



# BOLIVIA

## Quick Facts

Population: 11,639,909 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 1,098,581 sq km

Ethnic Groups: mestizo (mixed white and Amerindian ancestry) 68%, indigenous 20%, white 5%, cholo/chola 2%, black 1%, other 1%, unspecified 3% ; 44% of respondents indicated feeling part of some indigenous group, predominantly Quechua or Aymara (2009 est.)

GDP (official exchange rate): \$37.78 billion (2017 est.)

*Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated July 2020)*

## INTRODUCTION

*Bolivia, a country of more than 11.6 million people, has a Muslim population of approximately 3,000. But while the practice of the religion in Bolivia remains small and dispersed, the election of President Evo Morales in 2005 brought about a more amiable relationship with Islamic countries in the Middle East, and significantly opened official domestic policy towards Islam in the years since.<sup>1</sup>*

*Bolivia's Muslim population counts among its members' descendants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, the Palestinian territories, Iran, Syria, and Lebanon. These communities are generally spread out between the major cities of La Paz and Santa Cruz, with a smaller presence in Sucre, Cochabamba, and Oruro and other remote cities throughout the country. There are at least twenty different Islamic organizations, both Shia and Sunni, operating within Bolivia, funded primarily by either Saudi Arabia or the Islamic Republic of Iran.*

*Since opening an embassy in La Paz in 2008, Iran has been a driving force in increasing the Islamic presence in Bolivia, within both society and the state. Iran has proposed several bilateral agreements with Bolivia, ranging from economic development projects to military-to-military exchanges. Iran has also reportedly funded state-owned media networks in the country. In return, Bolivia has lifted visa restrictions for Iranian citizens, supported its efforts in the UN, and facilitated the increased presence of Iranian officials in this Andean nation. However, the November 2019 resignation of Evo Morales and transition to the interim government of President Jeanine Añez has shifted the official posture of Bolivia on Iran, including closing its embassy in the Islamic Republic in June 2020 because of a lack of resources.*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Given that Bolivia has a small Islamic population, its Muslim community is susceptible to influence from Islamist elements from abroad, notably sponsored by Iran and Hezbollah. Since 2007, the number of mosques and Islamic cultural centers has increased drastically in this small Andean nation. Iran's presence

and activities have grown at a commensurate rate. As in the rest of Latin America, Iran's *modus operandi* in Bolivia is to establish Islamist networks through mosques and cultural centers run by Bolivian converts to Shia Islam, while its proxy, Hezbollah, has become involved in the illicit narcotics and arms trade in the country.

In La Paz, the capital of Bolivia, a prominent local Islamist couple is known to boast ties to the Islamic Republic of Iran and its proxies. The leader of the Bolivian Shia community is Roberto Chambi Calle, a Bolivian lawyer and professor who converted to Islam in 1996. Chambi also goes by the name of Yousef and runs a Shia Islamic center—the Association of the Islamic Community of Bolivia (ACIB) Ahlul Bait, managed by Chambi's wife, Sdenka Saavedra Alfaro. Also, a professor, in 2009 Saavedra sued her previous employer, the Universidad Privada Del Valle, over social benefits in a case that reached Bolivia's Supreme Court in 2015.<sup>2</sup> Now living in Iran, Saavedra studies and teaches at the Al Mustafa International University in Qom, and is an active critic of the United States, Israel, and Europe. In an opinion piece, Sdenka Saavedra Alfara once referred to the U.S. as a “terrorist nation” that wants to wipe Iran off the map.<sup>3</sup>

Saavedra and Chambi met and married while in college<sup>4</sup> and later founded the now defunct *Fundación Cultural Islamico Boliviana* (Bolivia Islamic Cultural Foundation - FCIB) in August 2007 with the support of the Iranian government. Together, they have authored numerous books and actively promote an Islamist message through seminars and small meetings that they organize in Bolivia, where they have invited *imams* from neighboring Latin American countries, such as Argentina, Peru, Chile, and Brazil, to these gatherings. The two have a longstanding relationship with Shia spiritual leader Sheikh Abdul Karim Paz from Buenos Aires, Argentina. Karim Paz is a direct disciple of Iranian intelligence operative Mohsen Rabbani, and was his successor at the *At Tawhid* mosque in Buenos Aires after Rabbani left Argentina following his involvement in the 1994 bombing of the Argentine-Jewish Mutual Association (AMIA) building.<sup>5</sup> Chambi studied under Karim Paz in Argentina and was one of Rabbani's first converts to Shia Islam. He currently works at Rabbani's foundation in Qom, Iran.

