

Bolivia: Key Points About the Failed Military Coup and its Aftermath

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Images of the military forcibly entering the Government Palace (the *Palacio Quemado*) have been broadcast around the world, sowing confusion in Bolivia. The failed coup by a faction within the Army, repudiated nationally and internationally, took place in the context of the erosion of Luis Arce's administration, itself large the result of internal discord within the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party. Despite its swift failure, the military rebellion will have political repercussions.

The tanks in Plaza Murillo could very well have led to tragedy given the increasingly turbulent political climate. With MAS fractured into two wings—Evistas, supporting former president Evo Morales, and Arcistas, aligned with Luis Arce—stability is no longer guaranteed. On the afternoon of Wednesday, June 26, the commander general of the Army, Juan José Zúñiga—who refused to recognize his dismissal by the president the prior night—occupied the emblematic square with tanks. He even used one tank to force open the door of the *Palacio Quemado*, the ancient seat of government today shared with the adjacent *Casa Grande del Pueblo*. Confusion about the intentions and strategies at play prevailed throughout the event, as many government officials barricaded their offices with furniture to prevent any breach by the uniformed men.

Tensions had been brewing ever since General Zúñiga's allusion to the impossibility of former President Evo Morales's renewed run for the office of President, which culminated in calling Morales a "mythomaniac." In an interview with the local program No Mentirás on June 24, the military chief said "legally, Evo Morales is disqualified. The CPE (Political Constitution of the State) says that he cannot serve more than two terms, and yet the man was reelected. The Army and the Armed Forces have a mission to enforce the Constitution. That man cannot be president of this country again." [1]

Zúñiga was referring to a controversial ruling by the Plurinational Constitutional Court (TCP) which, in a decision on another issue, included an interpretation of the 2009 Constitution that would exclude the three-time president from running in the presidential race. [2] While the constitution states that individuals may only serve two consecutive terms, the court's interpretation states that individuals may serve two terms in total—consecutive or not. Morales presented the decision as a political proscription by the "endogenous right," part of a larger strategy that he called a "black plan" to remove him from politics, orchestrated, according to him, by the Ministers of Justice and Government, Iván Lima and Eduardo del Castillo.

The threatening statements made by Zúñiga, who was appointed commander of the Army at the end of 2022 by President Luis Arce Catacora, unnerved the ex-president and Evistas, who began to speak of a "self-coup" in the making. On his X account Morales denounced "the types of threats made by Juan José Zúñiga, the general commander of the Army," saying that they "have never been about democracy. They must be disavowed by the commander in chief of the Armed Forces [Luis Arce], otherwise they prove that what they are really organizing is a self-coup." [3] Morales daily criticizes the Arce government, which he considers a traitor to the so-called "process of change."

But it was not just the ex-president. Zúñiga's threats were in violation of military regulations as well as also the Constitution, leading to Arce's decision to dismiss him. This dismissal was interpreted by the military chief as an expression of "contempt" in the face of his loyalty to the president. On Wednesday, June 26, the day he had been summoned to be formally relieved, according to the newspaper *El Deber*, Zúñiga arrived at Plaza Murillo with armored vehicles and hooded soldiers. [4] This is how the country came to witness a General acting as if he was a "social movement," organizing an attempted *coup d'état*, and confronting President Arce face to face upon forcibly entering the *Palacio Quemado*. [5] The president's collaborators shouted to Zúñiga that he was indeed a *golpista* (coup plotter) and demanded he withdraw his uniformed men.

Zúñiga's isolation and lack of political or social support possibly explains his attempt to paint his rebellion as political. He said he was going to free "political prisoners"—including former president, Jeanine Áñez, and the former governor of Santa Cruz, Fernando Camacho—and restore democracy. "The elite have taken over the country, vandals who have destroyed the country," he harangued at the doors of his armored vehicle, in front of the palace and Parliament. His argument that "the Armed Forces intend to restructure democracy, so that it is a true democracy, not only for the owners who have been in power for thirty and forty years" fell on deaf ears.

The internal and external reaction was overwhelming. Even opponents currently in prison such as Áñez and Camacho condemned the military action. [6] So did former presidents Carlos D. Mesa and Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga. [7] Outside the country, leaders of diverse ideological persuasions—with the exception of Argentine Javier Milei, who left it in the hands of his Foreign Minister—called for the defense of institutions and condemned the subversives.

Meanwhile, parent organizations such as the Central Union of Peasant Workers of Bolivia (CSUTCB) and the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB), as well as Evo Morales, who continues to be the leader of the unions of coca growers of Chapare in Cochabamba (he has his offices and his fish farming enterprise there), called for a general strike, for roadblocks, and for a large march to La Paz.

