

American Foreign Policy Council

BOLIVIA

QUICK FACTS

Population: 9,947,418

Area: 1,098,581 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Quechua 30%, mestizo (mixed white and Amerindian ancestry) 30%, Aymara 25%, white 15%

Religions: Roman Catholic 95%, Protestant (Evangelical Methodist) 5%

Government Type: Republic (the new constitution defines Bolivia as a “Social Unitarian State”)

GDP (official exchange rate):
\$17.76 billion

Map and Quick Facts Courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated June 2010)



The practice of Islam in Bolivia remains small and dispersed predominantly between La Paz and Santa Cruz, with some 2,000 members scattered between eight different organizations with both Shi'a and Sunni sects.¹ There are also small Islamic organizations in Sucre and Cochabamba.

Bolivia's Muslim population counts among its members descendants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. The Islamic League for Latin America, the Muslim World League, and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth are among the top funders of Islamic activity in Bolivia. There is no history of persecution of Muslims in Bolivia, and since President Evo Morales entered

office, Bolivia's official posture toward Islam has opened significantly.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The Bolivian Islamic Center, based in Santa Cruz, claims to have founded Bolivia's first mosque in 1994; it serves some 50 congregants. The organization's current president, Mahmud Amer Abush-arar, arrived in Bolivia in 1974 from the Palestinian Territories, and founded the organization so he would not "lose his faith" while abroad. In 2009, the center spread to Sucre, La Paz, and Cochabamba. The BIC claims to support "open-mindedness and peace," but does appear to espouse an anti-U.S. political position closely aligned with the Bolivian government.²

The Islamic Organization for Latin America and the World Islamic League both fund the BIC, and the BIC receives some support from the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, acting as this organization's Bolivian headquarters.

Also connected with the World Islamic League is the Bolivian Muslim Cultural Association, located in Sucre. A Palestinian doctor and lawyer, Fayez Rajab Khedeer Kannan, runs the organization. In 1998, he received a 30-year grant to use five acres of land in Sucre for his organization. Funding from the World Islamic League and the Islamic Development Bank helped with the construction of an educational center and clinic.

The Bolivia Islamic Cultural Foundation, based in La Paz, is a small organization founded in August 2007 by Roberto Chambi Calle, a Bolivian who converted to Islam in 1996. The organization's goals are to deepen the understanding of Islam in Bolivia and spread Islamic culture.³ Chambi and his wife actively promote an Islamic message through the organization of seminars and small meetings. They have invited imams from other Latin American countries, such as Argentina and Uruguay, to speak at their events. In 2004, Chambi became the director of the At-Tauhid Mosque in Buenos Aires, Argentina, after its former director Mohsen Rabbani was implicated in the 1994 bombing of the Argentine-Jewish Mutual

Association Building in Buenos Aires.⁴

Another La Paz-based organization is the Association of the Islamic Community of Bolivia. A Bolivian convert, Gerardo Cutipa Trigo, a.k.a. Ahmad Ali, is president of the organization, and claims that between 10 and 30 people regularly attend service at the organization's mosque. The organization's stated goals include strengthening the understanding of Islam in Bolivia, to coordinate and organize Islamic activities and projects in Bolivia, and to strengthen relations between Islamic organizations across the country and in neighboring countries.⁵

The Islamic Association of Bolivia operates the As-Salam mosque in La Paz. Mahmud Ali Teheran is the director of the organization and oversees the mosque, which counts a congregation of some 70 individuals, many of whom are young Bolivians.

The Shi'a Islamic Community of Bolivia, based in La Paz, counts some 13 members. Tommy Nelson Salgueiro Criales, a.k.a. Husayn Salgueiro, founded the organization in March 2006.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Mahmud Amer Abusharar of the Bolivian Islamic Center recently commented that his organization does not discriminate against anyone. He laughed at the indication of reports outlining Bolivia as a center of radical Islam in Latin America.⁶ Apart from these isolated reports, there is no indication that Bolivian Muslims have any significant conflict with the rest of Bolivian society. Indeed, Bolivian President Evo Morales' continued good will towards Iran and other Middle Eastern countries indicates that, for the time being at least, political priorities will help maintain Bolivia as an Islam-friendly country.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Bolivia's contemporary relationship with Islam is dominated by the growing political and strategic ties between La Paz and Tehran. Bolivian President Evo Morales first met 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 bringing their respective countries closer together politically, culturally, and economically. 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.”⁷

Months later, in September 2007, Bolivia’s Foreign Minister, David Choquehvanca, visited Tehran to meet with his counterpart, Manuchehr Mottaki, and build upon the January meeting with firm commitments outlined in a signed agreement to broaden political and economic relations. During the same month, Morales signed an agreement with Iranian diplomat Abdulat Zisan to implement the importation and installation of six Iranian milk-processing plants in Bolivia. At the conclusion of the meeting, Morales noted: “we are interested in broadening relations with Iran, starting in the trade area with a view to continuing and consolidation relations of friendship, understanding and diplomacy.”⁸

