

Short-lived military coup fails against Arce in Bolivia

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27 June 2024

Bolivian President Luis Arce named a new military high command on Wednesday in the wake of an abortive military coup launched by the former commander of the Army, Gen. Juan José Zúñiga.

In one of the most short-lived attempts in Bolivia's long history of coups, just over four hours passed between Zúñiga's declaration of his bid to overthrow the government and his arrest at 7 p.m. (local time).

On Tuesday, Arce deposed General Zúñiga from his post for threatening to detain former President Evo Morales if the latter seeks another term in the August 2025 elections.

A day later, Zúñiga led hundreds of heavily armed soldiers with faces covered to surround the former government palace, Palacio Quemado, which is adjacent to the new building in the capital, La Paz.

At the Plaza Murillo in front of the palace, Zúñiga declared, "There will be a new cabinet of ministers, surely there will be changes, but our State cannot continue like this. We want to recover our homeland."

An armored vehicle was then slammed into the gates of the Palacio Quemado, and the soldiers invaded it with rifles and shields.

Inside the building, Arce unsuccessfully ordered Zúñiga to remove the troops.

Protests and a general strike had been called by Arce, his ministers, Evo Morales and the main union body, the Bolivian Workers Central (COB). Hundreds of demonstrators began gathering around the Plaza Murillo to tell the heavily armed soldiers to "Get out!"

Morales cited reports that snipers had been placed around Plaza Murillo as proof that the coup had been prepared beforehand.

While the character of the agreement—and concessions—will become clear in the following days and weeks, a dominant faction of the military reached a deal to keep the elected President Arce in power, for now.

Arce was allowed to return to the government headquarters, the Great House of the People, and name a new military high command in a televised ceremony. The new top commander, Gen. José Wilson Sánchez, then took the podium and ordered all mobilized troops to return to their barracks.

Zúñiga drove back to the military headquarters in one of the eight armored vehicles that participated in the mutiny, and the troops cleared the plaza, dropping tear gas canisters behind them.

An arrest warrant was issued against Zúñiga, who was then detained while claiming on live television that it had all been a "self-coup" planned by Arce himself to improve his popularity.

On Thursday morning, Zúñiga and his alleged co-conspirator Vice Adm. Juan Arnez Salvador, the former head of the Navy, were

formally charged with the charges of terrorism and armed uprising.

Zúñiga was appointed by Arce, who described him recently as "the people's general," an echo of similar declarations by Salvador Allende in the run-up to his own overthrow in 1973. It remains to be seen whether Bolivia follows the Chilean pattern, in which an abortive coup served as a dry run for the real thing, which imposed a blood-soaked military dictatorship.

The explosive context leading up to the coup attempt

The failure of the coup attempt marks a new stage in the economic and political crisis gripping Bolivia ahead of the 2025 elections, where the major drivers are the escalating third world war led by US imperialism against Russia and China and the deepening crisis of global capitalism.

Morales and the MAS were first elected in 2005—and again in 2009, 2014 and 2019—following a series of popular protests against inequality, including the 2000 "Cochabamba water war" and the 2003 "natural gas war" that had toppled five presidents. With the aid of pseudo-left organizations, Morales channeled the upsurge behind his election.

Taking advantage of a boom in oil and other commodity prices, the Morales-MAS administration carried out partial nationalizations of oil and minerals and limited increases in social spending which resulted in a lowering of the poverty rate from 61 percent in 2005 to 36 percent in 2023, while increasing profits for global corporations and making timely payments to global finance capital. The country's GDP tripled.

But, as early as 2014, the Morales administration responded to the end of the commodity boom, which had been caused mainly by Chinese growth, by adopting austerity measures to pay back the rapidly growing government debt. This brought to a halt the social improvements and was accompanied by police repression against working class protests.

Having lost confidence in his ability to suppress popular opposition, sections of the Bolivian oligarchy and US imperialism backed a military coup that overthrew Morales, only two weeks after the October 2019 elections, on the basis of fabricated claims of vote fraud.

A massive uprising against the coup, centered in the urban centers of El Alto, around La Paz, was brutally crushed by the military and police with numerous massacres.

Unable to quell the opposition and facing a worsening global

economic situation, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the coup regime led by Jeanine Áñez decided to call elections in October 2020 and allow the MAS to return to power under Luis Arce, a former minister of Morales.

In the last two years, however, amid the ongoing pandemic, the eruption of the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and the escalating US-led economic war and preparation for military conflict against China, Bolivia's crisis of bourgeois rule only deepened.

In this context, the country's key minerals, especially the world's largest lithium reserves, have become a key target in the emerging redivision of the planet between major powers.