The Iranian government, meanwhile, has further enhanced these efforts via its work with state-owned media. In 2008, for instance, the Iranian government attempted to build a television station in Bolivia's coca-growing region of Chapare.<sup>6</sup> Although that project did not materialize, Iran did launch a Spanish language television network in 2011. Known as *HispanTV*, it is owned and operated by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) conglomerate and is based out of Tehran.<sup>7</sup> *HispanTV* currently broadcasts Islamist-leaning programming 24 hours a day in several countries throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. The channel's local Bolivian correspondent was an Argentine journalist, Andrés Sal-lari, who used to work for Bolivia's state-owned Canal 7.<sup>8</sup> The most recent Bolivian correspondent for Iran's *HispanTV* is Mariano Vázquez, another Argentine journalist who also worked for state-owned BoliviaTV.<sup>9</sup>

Andrés Sal-lari and Mariano Vazquez also worked for another state-controlled media outlet believed to be financed by the Iranian government to the tune of approximately \$3 million.<sup>10</sup> In 2012, President Evo Morales reportedly received a monetary gift from his then-Iranian counterpart, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to launch *Abya Yala* TV, a new multimedia television network. Initially financed through one of Morales' foundations, the *Abya Yala* TV network has benefited from large amounts of government advertising and preferential contracts with various government agencies, notably the hydrocarbons agency, among other public entities. The term *Abya Yala* means “land in its full maturity” or “land of vital blood” in the indigenous Kuna language. Since 2015, *Abya Yala* TV has put out 135 hours of national programming a week through a major telecommunications firm, and in the western cities of La Paz and El Alto broadcast 24-hour coverage through an open signal on channel 41 and on Bolivian cable on channel 91. In 2020, due to budget constraints, the national programming of *Abya Yala* TV has reduced to slightly more than 100 hours weekly.

According to Bolivian journalist Amalia Pando, the *Abya Yala* TV network's rapid expansion raises at

least some suspicion: “here are two immoralities, first that the president receives three million dollars from a foreign power to launch a TV channel, then that the channel, which does not have a significant audience, receives such large amounts of public contracts and advertising.”<sup>11</sup> *Abya Yala* TV’s meteoric rise in Bolivia is due, in part, to its integrated programming with Venezuela’s state-owned *Telesur* network, *AnnurTV* in Argentina, *Russia Today*, and the Iranian-owned *HispanTV*. In the case of Iran, *Abya Yala* TV provides an authentic way to reach Bolivia’s largely indigenous population to propagate an Islamist message.

For instance, in July 2015, the *Abya Yala* TV network broadcast the opening of a new Iranian-funded hemodialysis center, The Red Crescent Society, in the city of Cochabamba. Nevertheless, the broadcast omitted the fact that the women working at The Red Crescent Society were forced to wear *hijabs*, to the displeasure of many Bolivians. Lourdes Millares, a deputy for an opposition party in Bolivia, subsequently called this Iranian demand an “assault on the dignity of women...” and excoriated President Morales for, “...submission to the rules of another government.”<sup>12</sup>

Further criticism arose in 2016, when then-Senator Arturo Murillo issued a complaint to the Bolivian Attorney General against then-Minister of the Presidency and Evo Morales strongman Juan Ramon Quintana for “donating” three vehicles to the *Abya Yala* TV network. Senator Murillo claimed this was “influence peddling” on behalf of the Bolivian government and suggested that *Abya Yala* TV is simply used to spread Iranian propaganda in Bolivia.<sup>13</sup> A former cultural minister and previous head of *Abya Yala*’s foundation, Pablo Groux, testified in January 2020 in the ongoing investigation into the three vehicles.<sup>14</sup>

