Bolivia presents a sharp contrast between high, bleak mountains and plateaus in the west and lush, tropical rain forests in the east. In the southeast it merges into the semiarid plains of the Gran Chaco. The Andes mountain system reaches its greatest width in Bolivia. Two cordilleras, the western one tracing the border with Chile and the eastern running north and south across the center of the country, are divided by a high plateau (altiplano), most of it 12,000 ft (3,660 m) above sea level—barren, windswept, and segmented by mountain spurs.

Despite the harsh conditions the altiplano is the population center of Bolivia. Many sections for want of drainage have brackish lakes and salt beds, notably the extensive Salar de Uyuni (see Uyuni, Salar de) in the south. In the north are Lake Titicaca, which Bolivia shares with Peru, and Lake Poopó. This region, world famous for its breathtaking scenery, was the home of one of the great pre-Columbian civilizations. Well known are the ruins of Tiahuanaco.

The eastern mountains, consisting of three major ranges, rise to the cold, forbidding heights of the Puna plateau (as high as 16,000 ft/4,880 m) and in the north to the snowcapped peaks of Illimani (21,184 ft/6,457 m) and Illampú (21,276 ft/6,485 m). In these mountains lies the source of the exploited wealth of Bolivia—its minerals. Tin is by far the most important product, but silver was once the chief metal, and tungsten, copper, wolframite, bismuth, antimony, zinc, lead, iron, and gold are also mined. The names of some mining towns, notably Potosí and Oruro, are world famous.

From the mountains, headstreams cut eastward, carving deep gorges and fingerlike valleys. In these valleys are some of Bolivia's garden spots—Sucre, Cochabamba, and Tarija. Santa Cruz de la Sierra and La Paz are the two main cities of tropical Bolivia. In the eastern foothills headstreams gather to form the Beni, the Guaiporé, and the Mamoré (tributaries of the Madeira, in Brazil), which flow through the torrid, humid yungas, covered with dense rain forests, and inhabited mainly by indigenous South Americans. The region is the most fertile in the country, yielding cacao, coffee, and tropical fruits, and in the early 20th cent. was a major source of wild rubber and quinine. Some of the more accessible valleys, with luxuriant scenery and a pleasantly warm climate, have become popular Bolivian resort areas.

Of the indigenous people, about 30% are Quechua and 25% are Aymara, but the citizens of European descent (some 15% of the people) or mixed European and native ancestry (about 30% of the population) have historically maintained economic, political, and social hegemony, but this has been challenged by Evo Morales, who was elected president in 2005, and by the constitution adopted in
2009. Spanish and 36 indigenous languages including Aymara, Quechua, and Guaraní are all constitutionally recognized as official languages. A few indigenous groups have remained isolated from European culture. Most of the population is Roman Catholic, although many people of indigenous descent retain the substance of their pre-Christian beliefs. There is also an evangelical Protestant minority.

Economy

Despite the importance of its tin, silver, and other mines and its large reserves of natural gas and crude oil, Bolivia is one of the poorest nations in Latin America and still largely lives by a subsistence economy. A large part of the population makes its living from the growing of coca, the source of cocaine; it is typically grown largely legally for the leaves and products in which they are used, and illegally for cocaine. Soybeans, coffee, cotton, corn, sugarcane, rice, and potatoes are the other major crops; timber is also important. Industry is limited to mining and smelting, petroleum refining, food processing, and small-scale manufacturing. The tin industry has received increasing competition from SE Asia, and as a result several tin mines have closed. Although Bolivia has much hydroelectric potential, it is underutilized.

Bolivia's natural resources and agriculture furnish the bulk of its exports, with natural gas, soybeans, crude petroleum, zinc, and tin most important. Petroleum products, plastics, paper, aircraft and parts, prepared foods, automobiles, and insecticides are important imports. Brazil, Argentina, the United States, and Peru are the chief trading partners. Bolivia is a member of the Andean Community, an economic organization of South American countries.

Government

Bolivia, which has had more than 190 revolutions and coups since it became independent in 1825, is governed under the constitution of 2009. The head of state and of government is the president, who is elected to five-year term. The bicameral legislature, the Plurinational Legislative Assembly, consists of an upper Chamber of Senators and a lower Chamber of Deputies. The 36 senators and 130 deputies are all elected for five-year terms. Administratively, Bolivia is divided into nine departments.