Arce, for his part, gave a brief speech, and amidst the possibility of confrontations in Plaza Murillo, also called for mobilization. Yet, the protesters were expelled with tear gas, and he prepared to name a new military command of the armed forces.

Arce, who had apparently promised not to run for re-election in 2025, later decided that he would seek a second term. Evo Morales, who attempted one re-election after another, ignoring the letter and spirit of the new Magna Carta, maintains that he was removed by a *coup d'état* in 2019 and that he has the right to run for the presidency again. This dispute has paralyzed the Legislative Assembly at an economic time when the pre-2019 economic boom is now years in the distant past.

Without a rebellion in the military or police barracks, Zúñiga's hope of maintaining the uprising and managing to stay in his post by force was running out. He was not helped by his involvement in at

least one case of embezzlement (the payment of the Juancito Pinto bonus during Evo Morales' government), or by his generally lackluster career performance. The military man who had been considered very close to Arce appears to have acted on his own impulse. His withdrawal from Plaza Murillo resembled a stampede, with protesters chasing the straggling soldiers.

Upon being arrested, along with Vice Admiral Juan Arnez, the former commander of the Navy, Zúñiga claimed to have been acting on the orders of the president: "President [Arce] told me 'the situation is very screwed, something needs to be prepared to raise my popularity.'" [8] A grenade had been activated that would last for the next few days. The idea of a self-coup in the strict sense seems to be contradicted by the very thread of events—what exactly was the plan? In reality, the events were more like a series of uncoordinated acts, explicable only within the framework of eroding institutions and the poor management of MAS.

How did things get so unstable? Upon Morales' return to power in December 2020, relations between him and Luis Arce, his candidate chosen from exile in Argentina, who served as Minister of the Economy for more than a decade, quickly wore out and ended in an open dispute for power. Arce, who had apparently promised not to run for re-election in 2025, later decided that he would seek a second term. Evo Morales, who attempted one re-election after another, ignoring the letter and spirit of the new Magna Carta, maintains that he was removed by a *coup d'état* in 2019 and that he has the right to run for the presidency again. This dispute has paralyzed the Legislative Assembly at an economic time when the pre-2019 economic boom is now years in the distant past.

The shortage of dollars and fuel reveals an exhaustion of the economic model that has been place since 2006. This is when Evo Morales was elected as the first indigenous president of Bolivia and which, in the midst of a spectacular political epic, began the "democratic and cultural revolution," which on the economic level deployed a "prudent populism" that was very careful not to increase the fiscal deficit and accumulate reserves.

Arce himself recently acknowledged that the diesel situation has become "pathetic" and ordered the militarization of the fuel supply system. This militarization aimed to avoid state-subsidized diesel from being smuggled to neighboring countries. The economic crisis has particularly affected Arce, who, without much personal charisma, built his legitimacy as the minister of the "economic miracle." On the political level, collaborations between the Executive and Judicial Branches have weakened the Legislative Branch, who in their majority are divided along political lines between Arcistas and Evistas, with each side accusing the other of "playing into the right's hands." [9] Judicial authority has also been extended, a fact denounced daily by Evistas.

The Senate president, Andrónico Rodríguez, a coca grower unionist trained by Evo Morales as a sort of successor, tweeted after the military retreat: "From self-extended magistrates to a supposed coup or self-coup, the Bolivian people are sinking into uncertainty. This institutional disorder, where the authorities illegally extend their mandates and democratic principles are undermined, is leading the country to a situation of chaos and mistrust, worsening the crisis and threatening the stability and well-being of the country." [10] Rodríguez is not alone in holding these sentiments. The aftershocks of the uprising will continue. Far from coming to a truce in the MAS space, the internal struggle will only intensify.

Part of the dispute is over the principles of the Movement toward Socialism (MAS), a party of social movements that showed its capacity for electoral mobilization in 2020. This capacity extends even in difficult contexts, such as the one experienced under the government of Añez and of the Minister of Government Arturo Murillo (who was later arrested in the United States for corruption). The congresses of each wing have been brought to court, with their eyes set on 2025, the year of the Bolivian bicentennial.

A weak opposition, associated with the authoritarian, inefficient and corrupt government of Jeanine Áñez, has found it incredibly difficult to find new figures. They have turned to fueling the “ch’ampa war” between Evistas and Arcistas who view the conflict as an “internal” dispute.¹¹ But in the midst of regional and global electoral volatility, this approach by the right carries risks, even though the electoral base around MAS remains strong and the experience of Áñez functions as a reminder for social and indigenous movements.

