

Is Bolivia's Coca Policy Protecting Traditions, or Creating a Narco-State?

Max Radwin | Tuesday, June 5, 2018

Editor's note: This is the first installment of a two-part series on Bolivia's relationship with coca, funded by WPR's Investigative Reporting Fellowship (<http://about.worldpoliticsreview.com/fellowship/>). The second installment will be published June 6.



Soldiers destroy illegal coca plants with machetes during a government-organized media trip to the Villa Nueva community of Chimore, Bolivia, Feb. 26, 2016 (AP photo by Juan Karita).

On a Monday afternoon this past February, around 300 residents of the small jungle town of Chimore in central Bolivia gathered at the town plaza ahead of a speech by the country's president, Evo Morales.

As they waited, children chased one another in front of the stage that had been erected along the main road. Their parents mostly hid under umbrellas, though some held heavy banners displaying slogans of various coca-growers' unions.

Chimore is situated in a dense jungle region, and its culture and identity have been heavily shaped by coca, the plant best known as the main ingredient in cocaine. Ten years ago, the town was the site of a base camp for the United States Drug Enforcement Administration, or DEA, which was investigating coca cultivation and drug trafficking. Going back to the 1980s, the agency's primary strategy had involved destroying as much coca crop as possible, leaving many rural families in poverty.

In 2008, however, Morales expelled the agency, citing its reputation for violence and meddling in Bolivian politics. In the decade since then, Chimore, like the country at large, has intensified its commitment to coca, thanks to a controversial nationalized market championed by the government.

When the president finally arrived in Chimore on the back of a four-by-four utility vehicle, loudspeakers played the official song of the ruling political party—the Movement to Socialism, or MAS—so loudly that they began to pop. Morales, wearing a short-sleeve, button-up shirt tucked into dirty black jeans, saluted a row of military officers and accepted a ceremonial lei before climbing the stage.

Though Morales was ostensibly there to inaugurate Chimore's newly constructed municipal building, he spent much of his speech talking about the importance of the coca leaf. He lamented that it had, to his mind, been misrepresented as a harmful drug, and he had harsh words for what he described as the egregious acts committed by the U.S. as a result.

"When I was first running for president, the ambassador of the United States, what did he say? That Evo is a criminal and the *cocaleros* are the Taliban," he told the crowd, using the colloquial term for coca farmers. "It was in the newspapers."

Even 10 years on, the expulsion of the DEA continues to represent

([https://twitter.com/evoespueblo/status/926444622943055872?](https://twitter.com/evoespueblo/status/926444622943055872?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fmundo.sputniknews.com%2Famericalatina%2F201711031073717928-la-paz-eeuu-agencia-antidrogas%2F&tfw_site=SputnikMundo)

[ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fmundo.sputniknews.com%2Famericalatina%2F201711031073717928-la-paz-eeuu-agencia-antidrogas%2F&tfw_site=SputnikMundo](https://twitter.com/evoespueblo/status/926444622943055872?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fmundo.sputniknews.com%2Famericalatina%2F201711031073717928-la-paz-eeuu-agencia-antidrogas%2F&tfw_site=SputnikMundo)) one of Morales' greatest victories. In some ways, the move ushered in a new era in Bolivia's relationship with the coca leaf, one in which production of the crop, already legal and regulated, was stripped of its stigma. More than ever, coca cultivation and consumption are treated as common practices in Bolivia, whether for tea or for more modern products like gum and lotion. The fight against drug trafficking was placed almost exclusively in the hands of internal law enforcement, giving Morales and his government freedom from outside interference.

It was a transition that resonated far beyond Bolivia's borders. Every change to Bolivia's drug policy makes a ripple through the worldwide network that traffics cocaine. On its own, the country is the origin of between 13 and 23 percent of all cocaine in global circulation, depending on who's counting. It also serves as a passageway for cocaine from Peru, which accounts for approximately 34 percent of the global total, according to the most recent estimates

(https://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2010/1.3_The_global_cocaine_market.pdf) of cocaine production from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, or UNODC. Most of those drugs head to Brazil, where they are shipped to Europe (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/eu-and-bolivia-at-odds-over-new-coca-leaf-law/>), Asia and Africa (<https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/bolivia-supplying-drug-markets-in-africa-lebanon/>).

Even 10 years on, the expulsion of the DEA is seen as one of Morales' greatest victories.