After Evo Morales resigned as president in late 2019, pressure mounted to close the *Abya Yala* TV network, which was largely seen as Morales regime political propaganda. In early 2020, the employees of *Abya Yala* TV wrote an open letter to the country’s communications minister in an attempt portray their television network as a victim and paint the new Añez government as a persecutor of the press.<sup>15</sup> To date, however, the Añez government has not shut down *Abya Yala* TV, but the editorial line for the network has become notably less provocative.

Back in 2017, when Evo Morales was in power, his political opposition denounced the presence of Canadian-Venezuelan-Lebanese businessman Khaled Khalil Majzoub. It was suggested that Majzoub was under investigation in Bolivia for alleged involvement in drug trafficking.<sup>16</sup> The Bolivian government, however, denied the existence of an investigation against Majzoub or his involvement in illicit activity, and stated that he is in Bolivia under legal authority.<sup>17</sup> Majzoub became well known to U.S. counter-narcotics authorities after a case involving the arrest of the nephews of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and first lady Cilia Flores in 2015.<sup>18</sup>

These accusations against Majzoub elevated a concern in Bolivia about Hezbollah’s involvement in the country. In March 2017, Bolivian security forces raided a warehouse in the suburbs of La Paz, seizing bomb-making materials and a four-wheel drive vehicle suspected to be used in a terrorist attack. According to several press reports, regional intelligence agencies believe the raid in La Paz thwarted potential terrorist plots by Hezbollah in Bolivia, Chile, and Peru.<sup>19</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Bolivia has a small Islamic community, numbering approximately three thousand, most of whose members are Sunni, with a smaller number of Shia followers. Altogether, Muslims in Bolivia account for less than 0.1% of the total population. However, they are increasingly active.

Most of the established members of the Islamic community in Bolivia were born within the country, and converted or are the descendants of Palestinian or Lebanese immigrants who have lived in Bolivia for decades. The traditional Islamic community in Bolivia is primarily Sunni, and typically adheres to the local Bolivian style of dress and culture. They do not practice fundamentalist Islamic traditions, nor do they actively proselytize. Nevertheless, there has been a recent influx of Pakistanis and Iranians that

follow a more fundamentalist line and are actively recruiting and proselytizing among Bolivian youth and women, causing some friction with the established Muslim community in Bolivia.<sup>20</sup>

*Dawa* (Islamic proselytization) commenced in Bolivia in the early 1970s, during the economic boom that integrated Santa Cruz into national and international markets. Over the ensuing years, Santa Cruz became the financial hub of Bolivia and in the 1990s the local economy was bolstered by the capitalization of the country's petroleum and gas industry. This spurred a mass wave of immigration that flooded Santa Cruz, of which an initial influx of Islamic immigrants was a part.

In 1974, Bolivia's Islamic community began its *dawa* after Mahmud Amer Abusharar arrived from the Palestinian territories and invited Muslims from around Bolivia to his home for prayer. He quickly became the leader of a small but emerging Islamic community, particularly in Santa Cruz, and in 1986 registered the first Bolivian Islamic organization—which was officially recognized by Bolivia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Office of Religion three years later, in 1989.<sup>21</sup>

This organization, the *Centro Islamico Boliviano* (Bolivian Islamic Center—CIB), based in the country's commercial capital, Santa Cruz, claims to have founded Bolivia's first fully operational mosque in 1994, serving some 300 congregants. The CIB seemingly espouses an anti-U.S. political position closely aligned with that of the Bolivian government, despite advertised openmindedness.<sup>22</sup>

On May 14, 2011, Mahmud Amer Abusharar died of natural causes. One of his disciples, Isa Amer Quevedo, stepped in to serve as Director of the CIB. Quevedo has a degree in Islamic jurisprudence from the University of Medina in Saudi Arabia and, prior to this appointment, was the CIB's administrative director and translator. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Quevedo supports his predecessor's anti-U.S. stance, as he offered criticism of the United States on the CIB website immediately after the September 11th attacks.<sup>23</sup>

