

# The Bolivian Presidents: A Matter of Record

*by Charles W. Arnade*

Abstract. – While Bolivia has had an agitated history the number of Presidents and changes of governments have been misrepresented in nearly all history books. This article tries to present the accurate picture focusing on Bolivia's Presidents since independence in 1825 to the present.

Everyone knows that there is a great deal of misinformation, including much about historical events. The misconceptions become even greater with the histories of countries that are foreign to us. Myths, legends and outright errors exist in the recorded history of any nation. The task of a professional historian is to present as much as is possible exactly what happened, based on reliable documentation. Any doubts because of possible unreliable and prejudicial documentation must be stated. Maybe we can never achieve what the illustrious German historian Leopold Ranke demanded when he said in his so often cited words, we should write “wie es eigentlich gewesen.”

I have done much research and writing dealing with the stormy history of Bolivia. Long ago I became aware that in the presentation of the history of Bolivia as an independent nation that began in August, 1825 a most serious error has appeared. Most Bolivian writers, journalists and politicians accept this error, it has entered textbooks used in classrooms and even reputed encyclopaedias. To be sure, many of these publications were for non-Bolivian readers, among whom were students studying Latin American history or related courses such as Latin American literature, culture or government. Bolivia's past has been characterised as among the most unstable histories of Latin America. Some texts stated outright that Bolivia had more governments than years of existence since independence, which would mean by the year 2000 more than 175 governments. Sometimes it is indicated that there have been that many presidents.

A popular book often used by journalists and other media commentators is called *History's Trickiest Questions*,<sup>1</sup> first published in 1991 by Paul Kuttner, that has a foreword by a professor of history from the reputed University of Virginia. In it there is the question, "Which country has had about 190 rulers in the last century and a half?"<sup>2</sup> The answer given on page 231 says, "The country is Bolivia." To make matters worse there is a popular series called *Global Studies* which among its books has one titled *Latin America*,<sup>3</sup> with a new edition each two years. It is edited by a recognised Latin American history professor from the University of Connecticut. The *Global Studies* series is used in undergraduate classes in many American universities, including my own. In the unit entitled "Bolivia: An Indian Nation" in the first six editions it stated: "Another enduring image is Bolivia's extreme instability. Granted, there were 200 changes of government in less than 200 years with the average regime lasting 9 months."<sup>4</sup> Several times I wrote the professorial editor about the extreme inaccuracy of this statement, using my own publication dealing with Bolivian presidents as support. I also enclosed pertinent copies from the excellent book by the contemporary Bolivian writer and journalist Jorge Mesa, entitled *Presidentes de Bolivia: entre urnas y fusiles. (El poder ejecutivo: Los ministros de Estado)*.<sup>5</sup> Mesa has the exact numbers of presidents and governments (giving the days, months, and years) plus much additional information such as the presidents' places of birth, where they died, and who their wives were. He gives also the vice presidents and the members of the cabinets. The book is a storehouse of reliable data.

*Global Studies: Latin America*<sup>6</sup> failed to acknowledge my communications. In 1996 I published a small essay on this matter in the scholarly journal *The Americas*<sup>7</sup> from the American Academy of Franciscan

<sup>1</sup> Paul Kuttner, *History's Trickiest Questions* (New York 1990).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> Paul B. Goodwin Jr. (ed.), *Global Studies: Latin America* (7th ed., Guilford, Conn. 1996).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> Carlos D. Mesa Gisbert, *Presidentes de Bolivia: Entre urnas y fusiles. (El poder ejecutivo: Los ministros de Estado)* (La Paz 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Goodwin, *Global Studies* (note 3).

<sup>7</sup> Charles W. Arnade, "Bolivia and a Monumental Historical Error": *The Americas* 53 (Washington 1996), pp. 289–90.

History. This journal circulates widely among Latin Americanists. I was aware that the reputed *Financial Times* of London, with global circulation, was preparing an updated country insert on Bolivia. I contacted their editorial staff with the correct data on Bolivian presidents and governments, and its Bolivia insert of November 9, 1994 had the right information. (This attests to the attention to accuracy at the *Financial Times*; reliability is one of the reasons for its growing global importance.)

Finally in the 7th edition (1996) *Global Studies: Latin America* corrected the error by simply saying, "The actual number of governments over the past 200 years is 80, however, not the 200 commonly noted."<sup>8</sup> The editors of *Global Studies* should have become aware of their mistake years earlier. In Bolivia, even with the excellent Mesa study, I have not been able to find any notices from academicians or journalists about the error that put their country in a most unfavourable light. Good and accurate writing about Bolivian history is only a recent development, spearheaded by some competent historians, librarians and archivists, and a few journalists.