Iran’s ties with Bolivia tightened upon Ahmadinejad’s arrival in Bolivia at the end of September 2007, when the two countries officially announced an established diplomatic relationship during the Iranian president’s short stay in La Paz after signing a raft of agreements in the oil and gas sectors. In the wake of this meeting, news surfaced that Morales might supplant investments from a number of international gas companies with Iranian funds. There was also suspicion that Bolivia might approach Libya as a new political and economic partner.⁹

By March 2008, Iran’s relationship with Bolivia had developed a cultural facet. News sources out of Tehran reported that Iran had signed with Bolivia joint projects worth some U.S. \$1 billion.¹⁰ Some of this money was directed towards establishing an Iranian television network in Bolivia, ultimately to be integrated with the satellite-based Telesur television network established by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. The Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)

planned to establish three television stations in Bolivia, and while announcing the new television stations to a group of coca growers in Bolivia's Chapare region, Morales stated that Iran would "support the peasant struggle here in Latin America."¹¹

Morales finally reciprocated Ahmadinejad's Bolivian visit when he arrived in Tehran on September 1, 2008. Brief meetings with the Iranian president and the Minister of Mining and Industry punctuated his short stay in the Islamic Republic, where he focused on persuading Ahmadinejad to accelerate payments under Iran's promise to invest U.S. \$1 billion in Bolivia.

Reflecting on Morales' visit to Iran, one columnist observed that the Bolivian president's visit to the Middle Eastern country "can provide a linking bridge between Bolivia as well as other Latin American states with other parts of the world, in particular the 57 Islamic nations. That will most certainly entail great gains for Latin America."¹² And within a week of his visit, Morales announced that Bolivia would move its lone Middle Eastern embassy from Cairo to Tehran.

By the end of September 2008, however, Bolivia and Iran had not yet exchanged ambassadors. The two countries had, however, exchanged technical delegations, with one Hojatollah Soltani emerging as Iran's business attaché to Bolivia. Soltani pledged that, apart from the promised investment of U.S. \$1 billion, Iran would also invest some U.S. \$230 million in a cement factory and another U.S. \$3 million to build dairy farms.¹³ Just under a month later, Soltani announced that Iran would use Bolivia as the base for a planned Red Crescent health clinic expansion across Latin America.¹⁴ Two Iranian-funded health clinics have been planned for Bolivia.

By February 2009, pledges from Iran to support Bolivia's efforts to further exploit the country's natural gas fields had yet to materialize, but the milk processing plants were already under construction. Some Iranian funding had found its way to Bolivia, but the majority of what was promised had not yet been delivered. This gap between

rhetoric and action, however, does not appear to have dampened relations between the two countries.

Money again headlined the Bolivian-Iranian relationship in July 2009, when Bolivia announced that it would receive a U.S. \$280 million loan from the Middle Eastern state. Iran's top diplomat in Bolivia, Masoud Edrisi, stated at the time that the money was to be used as President Morales saw fit.¹⁵ As long as Ahmadinejad remains the president of Iran and Morales the president of Bolivia, relations between the two countries will likely continue to grow, facilitating the spread of Islam in Bolivia.

ENDNOTES

- [1] “Global Muslim Population: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Muslim Population,” Pew Research Center, October 2009.
- [2] “Bolivia – Key Muslim Converts Assert Local Peril, Ally With Zealots Abroad,” Open Source Center, May 12, 2009.
- [3] Carillo, Liliana, “La comunidad musulmana de Bolivia,” *La Razon* (La Paz), February 24, 2008, <http://www.webislam.com/?idn=11654>.
- [4] “Bolivia – Key Muslim Converts...” Open Source Center, *supra*.
- [5] Accessed via organization’s website, <http://www.geocities.com/asocisbol/>.
- [6] Devin Beaulieu, “Alarmismo por Bolivia y el Islam,” CounterPunch, September 10, 2009, <http://www.webislam.com/?idn=15078>.
- [7] “Presidents of Iran, Bolivia ask for higher level ties,” IRNA (Tehran), January 16, 2007.
- [8] “President Makes Agreement with Iran Official,” *La Razón* (La Paz), September 9, 2007.
- [9] Franz Chavez, “Bolivia: Morales Established Diplomatic Ties with Iran,” BBC (London), September 28, 2007. Morales did finally visit Libya in September 2008, when the two countries formally established diplomatic ties.
- [10] At the time, Morales announced that Bolivia would remove visa restrictions for Iranian nationals traveling to Bolivia. See John Kiriakou, “Iran’s Latin America Push: As the U.S. ignores its neighbors to the south, Tehran has been making friends and influencing nations,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 18, 2008.
- [11] “Iran’s Bolivian TV venture to ‘interface’ with Venezuela’s Telesur,” Fars (Tehran), March 19, 2008.
- [12] Faramarz Asghari, “Iran-Bolivia strategic interaction,” *Siyasat-e Ruz* (Tehran), September 1, 2008.
- [13] “Iran, Bolivia State TVs Set To Co-op,” Moj News Agency (Tehran), September 30, 2008.
- [14] “Iran to open two clinics in Bolivia,” Moj News Agency (Tehran), October 11, 2008, <http://www.presstv.com/Detail.aspx?id=71865§ionid=351020706>.
- [15] “Iran approves US\$280 million loan for Bolivia,” Associated Press, July 29, 2009.