History

Early History

The altiplano was a center of native life even before the days of the Inca; the region was the home of the great Tihuanaco empire. The Aymara had been absorbed into the Inca empire long before Gonzalo Pizarro and Hernando Pizarro began the Spanish conquest of the Inca in 1532. In 1538 the indigenous inhabitants in Bolivia were defeated.

Uninviting though the high, cold country was, it attracted the Spanish because of its rich silver mines, discovered as early as 1545. Exploiters poured in, bent on quick wealth. Forcing the natives to work the mines and the obrajes [textile mills] under duress, they remained indifferent to all development other than the construction of transportation facilities to remove the unearthed riches. Native laborers were also used on great landholdings. Thus began the system of plunder economy and social inequality that persisted in Bolivia until recent years. Economic development was further retarded by the rugged terrain, and conditions did not change when the region was made (1559) into the audiencia of Charcas, which was attached until 1776 to the viceroyalty of Peru and later to the viceroyalty of La Plata.

Independence and the Nineteenth Century

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The revolution against Spanish control came early, with an uprising in Chuquisaca in 1809, but Bolivia remained Spanish until the campaigns of José de San Martín and Simón Bolívar. Independence was won with the victory (1824) at Ayacucho of Antonio José de Sucre. After the formal proclamation of independence in 1825, Bolívar drew up (1826) a constitution for the new republic. The nation was named Bolivia, and Chuquisaca was renamed Sucre, after the revolutionary hero.

Bolivia inherited ambitions and extensive territorial claims that proved disastrous, leading to warfare and defeat. At the time of independence it had a seacoast, a portion of the Amazon basin, and claims to most of the Chaco; in little more than a century all these were lost. The strife-ridden internal history of Bolivia began when the first president, Sucre, was forced to resign in 1828. A steady stream of egocentric caudillos plagued Bolivia thereafter. Andrés Santa Cruz, desiring to reunite Bolivia and Peru, invaded Peru in 1836 and established a confederation, which three years later was destroyed on the battlefield of Yungay.

Although a few presidents, notably José Ballivián, made efforts to reform the administration and improve the economy, the temptation to wholesale corruption was always strong, and honest reform was hard to achieve. The nitrate deposits of Atacama proved valuable, but the mining concessions were given to Chileans. Trouble over them led (1879), during the administration of Hilarión Daza, to the War of the Pacific (see Pacific, War of the). As a result Bolivia lost Atacama to Chile, and no longer had direct access to the Pacific. The next serious loss was the little-known region of the Acre River, which had become valuable because of its wild rubber. After a bitter conflict, Bolivia, under President José Manuel Pando, yielded the area to Brazil in 1903 for an indemnity.

**Twentieth-Century Bolivia**

Attempts at reorganization and reform, especially by Ismael Montes, were overshadowed in the 20th cent. by military coups, rule of dictators, and bankruptcy. This repeated sequence led to an increase in foreign influence, through loans and interests in mines and oil fields. Attempts to raise Bolivia from its status as an underdeveloped country met with little success, although great personal fortunes were amassed from tin mining by tycoons such as Simón I. Patiño.

Conflicting claims to the Chaco, which was thought to be oil-rich, brought on yet another disastrous territorial war, this time with Paraguay (1932–35). The fighting ended in 1935 with both nations exhausted and Bolivia defeated and stripped of most of its claims in that area. Programs for curing the ills of the nation were hampered by military coups and countercoups. World War II proved a boon to the Bolivian economy by increasing demands for tin and wolframite. International pressure over pro-German elements in the government eventually forced Bolivia to break relations with the Axis and declare war (1943).

Rising prices aggravated the restiveness of the miners over miserable working conditions; strikes were brutally suppressed. The crisis reached a peak in Dec., 1943, when the nationalistic, pro-miner National Revolutionary Movement (MNR) engineered a successful revolt. The regime, however, was not recognized by other American nations (except Argentina) until 1944, when pro-Axis elements in the MNR were officially removed. In 1946 the leader of the MNR-backed government, Major Gualberto Villaroel, was lynched. The conservative government installed in 1947 was soon threatened by opposition from the MNR and the extreme left.

In the 1951 presidential elections Victor Paz Estenssoro, the MNR candidate, won a majority of the
votes, but was prevented from taking office by a military junta. The MNR, with the aid of the national police (the carabineros) and of a militia recruited from miners and peasants, rebelled and took power. The revolutionary government proceeded to expropriate and nationalize the tin holdings of the huge Patiño, Hochschild, and Aramayo interests and inaugurated a program of agrarian reform. Civil rights and suffrage were extended to the indigenous people. Education, health, and construction projects were begun.