My sporadic search over thirty years has failed to pinpoint the original source of this grave error. It could have begun in Bolivia with political rhetoric, such as stating that there is a new government or revolution every year. This might have been accepted by a foreign observer and consequently entered the mythology of history. One possible guilty party is the popular *Guinness Book of World Records* in one of its earlier editions, but I have not been able to locate it. Another plausible origin is that some source counted the revolutions, attempted revolutions, insurrections, and even regional disturbances and uprisings. As in other Latin American countries there were many of those in Bolivia. In the U.S. we had them too, such as the Shays' and Whiskey Rebellions or the Haymarket Riot. Any German knows that this happened also in the last 200 years in German history. For Bolivia someone may have simply added those so-called revolutions which in reality were failed uprisings or insurrections.

By 2000, after 175 years of independence Bolivia had had 61 presidents (six of these occupied the presidency more than once). There

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<sup>8</sup> Paul B. Goodwin Jr. (ed.), *Global Studies: Latin America* (7th ed., Guilford, Conn. 1996), p. 62.

were 61 presidents and 79 governments. Of these, 42 governments can be classified as “constitucionales”, having come to power legally or by quasi-legal means (achieving power through a revolution or coup d’état but later constitutionalised). The other 37 governments were de facto. Four presidents, Andrés de Santa Cruz, Manuel Isidoro Belzú, Mariano Melgarejo, and Hugo Banzer remained in power for six or more years of a single term. Santa Cruz, who established the Peruvian Bolivian Confederation in the first part of the nineteenth century, served for ten continuous years – the years the Confederation lasted. Belzú stayed in power for six years and manipulated an election in 1855 to secure the presidency for his son-in-law Jorge Córdova, who was overthrown two years later. The infamous Melgarejo also maintained himself in the presidential office for six years. Incidentally, he supported Prussia in the Franco-Prussian War, and it is said that he offered Bolivian troops to Prussia. This has not been historically documented.

Hugo Banzer, whose grandfather migrated from Germany, became president after a coup in 1971 and implemented an authoritarian regime sympathetic to the then military governments of Chile, Argentina, and Brazil, with whom Bolivia shares borders, and also Uruguay. Banzer voluntarily left the presidency six years later. In 1997 he was democratically elected president. Víctor Paz Estenssoro was president four different times, altogether holding the office for more than twelve years.

A few de facto or interim presidents (after the death of a president or a coup d’état) occupied the presidential chair for only a short time. General Alberto Natusch Busch’s (of Lebanese-German origin) palace revolution of 1979 carried him into the presidential mansion but he was forced to vacate the presidency sixteen days later to the President of the Bolivian Congress, Ms. Lydia Gueiler Tejada (her father was a German), and she became the first Bolivian woman president and the first legally elected (by Congress) woman president in Latin American history. (This disregards Juan Perón who engineered his wife Isabel Perón’s succession on his death.) Two presidents, José María Velasco (in the nineteenth century) and Víctor Paz Estenssoro served four times. Velasco never was able to finish a term and his accumulated time as president was less than two years. It must be said that three times he was acting president and one time he was elected but was soon overthrown. Paz Estenssoro was freely elected all four times and

finished three of his terms. He served just short of thirteen years, making him the man who has occupied the Bolivian presidential palace longest. Víctor Paz Estenssoro as of this writing is an active nonagenarian.

Three presidents served twice in office at different times. In the nineteenth century Tomás Frías, who assumed the presidency upon the violent death (a family dispute) of President Agustín Morales and then again upon the natural death by cancer of President Adolfo Ballivián. In both cases Frías finished the terms of the deceased presidents and had no desire to run for reelection. He is considered a most venerable gentleman of culture and good manners. In the early twentieth century Ismael Montes was elected two different times and served full terms. He is often called “El gran Presidente.” In the second part of the century Hernán Siles Zuazo, a leader of the 1952 Bolivian Social Revolution of the *Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario* (headed by Paz Estenssoro) was elected for two separated terms. He passed away a few years ago and the La Paz International Airport was recently named in his honour. And in 1997 was democratically elected Hugo Banzer who in his first term was a military dictator.