Bolivian officials take advantage of events (<https://www.telesurtv.net/english/news/I-Dont-Regret-Expelling-the-DEA-from-Bolivia-Evo-Morales-20170604-0020.html>) like the one in Chimore to celebrate what they frame as their unprecedented success in having fought the global drug network on their own terms. They say their restrictions on legal coca cultivation have caused annual production of the plant to fall well below pre-

2008 levels, and that drug activity has been sharply curtailed.

Yet with the DEA gone, it's hard to judge the credibility of these claims. For all the agency's faults, it still would have represented the best source of third-party intelligence on coca and cocaine in Bolivia. In its absence, a wide range of views has emerged on just how successful Morales' drug policies actually are.

Many outside scholars consider them to be fairly effective, in that the country appears to have significantly lowered the amount of land devoted to growing coca while imposing regulations on those areas that still do. On the other end of the spectrum, Morales' most vocal critics question whether he is creating (<https://www.telesurtv.net/bloggers/Bolivia-Si-reeligen-a-Evo-Morales-Bolivia-se-hundira-en-la-miseria-violencia-y-corrupcion-20151022-0002.html>) a "narco-state" by allowing illicit activity to permeate every level of the government.

There is reason to think the latter might be true. Officials under Morales have been closely tied to international trafficking activity on numerous occasions, even if Morales himself has avoided any kind of direct culpability. Criminal conduct has trickled into low-level politics and the justice system, where drug-related corruption runs rampant. At all levels of government, Bolivia continues to work on strategies for fighting drug trafficking, but the country's efforts show mixed success and have left some neighboring countries frustrated.

At the same time, it's worth noting that the DEA's own record in Bolivia and elsewhere in South America is spotty at best. It's certainly possible that the agency, if it were still around, might have worsened the situation with its antiquated "war on drugs" tactics, or that it would have had no impact at all in combating the drug trade.

These days, the DEA primarily serves as a punching bag for Morales and those loyal to him, as was evident during the event in Chimore. "What did the DEA do?" asked Edgar Quispe, secretary of the Central Chimore Community Federation, which lobbies for the *cocaleros*' interests. "The DEA killed us. The DEA kicked us down."



Bolivian President Evo Morales speaks at the inauguration of a municipal building, Chimore, Bolivia, Feb. 11, 2018 (photo by Max Radwin).

Officials also used the occasion to affirm their support for the president and his policies. “We will remain in the palace of the head of our President Evo forever and indefinitely,” Leonardo Loza, an executive of the coca-growers’ federation of Chimore, said during his introduction to Morales’ speech. “We’re going to change Bolivia and make it a political stronghold, so that no neoliberal comes again to impoverish us or take our natural resources.”

As Morales delivered his remarks, Loza and several other officials sat onstage near him, and they stood by his side during the ribbon-cutting for the town’s new municipal building. After a photo-op and private tour, the group retreated into a side room for lunch of pacu fish caught from a local river.

The group was all seated at a long table, with Morales near one end. Coca leaves were piled up on the table for them to chew—a nearly universal habit in Bolivia, renowned for curbing altitude sickness and hunger while providing a small jolt of energy similar to caffeine. The officials lingered after finishing their fish, drinking a Bolivian beer called Pacena. Soon, Morales was pointing to various people in the room and directing them to take a shot of whiskey, then a double shot, and then two double shots. All the while, officials chewed coca leaf like tobacco, their cheeks bulging as they drank.

A Partnership Unravels

Cocaine began to permeate Bolivian politics in the 1960s, a process that came to a head during the 1980 coup carried out by Luis Garcia Meza, a general who had financial backing from the Bolivian drug lord Roberto Suarez Gomez, known as the “Cocaine King.” The putsch marked the first time that a true “narco-state” had come to power in South America.

Meza’s dictatorship, characterized by corruption, forced disappearances and press censorship, lasted just 13 months before he was forced to flee to Brazil. While the country revived its fragile democracy, the DEA was busy eradicating coca fields and investigating trafficking routes, which at that time were still mostly directed toward the United States.

In 1988, as coca cultivation boomed, Bolivia introduced Law 1008 in hopes of asserting some control over crop output. The law, which was met with intense protests, limited nationwide coca production to designated areas of the country—12,000 hectares in total. By 1997, the DEA and the Bolivian government were working together to carry out Plan *Dignidad*, aiming to eradicate all unlawful coca production.