It is still too early to know how the failed coup attempt will impact power relations within MAS, which today no longer exists as a unified party. After overcoming the challenge of the military rebellion, Arce now faces political crossfire from Evistas and opposition groups, who have already begun to talk about the “political show.” This open acknowledgment of the political spectacle devalues the political capital that Arce could have obtained from the national and international support for his institutionalism, defense of democracy, and his decision to confront the “coup General” head on.

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P.S.

- Spectre. July 30, 2024:
<https://spectrejournal.com/bolivia-keys-points-about-the-failed-military-coup-and-its-aftermath/>
- *This essay originally appeared in Spanish as “Bolivia: claves de la asonada militar y sus coletazos” in [Nueva Sociedad](#) and was translated for Spectre by Maga Miranda.*¹²
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Footnotes

- [1] Juan Carlos Véliz “«Mentiroso», «mitómano»: El general Zúñiga confronta a Evo y habla de detenerlo si fuera necesario,” eju! (website), June 25, 2024:
<https://eju.tv/2024/06/mentiroso-mitomano-el-general-zuniga-confronta-a-evo-y-habla-de-detenerlo-si-fuera-necesario/>
- [2] Fernando Molina, “El Tribunal Constitucional de Bolivia anula la reelección indefinida e inhabilita a Evo Morales para 2025,” *El País*, December 29, 2023:
<https://elpais.com/america/2023-12-30/el-tribunal-constitucional-de-bolivia-anula-la-reeleccion-indefinida-e-inhabilita-a-evo-morales-para-2025>.
- [3] Evo Morales Ayma (@evoespueblo), “El tipo de amenazas hechas por el Comandante General del Ejército, Juan José Zúñiga, nunca se dieron en democracia. Si no son desautorizadas por el Comandante en Jefe de las Fuerzas Armadas, M...,” [X, June 25, 2024, 9:03 a.m.](#)
- [4] “Toma del Palacio Quemado: Zúñiga, el militar más cercano al Presidente, sacó a la tropa

militar, fue aprehendido y dijo que actuó por orden de Arce,” El Deber, June 25, 2024, https://eldeber.com.bo/pais/suman-tres-las-ciudades-con-bloqueos-por-falta-de-diesel-anh-pide-a-choferes-de-oruro-permitir-la-sa_378873

[5] Correo Del Sur (@correodelsurcom), “Circula un nuevo video sobre el encuentro del presidente Luis Arce y jefes militares en el Palacio Quemado. Se observa cómo el Mandatario los increpa y muestra el bastón de mando y el retiro de Jua...” X, June 26, 2024, 10:18 p.m., <https://x.com/correodelsurcom/status/1806150180107956380>.

[6] Jeanine Añez Chávez (@JeanineAnez), “Repudio total a movilización de Militares en plaza Murillo pretendiendo destruir el orden constitucional, el MAS con Arce y Evo deben irse a través del voto el año 2025. Los bolivianos defend...” X, June 26, 2024, 4:04 p.m., <https://x.com/jeanineanez/status/1806056057136959714?s=52;Luis> Fernando Camacho (@LuisFerCamachoV), “Ante el inusual movimiento de tropas en Plaza Murillo, manifestamos nuestro respaldo a las instituciones y a la democracia en nuestro país. Se debe respetar el mandato del voto popular, cual...” X, June 26, 2025, 4:33 p.m., <https://x.com/LuisFerCamachoV/status/1806063159666421894>.

[7] Erbol (@ErbolDigital), “El expresidente Carlos Mesa expresa su repudio por el intento de golpe de Estado propiciado por un grupo de militares,” X, June 26, 2024, 5:01 p.m., <https://x.com/ErbolDigital/status/1806070180360896568>. ;Jorge Tuto Quiroga (@TutoQuiroga), “A tilín Arce #Bolivia se le va de las manos, con militares movilizados en Plaza Murillo. Repudiamos vehementemente estos aprestos anti-democráticos, los insurrectos deben ser procesados...” X, June 26, 2024, 3:28 p.m., <https://x.com/tutoquiroga/status/1806046901743280532>.

[8] Erbol (@ErbolDigital), “Estas son las declaraciones del general Juan José Zúñiga, donde acusa al presidente Luis Arce de un “autogolpe”. Eso al momento de ser aprehendido.” X, June 26, 2024, 7:16 p.m, <https://x.com/ErbolDigital/status/1806104265066189111>.

[9] Cecilia Chacón Rendón, “El “costo” de paralizar a la Asamblea Legislativa,” Opinión, April 19, 2024, <https://www.opinion.com.bo/opinion/cecilia-chacon-r/costo-paralizar-asamblea-legislativa/20240419000001943173.html>