As in some other countries there have been leaders from the same family. In the U.S. we had the Adams, Roosevelts, Kennedys and now the Bushes. In Bolivia there were three presidents from the Balliviáns (two in the nineteenth century and one in the twentieth), three from the Siles family (father and two sons, half-brothers who disputed each other’s legitimacy), and two from the Busch family (as said of German origin) of more humble roots than the Balliviáns and Siles who were considered “primeras familias”. And the recent President Paz Zamora (1989–93) is related to Paz Estenssoro. Most presidents came from the ruling elite, but among the exceptions were ruthless caudillos such as Melgarejo, possibly Belzú, as well as President Hilarión Daza (who like Melgarejo started his rough career as a simple soldier). One popular Bolivian textbook, written by a celebrated Bolivian historian, calls Daza “el soldado mandón”. No president was really what is still called *cholo* or *indio*. Belzú was a populist president whose major support came from “las clases populares de cholos e indios”.<sup>9</sup>

A claim to be descended from the Inca ruling class was socially acceptable. Santa Cruz’s mother was a Calahumana and the late twen-

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<sup>9</sup> Augusto Guzman, *Historia de Bolivia* (8th ed., La Paz 1998), p. 136.

tieth century President Siles Zuazo's mother was Zuazo Cusicanqui. The Calahumanas and the Cusicanquis trace their families to the Inca aristocracy. Even after the social revolution of 1952 the presidents were mostly from the accepted families, continuing the pre-1952 pattern.

Most of the 61 presidents were of Spanish criollo heritage, more than in most Latin American countries where there have been more non-Spanish heritage presidents (such as the recent President Menem in Argentina and the former President of Peru Fujimori). The twentieth century Presidents German Busch and Lydia Gueiler had German fathers, Alberto Natusch Busch was of German-Lebanese descent, and the one-year President Juan Pereda Asbun's (1978) mother was from the dynamic Asbun family who came to Bolivia from Lebanon about a century ago. The former President Hugo Banzer's grandfather was born in Germany. The respected President Enrique Hertzog of the mid twentieth century was of German ancestry. His father was a businessman from Alsace who married a Bolivian woman of Basque origin. They were considered solid citizens of the ruling establishment. A recent biography of Hertzog is entitled "El Hidalgo Presidente".<sup>10</sup> There is a controversy over the family of the venerated Antonio José de Sucre, the real founder of Bolivia and its second president. There is a possibility that Sucre's roots were Jewish and the name was Zucker. Many dispute this claim and others state that his forefathers came from Bavaria but were not of Jewish origins.<sup>11</sup>

No one disputes that Bolivian history until recently was one of many palace coups. Nearly half the 61 presidents who constituted 79 governments came to power by election or otherwise legally. These carry the official title of "Presidente Constitucional". Mesa assigns this identity to 42 governments and there have been two more since his book was published. One of these constitutional presidents was lynched.

Many Latin American presidents have died violently, and let's remember that four U.S. presidents were assassinated. Pedro Blanco, the third Bolivian president, was assassinated after six days in the presidency. Gualberto Villaroel died a horrible death when he was

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<sup>10</sup> Alonso Crespo/Mario Lara, *Enrique Hertzog. El Hidalgo Presidente* (Lima 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Charles W. Arnade, "Analysis de Hotel Bolivia": *Anuario* (Sucre 1998), pp. 431-38, here: p. 435.

lynched in 1946 by an enraged mob. In 1872 President Agustín Morales was murdered for personal reasons, killed by his son-in-law, while in office. German Busch committed suicide as president in 1939, something that has never been disputed. His biographer calls him “El Dictador Suicida”.<sup>12</sup> We must add the populist President René Barrientos who died when his presidential helicopter crashed in 1969. Barrientos was on one of his innumerable visits to small Bolivian towns, villages and isolated areas. He was 45 years old and full of dynamism – a modern benevolent caudillo who had an image similar to the Kennedy glow. The Bolivian essayist Fernando Díaz de Medina (who is known for his exaggerated praise and criticism) wrote a book entitled “El general del pueblo”.<sup>13</sup> It appears that it was really an accident, but one can imagine that rumours soon circulated that it was sabotage.

When it comes to ex-presidents the record is not good – seven of the 56 ex-presidents met violent deaths. Four of them had been military dictators. The caudillo Melgarejo killed the populist Belzú in what legend says was a daring public display when Belzú tried to regain the presidency. He was killed by an unaccompanied Melgarejo, apparently in the Presidential Palace. Melgarejo himself, later in exile in Peru, was gunned down by what history states was a jealous husband claiming that his wife had a relationship with Melgarejo.

The now historically disdained Hilarión Daza, because he lost the Pacific War to Chile and with it the Bolivian Pacific coast, died violently. He left for Europe after losing the presidency and being subjected to public disgrace and totally unfounded accusations of treason. Returning from Europe via Chile in 1895, he had to overnight in the Bolivian town Uyuni. He was accosted in the railroad station by an ugly mob, and was mortally shot from behind by two men while being escorted to his night quarters. He was quickly buried in Uyuni.