Yet by the time Morales came to power, in 2006, coca eradication had still not made a noticeable dent in cocaine trafficking, and the DEA had earned a reputation for violent tactics including alleged beatings, unlawful arrests and torture. The situation was made even more tense by the fact that, in the year leading up to its expulsion, the DEA was going after the Morales government much like it had gone after Meza, building a case against the president and several close officials by secretly monitoring their phone calls. However, according to Alexander Toth, who was assistant regional director of the DEA at the time, the agency could never get the “right” call—one strong enough to warrant the arrest of a sitting president on trafficking charges.

To this day, Toth has no doubt that Morales was involved in drug trafficking. “Evo is deep in it,” he says. “That’s not just political talk.” But the Bolivian government denies this, and many outside analysts are also skeptical, saying the DEA’s claims could merely represent an attempt by Washington to maintain influence in the country.

As they worked to eradicate coca, U.S. officials earned a reputation for alleged beatings, unlawful arrests and torture.

Toth had been transferred to Bolivia from DEA headquarters in Arlington, Texas, in February 2008, seven months before the agency received notice of its expulsion. The agency was relying on the cooperation of Special Investigation Units, Bolivian law enforcement units that were vetted, funded and trained by the DEA, to carry out joint operations. But as they closed in on big-name politicians, the Bolivian side started growing distant and less communicative, hesitating to carry out drug busts.

In September of that year, the DEA received a diplomatic note at the U.S. Embassy saying it had 90 days to leave the country. Toth recalls he was eating dinner in Santa Cruz, on the opposite side of the country, when another agent called him with the news. He returned to La Paz, where he and other DEA staff spent several days trying to convince the Bolivian government to change its mind. Unsuccessful, they began reassigning agents and their families, and destroying decades of classified intelligence.

Toth recalls that in the period leading up to the expulsion, his relationship with Rene Sanabria, the head of Bolivia's anti-narcotics police, had deteriorated. Three years later, Sanabria would be extradited to the U.S. on trafficking charges following his arrest in Panama, where he had gone to complete a sale involving 144 kilograms, or 317 pounds, of cocaine. In response, Morales, still trying to cultivate a positive relationship with the international community, condemned any corruption found within his ranks, while vaguely accusing the U.S. of trying to "implicate the government." Toth, stationed in Brazil, flew to Miami to speak with Sanabria about other corrupt figures in the Morales government; he says today that the information he gleaned confirmed what he had suspected about many top officials.

Morales, seeming worried, again tried to cast doubt on the credibility of the investigation. "What will Gen. Sanabria be negotiating so that his sentence is shorter?" he asked at a press conference following Sanabria's arrest. "Maybe he's negotiating with the image of the president. I know the kind of negotiations done by 'the empire' are political actions. It's not a fight against drug trafficking."

In the end, more than a dozen other officials connected to Sanabria were also arrested by authorities in Bolivia. Morales has nevertheless maintained that any officials found to be trafficking drugs are outliers in an otherwise clean government program that, in recent years, has expanded significantly.

The *Cocalero* President

It should come as no surprise that Morales, a former *cocalero* and growers' union activist himself, has closely associated his government with coca production. After all, he would never have reached the presidency without the rural support base he forged from his coca-growing days. Over the past 35 years, his advocacy for *cocalero* rights, along with his brash rhetoric, have won farmers' admiration and given him the status of a living legend: a *cocalero* who pulled himself out of extreme poverty to defend indigenous peoples' ancestral relationship with coca.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Morales was beaten by police, tear-gassed, thrown into rivers and arrested while protesting against restrictive coca laws and eradication efforts. He has staged hunger strikes (<https://www.noticiasfides.com/nacional/sociedad/libertad-de-evo-morales-194410>) and led 300-mile marches. By the late 1990s, Morales had transformed what began as coca activism into a political movement, taking over his political party, the MAS, and earning himself a seat in Congress.



A coca farmer shows off his crop, Chapare region, Bolivia, Feb. 11, 2018 (photo by Max Radwin).

When he ran for president in 2005, one of his slogans was “Coca Yes, Cocaine No,” underscoring his belief that coca should be disassociated from the fight against cocaine, as consumption of the leaf is part of the cultural heritage of Bolivia and its many indigenous groups, such as the Quechua and Aymara. He won that election with over 53 percent of the vote—the first time a Bolivian president had been elected with a majority since 1978.