The CIB has grown over the years to become Bolivia's largest Islamic organization and is known to receive support from the Saudi-based Islamic Organization for Latin America and the Muslim World League. The Egyptian Embassy in Bolivia and the Gulf Cooperation Council have both also funded the CIB's first mosque. Moreover, the CIB has an affiliation with the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, acting as the organization's headquarters in Bolivia. The CIB has a chapter in Cochabamba, the third largest city in Bolivia, where it holds religious services for congregations no larger than a few dozen made up of Muslim converts and immigrants from Africa, Pakistan, or the Palestinian territories.

Also, connected with the Muslim World League is the *Asociación Cultural Boliviano Musulman* (Bolivian Muslim Cultural Association—ACBM), located in Sucre, the constitutional capital of Bolivia. A Palestinian doctor and lawyer, Fayez Rajab Khedeer Kannan, runs this organization. Kannan espouses an extreme worldview, and has, among other things, openly praised the late Libyan leader Muammar al-Qadhafi.<sup>24</sup> In 1998, he received a 30-year grant from the Sucre city council to use five acres of land in the Los Libertadores neighborhood to construct an educational center and clinic, with additional funding for the effort coming from the Muslim World League and the Islamic Development Bank. By 2003, ACBM built a private Islamic school, which led to some legal disputes over a revoked title transfer (disputes which were finally resolved in 2006, in favor of ACBM). It is not clear whether this school is still active.

More recently, in 2016, an Indian couple, Ghalib Ataul and Nayara Zafar, built a new mosque in the Paititi district of Warnes, a small town outside the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra. The mosque adheres to the creed of the Ahmadiyya, a small sect of Islam from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in northern India. The new mosque in Warnes is emblematic of the small but notable growth of Islamic communities within remote eastern regions of Bolivia, including in San Borja and Riberalta, Beni, where there are practicing Muslims.

Moving north along the Andean ridge, in La Paz, is the Association of the Islamic Community of Bolivia (*Asociación Cultural Islamica Boliviana*—ACIB). It is believed that the origin of Islam in La Paz dates to 1995, when Moumin Candia, a Bolivian-trained in an Argentine mosque, brought Islam to the city. A Bolivian convert and the former president of ACIB, Gerardo Cutipa Trigo is educated as an

engineer, and was an atheist through most of his college years in Bolivia, assuming leadership roles in leftist student unions. It wasn't until the late 1990s that Cutipa converted to Islam while working in Spain, where he first was exposed to the faith. The ACIB is now led by Ahmad Ali, who claims to informally represent a community of approximately 300 Muslims, of which around 70 regularly attend service at the ACIB's mosque, called *Masjidum Jbelannur*.<sup>25</sup>

In 2006, a more fundamentalist mosque was opened in La Paz by a group of Pakistanis that had arrived in Bolivia three years earlier. This small Pakistani community, known as the Islamic Association of Bolivia, operates the *Masjid As-Salam* mosque, and has offered prayer services to other Muslims, including many Bolivian-born Muslim converts in La Paz. The *imam* of the *Masjid As-Salam* mosque was Mahmud Ali Teheran, a Peruvian-born son of Iranian immigrants who converted to Sunni Islam. Prior to this, Ali Teheran led the *Babu Ul-Islam* mosque in Tacna, Peru and as of 2008 has left Bolivia to lead the Islamic community in Uruguay.<sup>26</sup>

La Paz is also a hub for a small but growing Shia community, which is much smaller than its Sunni counterparts. This small influx of Shia Muslims is primarily due to the newfound Iranian presence in Bolivia, as the more visible Shia organizations have ties to the Iranian Embassy in La Paz.

The oldest Shia organization has a name like the Sunni ACIB; however, it adds the suffix "Ahlul Bait" which literally means "family of the House." This has an important distinction for Shia Muslims because the term refers to the family of the Prophet Muhammad. It is unclear how this organization was founded, but it appears to have been operational since 2000. For at least some time, however, it seems to have operated under a different name (Shia Islamic Community of Bolivia), until resurfacing with its original name in 2006.