José Torres, who came to power by force in 1970 and was overthrown one year later by Hugo Banzer, went into exile to Argentina and perished in the Dirty War there. Of leftist and populist tendencies, Torres was killed like so many by the rightist Argentine military rulers. Another military president, but certainly not a dictator was General

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<sup>12</sup> Augusto Cespedes, *El Dictador Suicida* (Santiago de Chile 1956).

<sup>13</sup> Fernando Diez de Medina, *El general del pueblo: René Barrientos Ortuño: Caudillo mayor de la revolucion boliviana* (Buenos Aires 1946).

Eusebio Guilarte, who assumed the presidency peacefully but served only ten days. Later in 1849 he was mortally wounded in a mutiny in the old Bolivian coastal province, Litoral.

Well known and documented is the death in 1861 of the civilian ex-president Jorge Córdova (the adopted son of Belzú) in what in Bolivia is known as “la matanza de Yanez.” The police chief of Sucre, the capital of Bolivia, believing there was a revolution arrested many, Córdova among them. Some of them were brutally killed while in detention, including Córdova who had been a rather gentle president.

Ex-President Manuel Pando, often considered one of the best Bolivian presidents, at the beginning of the twentieth century had retired to his farm. In 1917 he was travelling alone by horse to a nearby city but never arrived at his destination. After a search he was found dead, and his death is still controversial. Several rural peasants were convicted of his murder and one was hanged. Today it is thought that he was innocent. Accusations soon emerged that Pando’s death was politically inspired by eminent politicians, including the sitting President. These were never proven and seem baseless. Some sources say Pando died a natural death from a stroke, which is plausible, and others think the motive for murder was pure banditry or some petty personal revenge. Over eighty years later Pando’s death is still a topic of discussion. One of Bolivia’s *departamentos* (similar to states or Länder), the remotest of the nine, is named Pando in his honour. The ugly death of ex-President Daza was never given the attention reserved for Pando. Daza is considered among the worst Bolivian presidents while Pando is said to have been one of the best.

We said that seven ex-presidents died violently (assuming that Pando did). In reality it was eight. Most forget José de Sucre, the famous and beloved associate of Bolívar who was Bolivia’s second president and the real founder of the independent Bolivian nation. He returned in 1828 to Bolívar’s Gran Colombia, as is well known, and was assassinated there two years later. Between those who died violently while in office and the ex-presidents there were 13 out of the 61 presidents, which comes to over 20 %. This is not too good a record.

For his book about Bolivian presidents Carlos Mesa solicited opinions from 3 ex-presidents (Paz Estenssoro, Lydia Gueiler, Hugo Ballivián), 13 Bolivian historians, 2 sociologists, 8 writers, 3 journalists, and 9 politicians about who had been the “most significant” (notice, not the greatest) Bolivian presidents. Although many foreign histori-

ans and writers (including many South Americans) have written about Bolivia none was asked. Thirty-two of the 59 presidents who had served when the poll was taken about ten years ago received votes. According to the responses the 5 most significant presidents were Andrés Santa Cruz, Víctor Paz Estenssoro, Ismael Montes, Manuel Isidoro Belzú, and Antonio José de Sucre. Paz Estenssoro's 32 votes were all for positive reasons while Santa Cruz' 36 votes were 33 positive and 3 negative. The super caudillo Mariano Melgarejo came in sixth place with 17 votes, of which 15 were for negative effects and 2 for positive. Six received only one vote (all positives) and 6 only 2 votes, all positives with the exception of the last Bolivian dictator, Luis García Mesa (now in prison), whose 2 votes were negative. Lydia Gueiler received 2 positive votes, basically because of her identification as the first female president.

In 1996 I published a study of Bolivian presidents in *Anuario*,<sup>14</sup> a journal sponsored by the Bolivian National Library and National Archives. In my article I placed the presidents within a global context. Contrary to the Mesa survey, I gave my choice of the five best and five worst presidents, not the most significant. One criterion was devotion to the country rather than ambition for power. Tomás Frías, forced twice to be acting on the death of the president, was one selected for his probity and patriotism. Narciso Campero, inheriting the presidency of the failed dictator Daza (accused of bungling the war against Chile), moved the country in a positive direction, inaugurating the long and rather stable rule of the Liberal Party. The other great presidents of my choice were Sucre, Montes, and Paz Estenssoro, all three scoring in the Mesa survey as "significant" although Sucre (the true founder of Bolivia) had a lower score.