He has maintained this strong support. Four years later, in his 2009 re-election bid, he received over 64 percent of the vote. This followed the adoption of the 2009 constitution, which established that he and future presidents could be re-elected to a second term. During his third run for the presidency, in 2014, Morales won with 61 percent of the vote, despite having to argue that his initial term did not disqualify him from office, as it occurred under a different constitution.

With Morales in office, Bolivia has consistently promoted a nationalized legal market for products containing coca, such as shampoo and candy. In 2017, the country increased the legal coca production limit (https://elpais.com/internacional/2017/02/26/actualidad/1488144444_618630.html) from 12,000 to 22,000 hectares.

Yet Morales' philosophy has been a tough sell for some skeptics, especially because coca that is consumed legally can sometimes bear a close resemblance to cocaine. To this day, the leaf is sold legally in plastic baggies that are pounded with a hammer on a wooden stump, then mixed with bicarbonate and Nescafe powder. The combination allows the leaf to be chewed like tobacco. But the recipe only lacks the gasoline needed to transform the mixture into the base form of cocaine.

Critics accuse Morales of closing his eyes to a drug-trafficking problem that is only getting worse.

Nonetheless, Bolivia's Anti-Narcotics Special Task Force, known by its Spanish acronym FELCN, has reported significant improvement in curbing cocaine production since the DEA's exit. Its figures show a gradual increase in the number of cocaine hydrochloride and crystallization laboratories destroyed each year since 2008. Whereas authorities were busting around 10 or fewer laboratories each year between 2000 and 2008, they are now busting well over 100. In 2016 alone, over 12 metric tons of cocaine base and 17 tons of cocaine hydrochloride were confiscated.

In the eyes of the government, then, Morales' "Coca Yes, Cocaine No" approach has been a success. "Not only have we defended coca leaf as part of our economy, as part of agricultural production, but we have defended it as part of our identity, and as a defense of our identity," Morales said in a joint statement (<https://www.vicepresidencia.gob.bo/Presidente-Morales-Con-la-defensa-de-la-hoja-de-coca-defendimos-nuestra>) in January with Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera.

But not everyone agrees that the Bolivian government has addressed the trafficking issue. Jimena Costa (<https://twitter.com/jimenacosta?lang=en>), a lawmaker in the opposition Democratic Unity party, says trafficking pollutes Bolivian politics at the national level, and that Morales is actively choosing to ignore an increasingly serious problem. "When investigations take place and the solution requires that someone step down," Costa says, "the president closes his eyes."

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‘Who Isn’t Involved?’: How Corruption Fuels Cocaine Trafficking in Bolivia

Max Radwin | Wednesday, June 6, 2018

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A Bolivian coca leaf producer packs 50-pound bags of the dried plant to be sold and delivered to traditional market retailers, La Paz, Bolivia, March 28, 2006 (AP photo by Dado Galdieri).

On a Thursday evening this past February, two Bolivian men met at a public plaza in the country’s capital, La Paz, to discuss a major cocaine sale. Though they had been texting back and forth all week, each was wary of the other.

One of the men, Luis, was an emissary representing cocaine buyers in Europe; this author attended the meeting at his invitation. The other, Jorge, said he worked for a drug ring that produces and sells both “base”—cocaine in its basic chemical form—and “powder,” for immediate consumption.

Jorge, the seller, was offering to supply between 50 and 100 kilograms of cocaine paste per week at \$1,600 per kilogram, and cocaine powder at \$2,100 per kilogram. Luis agreed that both figures were a standard market price, but added that he was not willing to pay any more. The deal also required, per industry standard, that the “cook” of the cocaine be present to consume a small portion during each transaction, so as to demonstrate its quality to the buyer.

These are normal terms for drug transactions in Bolivia, Luis said later. He was more interested in the total quantity the seller had available and how long the supply could last. A drug lab’s supply of coca leaf can be inconsistent, and some trafficking operations are only set up for short-term profit.

Jorge was open about the fact that he works for Oswaldo Pablo “Sacate” Justiniano Vaca, a former navy captain who was arrested in 1995 for running a trafficking ring connected to criminal organizations in

Colombia. In 1997, Sacate was sentenced to 16 years in prison (<https://www.noticiasfides.com/nacional/politica/a-16-anos-de-carcel-53238>), though he continued to oversee trafficking operations from behind bars.