During the brief time that the ACIB Ahlul Bait was organized under a different name, it was run by a licensed psychologist named Tommy Nelson Salgueiro Criaes, a former Jesuit who converted to Islam in the mid-1990s while living in Australia. ACIB Ahlul Bait is known for its publications and translations of Islamic text into Spanish, and was the first to introduce Islamic literature to the 15th annual international book fair in 2010, where they presented the former Bolivian Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera with their own in-house publication, "La Revolución de la Mano de Dios," written by resident Islamic scholar Sergio Grover Dueñas Calle.

ACIB Ahlul Bait has an associated mosque purchased with the help of the Iranian government. The first Shia mosque in Bolivia, *As-Salam*, is a three-story building in the heart of La Paz with a large prayer hall that was inaugurated in 2006. The mosque is meant to serve a growing Shia community in La Paz, and other smaller Islamic communities nearby.

The Iranian-supported *Abya Yala* TV channel dedicates programming targeted towards the diverse indigenous peoples of the Americas. The Kuna are indigenous people that used to inhabit the Darién Gap, which is today in northwest Colombia and southeast Panama. *Abya Yala* TV consistently propagates the message that consumerism and the exploitation of natural resources leads to the erosion of biodiversity and the loss of indigenous culture.

Many of the organizations mentioned above have created their own websites, radio broadcasts, and/or social media outlets. Social media plays a significant part in spreading the Islamic message throughout Bolivia, as many communities have a virtual presence via different social media outlets. Roberto Chambi and his colleagues at ACIB Ahlul Bait are arguably the most active on different media platforms; they established a local radio program, "Al-Islam," that broadcasts every weekday morning on 107.3 FM. Chambi is also a regular on *HispanTV*'s local broadcasts and is featured in ACIB's web portal, *Islam en Bolivia* ([www.islam.org.bo](http://www.islam.org.bo)). This portal is frequently updated, largely with articles accusing Israeli of atrocities against the Palestinians, and recently launched an effort to proselytize in Aymara, one of Bolivia's mayor indigenous languages and culture. It currently offers a translation of the tract "What is Islam?" in the Aymara language.<sup>27</sup>

In 2014, according to an interview with Ahmad Ali, an American student researching Islam in Bolivia discovered that Aymara and Quechua Indians had begun converting to Islam.<sup>28</sup> This represents an important advance for the Islamic community, because Aymara indigenous groups hold important political currency with the current government and society. Establishing a foothold within this group would help advance Islam (and, potentially, Islamism) to a significant degree within Bolivian society.

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

During the 14-year tenure of former President Evo Morales, the political and strategic ties between La Paz and Tehran dominated and expanded Bolivia's contemporary relationship with Islam. Morales first met former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at the inauguration of Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa in mid-January 2007. At the time, the two leaders showed unprecedented interest in tying their countries together through politics, culture, and trade. Ahmadinejad focused on agriculture, gas, and oil, referring to "academic potentials" in Iran for "improving the technical knowledge of Bolivia experts... in accordance with our Islamic teachings and duties."<sup>29</sup>

In September 2007, The Bolivian government concluded its first bilateral agreement with the Iranian regime. It provided a strategic framework for future collaborative ventures in the hydrocarbons, extractive, agriculture, oil and gas industries, as well as science, culture and technology. Several side agreements were also concluded to implement the importation and installation of six Iranian milk-processing plants in Bolivia. At the time, President Morales suggested that this deal would set the tone for increased and broadened relations between the countries.<sup>30</sup> Though the agreement was not ratified in 2010, this did not halt the expansion of the relationship between the two countries, which grew by the end of 2011 to include the construction of embassies and health clinics,<sup>31</sup> joint economic development,<sup>32</sup> technical and diplomatic delegation exchanges,<sup>33</sup> the provision of loans,<sup>34</sup> and joint natural resource and mineral extraction projects.<sup>35</sup> The Spanish daily *El Pais* reported in 2012 that Bolivia then had at least 145 registered Iranian diplomats in country.<sup>36</sup>

