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Bolivia Rejoins UN's Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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In an unprecedented recognition of the ancient culture of native peoples of the Americas, on Jan. 11, the UN accepted a demand from Bolivia, which had been working hard since mid-2011 for recognition of Bolivians' right to chew coca leaf (*aculliar*), a common practice among Andean communities. After the UN body refused to modify Article 49 of the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs—which criminalizes coca-leaf chewing and classifies the plant as a narcotic—Bolivia withdrew from the agreement ([NotiSur, March 14, 2008](#)). After Bolivia modified its original demand, 169 of the 184 countries that signed the Single Convention agreed that, in Bolivia, chewing coca leaf is a cultural custom.

After withdrawing from the Single Convention, Bolivia tried to have several subparagraphs of Article 49 eliminated. When that proved to be a strategic error, it revised its position, ratified its membership in the convention, and asked for readmission but without agreeing to the ban on chewing coca leaf, which is also traditional in Peru, Colombia, and other Andean countries. The US, Great Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Holland, Russia, Canada, Ireland, Switzerland, Finland, Portugal, Israel, Japan, and Mexico opposed granting Bolivia the exception but could not block its readmission.

For the first time since Evo Morales became president in January 2006, the moderate opposition praised the administration's diplomacy in this specific case. However, indigenous groups allied with the extreme right—which in 2011 had organized public demonstrations and marches in support of coca-leaf chewing—did not join the rest of Bolivians in celebrating the global recognition of their own culture. Nor did the extreme right celebrate the country's success.

Former foreign minister Javier Murillo, a critic of the Morales administration, was the first to react and congratulate indigenous Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca. "This victory is the result of an important and successful diplomatic effort, in that coca-leaf chewing is a basic component of our national identity," said Murillo.

Defensor del Pueblo Rolando Villena Villagra, also a member of the opposition, lauded the re-entry to the Single Convention with the exception of the ban on coca-leaf chewing and considered it "an enormous step toward revaluing the sacred coca leaf and the rights of indigenous nations. It is an achievement for the government, it is an important result for strengthening our sovereignty, achieving greater levels of respect for native peoples, and consolidating a new space where we reaffirm our dignity as a state and as a society."

Coca leaf widely used in Andean cultures

The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) says that, with 27,000 hectares under cultivation, Bolivia is the third-largest producer of coca leaf, after Colombia (68,000 ha) and Peru (59,000 ha).

In Bolivia, the plant is grown in the Yungas area near La Paz and in the Chapare region near Cochabamba, where Morales began his union work as leader of the *cocaleros* (coca growers). In these three countries, coca-leaf chewing goes back to pre-Colombian times and is used to overcome altitude sickness and reduce hunger, and as a source of energy. The leaf is also used to prepare food

and drinks (NotiSur, June 4, 2010) and to create medicinal and cosmetic products: flours, pastries, pastas, teas, sweets, candies, creams and ointments for medical use, shampoos and other beauty products, liquors, and soft drinks (Coca Colla).

Three days after the country's readmission into the Single Convention, Bolivians throughout the country celebrated, acullicando in plazas and other public spaces. Morales joined the festivities and said that no previous government "had challenged the international persecution of the traditional and medicinal use of our sacred leaf." He said that "coca leaf was penalized, demonized, and criminalized internationally; we were even called drug dependents and coca producers were called drug traffickers."

The president said that "the most prestigious research centers in the world," including Harvard University, have recommended the use of coca leaf. Using the strong language he used as a union leader, Morales included in his speech in the city of Cochabamba a phrase in Quechua that was popular in those years, "¡Causachun coca, wañuchun yanqui!" (Long live coca! Death to the Yankees!).

Morales said, "It is contradictory that the traditional use of coca leaf is prohibited by the Single Convention when some US states and some European countries allow the legal use of cocaine in small quantities for personal consumption," and he recalled that among the 15 countries that opposed Bolivia's return to the Convention "are the largest consumers of cocaine, not coca leaf, in the world."

Finally, mocking "the hypocrites from those countries and the INCB experts," who, despite the decision, suggest that the government urge Bolivians to abandon coca-leaf chewing, Morales said, "We are going to invite them to come and chew coca leaf with us, so they will be healthier and more intelligent, and so that they will also learn to respect and understand the world's social diversity."

At the doors of Palacio Quemado, the government palace, Vice President Álvaro García Linera added his comments to those of the president. "We're going to wage an educational campaign aimed at countries opposed to coca-leaf chewing so that they understand our reasons and the age-old use of coca in Andean cultures, which goes back to the year 5000 BCE," he said.

TNI study debunks assumptions about coca leaf

In addition to the international studies cited by Morales, Bolivia also has other indirect support, such as from the Transnational Institute (TNI), whose 2009 report "Coca Myths" discredits certain generalized beliefs about the leaf of the South American plant.

"The UN drug-control authorities have been claiming that the coca leaf is a narcotic, comparable to heroine or cocaine. It is, therefore, harmful to health and causes addiction. If this was true, hundreds of thousands of indigenous people chewing coca leaves on a daily basis would have died from overdoses. Or they would be addicted to cocaine," said Pien Metaal, co-author of the report and researcher with TNI's Drugs and Democracy program. "Every initiative to question the legal status of the coca leaf has so far fallen on UN's deaf ears. It has been defending its decision without suitable evidence to support it. A study that condemned coca to illegality decades ago would never pass the scrutiny and critical review of today, to which scientific studies are routinely subjected."

"Coca Myths" examines four aspects of the problem, in which TNI does not always agree with the Bolivian government's position.

1) Coca and Food. This section of the report points out that, while coca is an excellent source of vitamins and minerals and an important source of calcium for adults and older people with lactose intolerance, it is unlikely to become a major food source.

2) Coca and Alkaloids. It is incorrect to say that coca does not contain cocaine, but the cocaine alkaloid content of coca leaves is less than 1%. The effective extraction of this amount to produce a semi-refined coca paste requires, as well, a degree of chemical expertise and series of elements not found in most households.

3) Coca and Addiction. The Dutch institute said that the US ambassador blocked release of a joint study done in 1992-1994 by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) at the 1994 annual World Health Assembly because "it demolished what remained of the coca-addiction argument."

4) Coca and the Environment. The growing use of industrial products to boost coca yield has a cost for the environment, but this is insignificant compared with the environmental damage from alternative crops, such as oil palm or sugarcane. Unlike these monocrops, "most coca is grown in association with other tropical crops, maintaining species diversity in the local flora and fauna, and helping to delay and contain depletion of productive soils."

On its Web page, TNI describes itself as an international network of activist researchers based in Amsterdam and "committed to critical analysis of the global problems of today and tomorrow. It aims to provide intellectual support to movements struggling for a more democratic, equitable, and environmentally sustainable world."

"The complicity of UN bodies such as ECOSOC [Economic and Social Council] and the WHO [World Health Organization] in labeling coca leaf as a narcotic is not only insensitive, authoritarian, and ethnocentric, it is also a betrayal of their scientific mandate and mutual respect on which the UN were built," says Anthony Herman, co-author of the report.

"Allowing a world market for coca products such as tea would mean a significant contribution to developmental goals in the coca producing regions. At the same time less coca would be used in cocaine production," says Metaal.

"Instead of a threat, coca leaf should be viewed as another valuable contribution to public health from ancient cultures and peoples," said the TNI press release.

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