As the two men spoke, the plaza filled up with workers and college students, many of them heading to a nearby bus station. After listening to Luis' concerns about supply, Jorge took out his phone to make a call. When he hung up, he assured Luis there was no need to worry about the length of the deal. It could be a permanent relationship if Luis wanted. There was literally no limitation on the amount of cocaine for sale.

The cocaine market in Bolivia is vast, fueled by a lax justice system that fails to hold traffickers to account.

In the end, the deal never happened. Over messages on WhatsApp, Jorge pressured Luis for a final decision, but talks petered out. Luis said there were a handful of other sellers to negotiate with, many of whom had similar, if not better, offers to make. The cocaine market in Bolivia is vast, and competitive.

That's in no small part due to people like Sacate and a lax justice system that fails to hold them accountable. Just as the expulsion of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/24824/is-bolivia-s-coca-policy-protecting-traditions-or-creating-a-narco-state>) in 2008 has left drug-related corruption unchecked at the highest levels of the Bolivian government, it has also created space for an alarming increase in illicit activity permeating lower bodies of government, especially in prisons and among law enforcement.

In 2015, approximately 60 police officers were investigated by Bolivian authorities for drug-related corruption, according to the U.S. State Department's 2017 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268025.pdf>) on Bolivia. "Corruption, interference by other branches of government, and insufficient judicial resources undermine due process and create delays in the administration of justice," the report said.

The State Department's 2017 money laundering report (<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/278760.pdf>) included Bolivia on a list of major money laundering jurisdictions, noting that the practice "derived primarily from smuggling contraband and from the foreign and domestic drug trade." It added, "The Bolivian justice system is hindered by corruption and political interference, which impedes the fight against narcotics-related money laundering."

The Bolivian government has brushed off such criticisms (<https://wp.eldeber.com.bo/bolivia/Evo-dice-que-no-hay->

[denuncias-de-corrupcion-en-el-Gobierno-20151118-56067.html](#)), noting that representatives of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, or UNODC, work with the Ministry of Justice to provide technical and legal assistance for fighting corruption in 60 municipalities around the country.

But opposition officials and outside scholars question the U.N.'s effectiveness in Bolivia. As Jimena Costa (<https://twitter.com/jimenacosta1?lang=en>), a lawmaker in the opposition Democratic Unity party, has pointed out, the international body is not designed for armed law enforcement investigations in the manner of the DEA. Moreover, there's always the risk that Morales' government could kick out the U.N., much like it did the DEA.

"If they go too far and anger the government, they can be simply expelled," says Miguel Centellas, an assistant professor of sociology and international studies at the University of Mississippi who studies political stability in Bolivia. "So I think what they've tried to do is find a balance so that they're honest, but not overly critical, to the point where they can stay in the country and do some good."

Perhaps the largest compromise made by the U.N. took place in 2012 and 2013, when Bolivia pulled out of the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs and then agreed to rejoin

(<https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2013/January/bolivia-to-re-accede-to-un-drug-convention-while-making-exception-on-coca-leaf-chewing.html>) on the condition it be exempt from the treaty's ban on coca chewing. Now, the UNODC actively assists the Bolivian government with commercialization of the leaf, and it helps monitor how much coca grown for the legal market ends up diverted to drug labs. In 2016, the UNODC said in a report (<https://onedrive.live.com/redir?resid=11C5A8E2AD803F8E!309&authkey=!AJ4DQIn52B2ONnE&ithint=file%2cdocx>) that 16,248 tons, or 43 percent of total production, disappeared while in transit. About 90 percent of coca grown in the country's central Chapare region—approximately 7,200 hectares in 2017—goes to the drug trade, the same report said.



Counternarcotics officers catalogue packages of cocaine seized during an operation in Cochabamba, Bolivia, Dec. 4, 2007 (AP photo by Dado Galdieri).

In part, those diversions occur because law enforcement and other officials are subject to bribes at every step of the legal process, according to Georgina Montero Guivara, a defense attorney in the city of Santa Cruz who has been fighting against coca- and cocaine-related corruption for over a decade.

Guivara also says there is a pattern in which cocaine confiscated by the authorities goes missing. “Where do the illicit substances from each case go?” she asks. “Where are they? We know that the substances should be somewhere. When you inquire about it, they say, ‘It’s with the attorney general’s office, it’s here, it’s there.’ But where?”

