of a well-armed organized group to deploy in a military fashion deliberately seeking to cut off the capital and overthrow the government would be considered an insurrection, subject to an armed, albeit proportional response by the government under the laws of war period in Bolivia however, the tradition of such protest including the [use of dynamite](#) and some arms, combined with the weakness and sometimes unreliability of security forces, has led the government repeatedly to treat such activities as criminal, not combat.

## THE BOLIVIAN GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Within the Bolivian government, its armed forces and police, there are many competent professionals seeking to act honorably to do their duties, protect the security of the country and combat criminal organizations and other threats. Nonetheless, gravely worsened by two decades of governance by the MAS, closely affiliated with the cocaine producing coccaleros of Chapare and criminal interest within the informal mining sector, and persistently underfunded, the Bolivian government and its security forces are severely impaired by corruption and degraded capability.

## THE POLICE AND FELCN.

Within the Bolivian national police, particularly following the previously noted expulsion of the DEA and the termination of US training, transparency, and institution strengthening programs, controls against corruption have been virtually absent in the face of a country flooded with illicit activity and money. According to those surveyed for this work, corruption within the Bolivian police is ubiquitous. Indeed, as illustrations, in 2024, the Bolivia's Evo Morales-era anti-drug czar [Maximiliano Davila](#) was indicted in the United States for narco trafficking, as was the prior head of FELCN, [Renee Sanabria](#) in 2011.

As an initial step in confronting the situation, the Paz government in 2026 brought the DEA back into the country, albeit with a [limited number of members](#), operating in a representative capacity in an office in La Paz.

In the police more broadly, in addition to corruption, there is a significant lack of equipment needed both to fight crime and to confront protesters. This includes grave shortages of basic crowd control materials such as tear gas, which in previous government responses, the government has even imported from Argentina. Bolivian police have long been forced to buy their own uniforms and much of their equipment. Amidst a grave fiscal crisis, increasing police resources has not yet been an option for the Paz government.

## THE BOLIVIAN MILITARY.

The capabilities of the Bolivian military, like the police, have been eroded by corruption, and neglect.

During the Evo Morales era, the government sought to fundamentally restructure the armed forces and transform its orientation. Their efforts included bringing Cubans in, principally into the Bolivian military intelligence service G2, which not only supports the military, but in the absence of a civilian intelligence service, also serves as the integrator of civilian, police, and military intelligence. The Morales government also used the Cubans [to help launch](#) its "[Anti-Imperialist School](#)" for military indoctrination, subsequently dismantled by the government of Jeanine Anez.

The Morales government further fostered ideas regarding the equality of the enlisted and officer corps, and in both the police and military, and opened up the Bolivian officer corps to personnel previously lacking the required prior college degree, and in some cases even basic literacy. Notably, a significant number of such new recruits, brought in through the [Equality of Opportunities Program](#) (PIO) came from the core cocalero region and Evo Morales [bastion, Chapare](#). Today, many of these are reportedly in positions of leadership, at ranks from major to Colonel. As a result, President Paz's government has arguably been highly reluctant to deploy the military or the police to confront protesters, not only because of a lack of proper equipment and training, but also because of the mixed loyalties of the force, and the risk that forces could decide to join the protesters or refuse to fight, or even engage in the sabotage deliberately inciting violence in order to destabilize the situation to accelerate the fall of the government.

Of the limited amount of new equipment obtained by the armed forces, virtually all has been low quality items purchased from or donated by the People's Republic of China (PRC). These include [6 K-8 fighter](#) interceptors, [6 Z-9 helicopters](#), limited number of Dong Feng military trucks, [31 armored vehicles](#), and a small number of patrol boats.

Of the six K-8s, [two have crashed](#) and only one is reportedly still functioning, due to a combination of poor or deferred maintenance and difficulty in obtaining spare parts. For similar reasons, of the six Z-9 helicopters, only one is still functioning but reportedly no one wants to fly it because it has not been well maintained.

Although Bolivia tried to maintain an older fleet of UH-1H U.S. helicopters, the money left by the US state department to maintain them was reportedly diverted to other purposes, and none are still flying. The situation is reportedly similar with Bolivia's small number of Super Puma helicopters.