The Iranian ambassador to Bolivia, Reza Tabatabayee Shafiyee, arrived in 2014, and subsequently enhanced many of the bilateral projects that had been outlined by President Hassan Rouhani during Evo Morales's 2015 trip to Tehran.<sup>37</sup> The results encompassed a series of additional agreements, including in non-traditional areas such as space and nanotechnology, as well as a series of high-level diplomatic exchanges. For instance, on August 25, 2016, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif arrived in Santa Cruz, Bolivia along with a delegation of at least 70 executives of Iranian state-owned firms for a series of events with prominent Bolivian businessmen. On that occasion, President Morales flew from La Paz to Santa Cruz to meet with Zarif, and decorated him with the Order of the Condor of the Andes, a state medal awarded for exceptional merit to Bolivians or foreign nationals.<sup>38</sup>

The relationship between La Paz and Tehran has adopted military - and possibly nefarious - facets as well; in October 2010, Bolivia bought light transport aircraft parts from Iran.<sup>39</sup> In 2011, Bolivia's Defense Ministry invited then-Iranian Minister of Defense, Ahmad Vahidi, one of the alleged masterminds of the 1994 Buenos Aires AMIA community center bombings, to attend the inauguration of a new regional defense school.<sup>40</sup> In April 2012, Reuters reported that 15 vessels linked to IRISL, the UN-sanctioned Iranian shipping conglomerate, were flying the Bolivian flag.<sup>41</sup> The Bolivian government responded by saying that it would revoke the Bolivian flag license and remove these Iranian vessels from its shipping register; however, this action was never confirmed. In June 2012, the two governments signed an anti-narco-trafficking accord that created the political and legal groundwork for an Iranian military footprint in Bolivia. As of 2012, rumors suggested that the Islamic Republic was helping Bolivia augment a special operations unit within one of their antiterrorism military commands and counternarcotics police.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, Morales made common cause with some of Iran's international allies, releasing a joint

declaration with Russia on the shared concern of the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. This declaration was followed by Morales trip in April 2019 to Ankara for Bolivia's first official head of state visit to Turkey, marking a turning point in bilateral relations between the two countries. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan hailed Bolivia's support for the Palestinian cause as the two presidents signed an array of agreements, in defense, energy, and agriculture.<sup>43</sup> This included a new direct flight from Turkish Airlines to Santa Cruz which was supposed to be inaugurated in 2020.<sup>44</sup>

Since Evo Morales effectively resigned from office on November 10, 2019, after committing the largest electoral fraud in Bolivia's history, relations with Iran have begun to cool. New President Jeanine Añez has focused realigning Bolivia's foreign policy toward the United States, and the closure of the Bolivian embassy in Iran in June 2020 signaled an end to Bolivia's foreign policy prioritization of the Middle East – at least until the country's next election in October 2020.

## ENDNOTES

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8. Andrés Sal-lari has his own blog (<http://andressallari.blogspot.com/>) where he posts interviews and media appearances for both the Iranian-owned HispanTV and the Bolivian-controlled National Corporation for Bolivian Television (ENTVB), which operates the Canal 7 television station.
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  18. Reporting of the arrest of Efrain Antonio Campo Flores and Franqui Francisco Flores de Freitas (nephews of First Lady Cilia Flores, wife of President Nicolas Maduro) cited an airplane Citation 500 with tail number YV2030 that was seized by the DEA. This plane is registered to Inversiones Sabenpe C.A. a Venezuelan company created in 1980 under the leadership of Khaled Khalil Majzoub.
  19. The Saudi Arabian daily newspaper *Okaz* first reported on this potential terrorist plot by Hezbollah in their March 16, 2017 edition. Subsequent media outlets, such as *Aurora* (in Israel) picked up on this reporting. See <http://aurora-israel.co.il/hezbollah-en-bolivia-des-baratan-atentados-masivos-en-sudamerica/>.
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