Juan, a prolific drug trafficker based in La Paz who was willing to speak to this author on the condition that he be identified with a pseudonym, citing safety reasons, echoed Guivara’s claim that corruption pervades low-level government bodies, especially within the justice system. He and his partners transport several hundred kilograms of cocaine across the border into Chile each week, thanks to law enforcement officials who are involved in the operation or who accept bribes to look the other way. Some of the drugs they traffic are spread throughout Chile, but most end up at the port city of Valparaiso, for shipment to Asia.

Only six people in his operation have been arrested over the past three years, and only one has spent more than three months in prison, he says. Officers are often willing to cut a deal in exchange for some of the seized cocaine. When Juan's partners were caught moving 130 kilograms in two pickup trucks last year, only one truck and 30 kilograms were registered by the police. A month later, they were out of prison.

Juan grew up on the streets of Arica, a city in northern Chile near the border with Peru. He started smuggling electronics in and out of Bolivia as a teenager. Later, he would switch to cars and motorcycles, before ultimately getting involved in illicit drugs—a more lucrative enterprise. Over the past decade, he says, trafficking has become easier than ever, due in part to government corruption. “Who isn’t involved in the business today?” Juan asked. “Before it was special. Now, it feels normal.”

A System Riddled With Loopholes

Widespread evidence of corruption aside, Bolivian officials say their country has been unfairly maligned as unwilling to combat illicit drug activity. “We are coping with a perverse campaign that is trying to stigmatize the Bolivian state as a state tied to drug trafficking,” says Carlos Romero, the minister of government. “The illogical thing is that this current, perverse campaign is being carried out by absolutely unqualified people.”

“Who isn’t involved in the business today? Before it was special. Now, it feels normal.”

Romero says he views the United States as a key participant in this attempt to undermine Bolivia’s reputation. Since the DEA’s exit in 2008, the agency has included Bolivia on a list (<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/09/28/2017-21028/presidential-determination-on-major-drug-transit-or-major-illicit-drug-producing-countries-for>) of “illicit drug producing countries” that have “failed demonstrably” to fight trafficking. This list of “decertified” countries consistently includes Venezuela and Myanmar. Colombia, meanwhile, somehow manages to stay off the list despite leading the world in global coca production and cocaine trafficking.

Romero says the omission of Colombia, where the DEA works closely with local law enforcement (<https://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/rm/2017/272997.htm>) to combat drug-related crime, proves that such lists are purely political. “Decertifying Bolivia is, unfortunately, a political campaign rooted in the ideological differences they continue to have with the government of Bolivia. It is an unethical political campaign.”

Since the DEA's exit, and despite decertification, Bolivia continues to report significant reductions in the amount of coca it grows each year. In 2008, the country was producing around 30,500 hectares, of which 12,000 was legal, according to a UNODC report (https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Bolivia_Coca_Survey_for2008_ES.pdf). But the organization said that figure had dropped to 23,100 hectares (http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Bolivia/2016_Bolivia_Informe_Monitoreo_Coca.pdf) in 2016. That's just 1,100 hectares over the revised legal limit of 22,000 hectares passed in 2017.

Officials in Bolivia attribute this progress to a system in which communities police themselves. Under this system, wrongdoing by one coca farmer—such as growing excess coca or selling it to drug labs—jeopardizes everyone else's license to produce. In the Chapare region, the government only allows coca farmers to grow within a 40-square-meter plot. In the western, ancestral area known as Los Yungas, where the terrain is choppy and mountainous, coca farmers are allowed to grow as much as they want, as long as they don't stray outside of the regional border.

The UNODC tracks coca production with digital scanning of coca plantations, helicopter flyovers and in-person measurements taken during site visits by staffers. When coca farmers are found to have exceeded the limit, they are given a warning before their excess crops are forcibly destroyed.

But a trafficker based in Beni department, in northern Bolivia, who agreed to speak on condition of anonymity, says there are numerous ways to get around UNODC and government oversight. The best, and perhaps most effective, one is to take advantage of the legal system already in place. This means that in addition to frequently paying off law enforcement and other government officials, she also operates her own legal coca plantation. Because it's registered with the Bolivian government, as is her license to transport the product, she has her own regular supply. But instead of entering the legal coca market, her crop ends up at her drug lab, where it is turned into a paste and loaded onto one of two weekly clandestine flights to Paraguay.