At the same time, the country's gas and oil reserves have begun running low and increased exploration is not yielding significant results. In the months immediately before the latest coup attempt, the country had been mired in shortages of fuel and dollars.

A 75 percent drop in the price of lithium in the past year, mainly due to lower-than-expected electric vehicle demand and the economic war tariffs against China, explosively worsened Bolivia's economic outlook.

Reflecting a conflict between factions of the ruling class in response to this crisis, the MAS was riven by a rivalry between Arce and Morales over control over the party and the 2025 presidential candidacy. Both factions have spent months launching allegations of unconstitutionality, corruption, alignment with the far-right and US imperialism and "soft-coup" preparations. Morales convoked major roadblocks greatly worsening the supply of fuel and other goods.

Last December, the Constitutional Court ruled that Morales was not allowed to run for reelection in 2025, although a Congress with tens of thousands of supporters in Villa Tunari on June 10 ratified his candidacy.

A major factor in these conflicts within the ruling class has been getting a share of the proceeds from future lithium projects. In April, Alberto Echazú, an ally of Morales and his key official in charge of launching the lithium industry, was arrested on charges of approving contracts detrimental to state finances, while Morales has denounced Arce's son for making corrupt deals with Elon Musk. All these claims are murky and not backed by strong evidence.

Wednesday's events, however, were preceded most immediately by discussions of a MAS "Unity Congress" and a suspension of demonstrations backed by Morales.

Morales's ally and former interior minister Carlos Romero said earlier this month: "The former president Morales is doing everything possible to contain a social mobilization, there are social mobilizations of all kinds, for dollars, for fuel, for the increase in prices of the family basket; for the economic crisis to increase once more is what we do not want."

A meeting on June 11 between Arce and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow led to the announcement of a partnership to "industrialize" Bolivian lithium production starting in 2025 by the state-owned companies Yacimientos de Litio Bolivia (YLB) and the Russian Uranium One Group.

At the same time, Chinese companies have played the main role in developing lithium projects within Bolivia, while the Chancay port that is set to open in November in Peru is expected to greatly facilitate the transportation of Bolivian minerals to China.

There was also an agreement to import Russian oil, in the context of unrest among consumers and transportation employer groups over shortages. On June 14, Arce deployed the military to gas stations across the country to oversee purchases, ostensibly to prevent

hoarding and contraband. Bolivia spends over \$1 billion yearly to subsidize fuel imports.

Hours before the coup, however, transportation employers reached an agreement with the government which canceled planned roadblocks along major highways and border crossings to protest taxes and shortages in fuel and dollars in the economy.

Even though the US corporate media, the Bolivian far right and allies of Morales have given credence to the claim of a "self-coup," and this possibility cannot be immediately discounted, the context and events leading up to the coup attempt points to US imperialism as the main force interested in overthrowing Arce.

Unable to secure a US puppet regime in the 2019 coup, Washington is eager to try to elevate the role of the military, push politics to the right and secure control over Bolivia's natural resources against its rivals, above all China.

In the week before the coup attempt, the Arce administration focused its allegations of coup plotting against the US Embassy, which Washington denied. The Bolivian Economy Minister declared last week that the shortages and recent protests were part of "a soft coup against the economy" being hatched at the US Embassy.

On Tuesday, in an interview with *El Deber* after his firing, the coup leader Zúñiga declared: "Our homeland is once again under attack by internal and external enemies that seek division, destabilization and hatred among Bolivians in order to take control of natural resources for the benefit of petty interests and power groups that respond to the *caudillismo*." This is a thinly veiled reference to the competition between factions of the ruling class over lithium.

During the coup itself, General Zúñiga demanded the liberation from jail of the leaders of the fascistic 2019 coup, including Jeanine Áñez, the fascist Luis Fernando Camacho and military officials—all closely associated with Washington.

Suspiciously, the US Embassy in Bolivia did not publish a statement until after the arrest of Zúñiga, and more than five hours after the coup was launched, writing on X: "We reject any attempt to overthrow the elected government and demand respect for the constitutional order."

The South American country with 12 million people has seen 36 completed military coups in its two centuries since breaking from Spain. It has also been involved in 12 wars against neighbors and other conflicts that left it landlocked and made it lose more than half of its original territory.

Bolivia is a case study in the failure of the capitalist ruling class in backward economic countries to secure its independence from imperialism or secure democratic forms of rule, no matter how radical the pretensions of the ruling bourgeois parties.

As democratic forms of rule break down in the advanced capitalist countries, as well as the hurtle toward fascism and world war, Latin America is being transformed into a field of battle for control of vital resources and markets. The United States is responding ever more openly in a military manner to deflect the growing economic weight of its rivals.



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