

The Bolivian 'Tanquetazo'

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Photo: Fabián Restivo

On June 26, 2024, the Bolivian government suffered an attempted military coup d'état organized and orchestrated by dissident members of the Army, who, using tanks and other combat vehicles, forcibly entered the Palacio Quemado, positioning themselves in strategic places in the Plaza Murillo, in a clear coup against the democratic government of Luis Arce Catacora.

A failed coup attempt with strikingly similar characteristics was experienced in Chile in 1973, just three months before General Augusto Pinochet took power by force at the cost of the life of President Salvador Allende.

On an almost analogous date, June 29, 1973, the Popular Unity (UP) government, headed by Allende, suffered an attack that was immediately named "Tanquetazo", due to the use of tanks and other vehicles in its execution. What is the significance of this similarity? In that, only three months after that failed attempt, Augusto Pinochet's successful coup d'état took place.

The narrative installed at that time was that the "Tanquetazo" had been carried out by military men who were not in their right mind and that the real danger were the workers who were armed with the consent of the Government. In the Bolivian case, the narrative that both Evo Morales and the opposition seek to install is that it was a "self-coup" organized to increase President Arce's popularity, a dangerous statement that would lead to ignore the multiple threats to democracy in the country.

Two were the protagonists of the same role at different times: Lieutenant Colonel Roberto Souper, in the Chilean case; and General Juan José Zúñiga, in the Bolivian case. Both would have been inclined to a coup d'état when they saw that they would be relieved of their posts: the former for being part of a conspiracy, and the latter for controversial statements, some of them directed against former President Morales.

Both events took place in a context in which the Military High Command had lost confidence in its government and vice versa, something that can be clearly observed, in our case, in the fact that Luis Arce changed the High Command six times during his administration.

Another common element is the participation of the United States in Chile in 1973, led by President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, who had a decisive influence on groups opposed to Allende and whose support and financing of the coup d'état is widely documented, according to files declassified by the United States itself.

In Bolivia, this participation would have a name: Debra Hevia, US Chargé d'Affaires who arrived in the country, generating susceptibility for her support to the opposition and her eventual contribution to the gestation of a coup d'état. Further supporting this idea is the fact that the attack on democracy took place shortly after a meeting held between Luis Arce and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, in which issues related to international cooperation and Bolivian lithium — a resource much sought after by the country of the North-, among others, were discussed.

Bolivia has warned on several occasions of Washington's intentions to take over the exploitation and industrialization of lithium. Along these lines, in July 2022, the commander of the U.S. Southern Command, Laura Richardson, publicly expressed her concern about an alleged interference of China and Russia in Latin America, particularly in what is known as the "Lithium Triangle."

One of the most questioned aspects of the frustrated Bolivian coup was the fact that both Luis Arce and the Minister of Government, Eduardo Del Castillo, dared to speak out and confront General Zúñiga, something that, however, General Carlos Prats, the protagonist who managed to placate the Chilean "Tanquetazo," did just the same. On that occasion, Prats went out to talk to the tank commanders in a courageous act that almost cost him his life (although years later, Pinochet's coup

plotters would take revenge).

In 1973, after midday, the coup had been put down, and Salvador Allende went out to thank the population and the loyal troops for their fierce defense, something that Luis Arce also did at the end of the afternoon.

But, beyond the similarities, it is worth mentioning serious differences, such as the fact that nowadays communication is instantaneous, and this made it possible that, in a matter of minutes, the attempt was known worldwide and that the Murillo square was filled with people indignant at the possibility of the establishment of a military dictatorship. The same happens with the decision to use bullets and not rubber bullets, something that they knew would cause general indignation and the repudiation of public opinion. In the 1970s, this was "easily" solved: the Chilean military killed the journalists, an issue that was patented with the outrageous image of a military officer shooting a cameraman who was recording the events and who ended up immortalizing his own murder.

After all these events, Pinochet embraced Prats and congratulated him for his work; the same Pinochet who three months later would take power by force and cause the death of Salvador Allende.

After these reflections, we are left to wonder: will there be a Pinochet in the Bolivian coup? Only time will tell.

Source: [ATB](#), translation, [Resumen Latinoamericano - English](#)



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