Counternarcotics special forces officers carry sacks of explosives to crater a clandestine airstrip in the Peruvian jungle that police say was used to smuggle cocaine to Bolivia, July 28, 2015 (AP photo by Rodrigo Abd).

Though the UNODC has methods for tracking this kind of activity—and has no problem admitting (<https://www.eldeber.com.bo/bolivia/Evo-admite-que-hay-desvio-de-coca-al-mercado-ilegal-20170625-0030.html>), along with the Bolivian government, that it's a problem in need of fixing—an agency spokesman says it isn't monitoring who purchases coca legally, and for what. That means drug traffickers could be skipping the hassle of diverting crops and simply purchasing their supply of coca over the counter at any regular store.

For this reason, the U.S. has claimed that the UNODC's methods of monitoring coca production and transit aren't adequate. Its own crop-scanning efforts, which are based on satellite imagery and crop yield studies, reveal there is actually far more coca being grown (<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/268025.pdf>) than the UNODC is reporting—around 37,500 hectares in 2016. That would mean coca production has actually increased since the DEA's exit in 2008, contrary to official statistics.

Again, though, analysts say U.S. figures on coca production may be too politicized to take at face value.

“U.S. critics of Bolivia, at times including U.S. government representatives, have with some regularity

characterized Bolivia as a ‘narco-state.’ Such a charge is nonsense when applied to the Evo Morales years,” says Robert Albro, a research associate professor at American University’s Center for Latin American/Latino Studies.

And Bolivian authorities insist they are committed to fighting trafficking. This year, for example, the government plans to test new radar technology along the border with Peru so as to better track clandestine flights arriving into the country.

“Organized crime is an enemy of unity, and that is why we have expressed a common and shared responsibility,” Romero says. “We have formulated not only a nationalized strategy against drug trafficking, but also a regionalized one. We are absolutely convinced that the isolated efforts that are made in some countries do not have an impact on the whole.”

To Romero, ongoing regional collaboration is evidence that Bolivia’s anti-trafficking efforts are not only legitimate, but effective. Anti-narcotics agents from neighboring countries like Peru and Paraguay, he says, carry out joint investigations with Bolivia and share intelligence about emerging drug routes.

Officials in Argentina and Brazil did not reply to requests for comment concerning the strength of those relationships. A spokesman for the Peruvian National Police, or PNP, said officials there weren’t willing to discuss the issue, or the blame that Bolivia puts on the country for its cocaine activity. Peruvian officers who work along the border explain that it’s a sensitive, politically charged topic.

There is no doubt in Bolivian officials’ minds that the decision to expel the DEA was a good one.

“There is no officer that will tell you it is easy to work with Bolivia,” says one officer who works under the direction of the PNP’s anti-drug czar, Gen. Hector Loayza Arrieta. “They have a political discourse—that they’re very efficient in the fight against drug trafficking. But it’s only discourse. They say, ‘After the DEA, there aren’t any problems.’ But it’s not the case.”

‘All Together, We Will Fight’

For its part, the Bolivian government remains confident about its fight against drug trafficking and its control over the legal coca market. There is also no doubt in officials’ minds that the decision to expel the DEA 10 years ago was a good one.

As for everyone else, their positions remain largely unchanged regardless of what has or has not happened on the ground. The U.S. contends that the U.N. has overstated the gains made against cocaine trafficking under Morales. The U.N. claims that areas where Morales has empowered coca farmers continue to supply major drug trafficking schemes. And the farmers themselves stand by Morales.

In no place is this clearer than Chimore, the jungle town in central Bolivia where Morales presided over a rally (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/24824/is-bolivia-s-coca-policy-protecting-traditions-or-creating-a-narco-state>) in February that turned into a celebration of the government's coca policy. Many who attended said they continued to harbor negative sentiments toward Washington and the DEA, as well as toward the notion of coca regulation in general. Regardless of any future restrictions that might be put in place, they have no plan to stop growing coca, and their devotion to the crop is a point of pride.

“Thousands of years have passed and we continue chewing as part of our coca culture and tradition,” go the lyrics of one song that played out over the speakers during the event. “Now they want to exterminate you like they did to our brothers. No, no, they can't. All together, we will fight. The Andinos will continue to live and coca will live forever.”

Max Radwin is a writer and journalist based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Follow his reporting on Instagram @max.radwin.

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