Of the vehicles possessed by the Bolivian Army, most have been acquired from neighboring Brazil, including their principal 2.5-ton transport trucks, produced by the firm INGESSA. Some land vehicles in Bolivia's fleet are now almost 70 years old. Of the aging URUTU amphibious vehicles acquired from Brazil, only six are still working. They also have a limited number of aging Cascavel vehicles from Brazil, of which 7 are reportedly working. Those vehicles that are still functioning reportedly only do so because they have been upgraded and modestly maintained.

Bolivia has also reportedly acquired some trucks produced in Argentina, Nissan “Condors,” but these are civilian not military grade.

Of the modest number of land vehicles more recently acquired from China, as previously noted, the Bolivian Army reportedly does not generally use them, owing to their high operational costs, including only getting about one kilometer per gallon gas mileage at a time when gas is increasingly expensive and resources are limited.

For detecting narco flights, in 2016 the Morales government [acquired nine radars](#) from the French company Thales. Under the Morales government, however, these were never made operational. The current government, however, has [brought approximately half](#) to functionality.

In the context of such difficulties, the Paz government has begun to reengage with the U.S. on military security cooperation. It is reportedly exploring once again sending Bolivian students to U.S. military institutions such as the [Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation](#) (WHINSEC), although the number of students for which funding will be available in the current challenged fiscal situation is unclear.

Beyond cooperation with the U.S., the path that the Paz government will take with narco traffickers, illegal miners, and de facto insurgents seeking to overthrow his government is uncertain. According to those interviewed for this work, the President has given some recognition that he understands the importance of addressing the issue of Evo Morales, currently a fugitive from Bolivian law, and other cocalero leaders in Chapare as key to the endurance and level of violence and destabilization of the protesters. Nonetheless, it is not clear whether the president would risk military or police action that could itself precipitate the fall of his government, if confrontations with the military causes the loss of life occurred in 2003, if the military refuse to confront the protesters, has happened in 2019, or if elements of the military and police join the protesters.

On the other hand, if the President seeks to negotiate with protesters, hoping to divide them and buy them off, doing so would likely deepen Bolivia’s fiscal woes, ultimately complicating the provision of needed resources to the Armed Forces and Police. In addition, if President Paz brings some of the left-oriented radical groups into his Cabinet as Ministers, this could impede his re-engagement with The U.S. and the security and counter drug cooperation which could come with it.

## CONCLUSION

The strategically important nation of Bolivia is at a critical moment in which the government of Rodrigo Paz is open to rebuilding relationships with the United States in security and other domains, as illustrated by his participation in the America's [Counter Cartel Coalition](#) (A3C), and in the [Shield of the Americas](#) in March 2026.

Although Bolivian cocaine, illicit gold, and refugees do not directly go to the United States, the previously noted role of Bolivia as a nexus for major international criminal organizations, including those such as the PCC and CV [that have been designated](#) by the U.S. as terrorist organizations, highlight the importance to the U.S. of Bolivia's success in its fight against narco-trafficking, other transnational organized crime, and insurgency disguised as social protest.

Bolivia's [fiscal crisis](#) and the depths of the corruption permeating its institutions make it virtually impossible for the Paz government to succeed in its fight alone. Indeed, even the basic ability to confront those engaged in a military-style "siege" of La Paz is undermined by lack of confidence in the resources and loyalty of Bolivia's security forces.

Reciprocally, the fall of a long-overdue pro-US Bolivian government committed to the fight against organized crime and terrorist groups, and resisting cooperation with extra-hemispheric US rivals, would be disastrous not only for Bolivia but also for its neighbors which are already affected by Bolivia's cocaine and gold fueled criminal economy and radicalized indigenous groups.

From the perspective of Washington D.C., the role of Cuba in supporting the prior government of Evo Morales, and the risk they could return to power with him, would directly contradict the progress that the current U.S. Administration has made [against the narco government of Nicholas Maduro](#) in Venezuela, and is seeking to make against the [Communist government in Cuba](#).

Although Bolivia is somewhat geographically separated from the United States, it is central to the dynamics of the region that the US has prioritized in its [National Security](#) and [National Defense](#) strategies, as critical to the security of the US homeland. What happens in Bolivia matters for the United States.

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