Of the five worst presidents I thought three were easy choices: Melgarejo, Daza, and García Meza. My other two, José María Acha and Agustín Morales, who preceded and succeeded Melgarejo in the mid-nineteenth century, were classified along with him by the notable Bolivian historian Alcides Arguedas as "caudillos bárbaros".<sup>15</sup> Arguedas had strong prejudices with racist and aristocratic overtones and his well known book that had an international readership, *Pueblo*

<sup>14</sup> Charles W. Arnade, "Presidentes Bolivianos": *Anuario* (Sucre 1996), pp. 287–294.

<sup>15</sup> Alcides Arguedas, *Caudillos bárbaros* (Barcelona 1929).

*Enfermo*, permanently damaged Bolivia's image.<sup>16</sup> But Arguedas had some good points: he was a keen observer with a thorough knowledge of his country and its history, and a good writer. Acha and Morales were basically bad presidents but better than Arguedas represented them. They need to be re-evaluated.

That does not mean all the other 51 presidents were mediocre. Indeed many were competent and well intentioned and achieved some fine accomplishments, especially those in the first part of the nineteenth century. A few were utterly honest such as the unfortunate Daniel Salamanca who the military and many other Bolivians blamed for the loss of the Chaco War in the 1930s. Tomás Frías and Tomás Monje Gutiérrez, both of whom assumed the presidency (Frías twice) upon the deaths of presidents – two of them violent – did it as a patriotic obligation with no desire to stay permanently or for personal benefit.

When they left office many presidents had financial problems since even when there was a pension it was very inadequate. The controversial José María Linares of the mid-nineteenth century, who came from the elite and declared himself a benevolent dictator (indeed he was), exhausted his own funds while president not in extravagance but for basic expenses. When overthrown he had to go into exile to Chile where he died in poverty. More recently Enrique Hertzog, known for correctness and modesty, has now finally been recognised as a worthy president. He never had wealth, there was no pension, and his house in La Paz was burned down. He eventually ended up in Buenos Aires in relative obscurity. He and his wife had difficulty maintaining even a modest life style. He managed to get a job as translator in a publishing house. Later, already in his sixties, he replied to a help-wanted ad to write political commentaries for a journal, at which he was very good. His simple vita stated that he had experience in political journalism but did not mention he had been a democratically elected president of Bolivia. He failed to get the job. When his health deteriorated (he was then an octogenarian) he could not afford one of the better hospitals but managed to be taken to the military hospital in Buenos Aires where he died. His devoted wife soon followed him in death.

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<sup>16</sup> Alcides Arguedas, *Pueblo enfermo* (Barcelona 1909).

Other ex-presidents also had to live frugally, such as Enrique Peñaranda who depended on his very modest pension. Many owned their houses from before their presidencies. Ex-President Gueiler, overthrown by García Meza, left for Paris to be supported by her daughter who lived there, and later returned to Bolivia. I was told the widow of President German Busch had financial difficulties as she faded into obscurity. Some of the ex-presidents who were in better financial shape returned to a normal life with no security protection. Only a few re-entered politics. There was no ostentatiousness. No ex-president built a mansion or purchased extensive real estate. About fifteen years ago while visiting Cochabamba I helped one of them move his stranded car when he was taking his grandchildren to school. Not until he thanked me did I realise who he was. I have met several others, including the Ex-president Banzer (between presidencies) casually on the street.

We all know of the Mobutus (Congo), Abacha (Nigeria), Suharto (Indonesia), and others who enriched themselves while rulers of their countries. There is not a single case of this in Bolivia. The worst Bolivian dictator of the century, García Mesa who is now in prison, had no hidden accounts. He killed but apparently he was not greedy. To be sure, especially in the early part of the twentieth century when the silver and tin oligarchy ruled Bolivia, many of the ex-presidents while not wealthy or profiting from being president lived quite comfortably but never ostentatiously. Yet as in all countries the general public is always suspicious and rumours are abundant. I have heard several times that Paz Estenssoro acquired wealth during his presidencies. There is no evidence. After his many terms he retired to his modest farm in provincial Tarija where he still lives. He likes to visit a small bookstore owned by a friend of mine in the centre of town and acts like any simpler browser in the store (no bodyguards, etc.).

Bolivia had 61 presidents within a framework of a rugged history. They all wore the Presidential Medallion handed down from Simón Bolívar. The medallion miraculously survived all the changes, violent and peaceful. A few of the presidents were ruthless, two even cruel. But financially they were nearly all honest, some even obsessively such as the patrician Daniel Salamanca who forbade his ministers to accept even insignificant gifts, and the super-honest President Hertzog who used Salamanca as a model. A Bolivian acquaintance, an acute observer, once told me that the problem with Bolivia is that it had too

many presidents who were too honest and did not know how to manipulate power. History has not been fair in giving a true picture of Bolivia's past as an independent country.