In 1956 the MNR candidate, Hernán Siles Zuazo won the presidential election, and in 1960 the MNR further consolidated its power with the reelection of Victor Paz Estenssoro. The United States, in spite of losses incurred by American investors, stepped up its program of technical and financial assistance, and Siles Zuazo temporarily succeeded in stemming inflation. But economic and political factors weakened the government, and the eruption of dissident splinter groups, some fostering acts of political terror, brought all attempts at further reform to a virtual halt.

In 1964 the government was overthrown by the military. A junta dominated by Gen. René Barrientos Ortuño assumed power. The regime used troops to occupy the mines but did not rescind the important reforms of the MNR. Barrientos was elected president in 1966. A radical guerrilla movement, led by the Cuban Ernesto “Che” Guevara, was set back seriously when government troops killed Guevara in 1967. Barrientos died in 1969; his successor, Luis Adolfo Siles Salinas, was overthrown by Gen. Alfredo Ovando Candía. Ovando nationalized the Gulf Oil Company facilities in Bolivia.

A rightist military junta overthrew Ovando in 1970 but lasted only one day, succumbing to a leftist coup led by Gen. Juan José Torres. Under Torres relations with the Soviet Union, which had been established by Ovando, became closer, to the detriment of ties with the United States. Torres was overthrown in 1971 by Col. Hugo Banzer Suárez, who was supported by both the MNR and its traditional rightist opponent, the Bolivian Socialist Falange. Banzer closed the universities, arrested opposition politicians, and returned Bolivia to a pro-U.S. foreign policy. In 1974 an all-military cabinet was installed. Banzer was forced to resign in 1978 by the military, which soon gained control of the government and imposed martial law.

Civilian rule and democratic government were restored in 1982, when Siles Zuazo again became president. He served from 1982 to 1985, when he was succeeded by Victor Paz Estenssoro. During the 1980s, hyperinflation and labor unrest led to internal disturbances, which were intensified by government austerity programs. The government, however, made progress in its efforts to suppress the drug trade. Jaime Paz Zamora succeeded Paz Estenssoro as president in 1989. In the early 1990s the government offered tax incentives to attract foreign investment in the mining industry.

Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, a mining entrepreneur and former planning minister, was elected president in 1993. He pursued a policy of privatization and continued the free-market reforms begun in the late 1980s. He also launched a social security program and granted greater autonomy and more resources to poor urban and indigenous communities. In 1997, Hugo Banzer Suárez once again came to power, this time through democratic elections. He continued his predecessor’s reform programs and pursued an aggressive coca-eradication and alternative-crop program. The government’s antidrug programs led to economic difficulties in some regions in Bolivia, which resulted in protests and clashes and the temporary declaration of a state of emergency in Apr., 2000. Protests again in September–October paralyzed the economy, forcing Banzer’s government to grant economic concessions to indigenous groups, although it refused to alter its plans to end illegal coca production.

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In Aug., 2000, illness led Banzer to resign the presidency; the vice president, Jorge Fernando Quiroga Ramírez succeeded him. After a close election in June, 2002, in which no presidential candidate won 50% of the vote, the congress elected former president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, who had won a plurality. The country’s economic difficulties and anti-coca campaign led to increasing political assertiveness by persons of indigenous descent; roughly 60% of Bolivians lived in poverty at the beginning of 2003. Proposed tax increases, which were designed to reduce government deficits to the level demanded by the International Monetary Fund, sparked protests in La Paz (Feb., 2003) that turned violent and forced the president to flee the presidential palace.

Plans to export natural gas led to new demonstrations against the government beginning in Sept., 2003. As the demonstrations grew and led to violence in October, the government lost support in Congress and the president resigned and went into exile. Vice President Carlos Diego Mesa Gisbert, a former journalist, succeeded to the presidency, and subsequently won approval for exporting natural gas in a July, 2004, referendum. However, increases in fuel prices, autonomy for Santa Cruz prov., and other issues sparked a series of demonstrations in early 2005 that threatened to plunge Bolivia into chaos. Mesa offered some concessions, but when some of the protests continued he offered to resign (Mar., 2005). Congress rejected his resignation, and Mesa, who remained popular with many Bolivians, attempt to rally his supporters.

Passage in May of an oil and gas taxation law, which became law without Mesa's signature when he failed to veto it as he had said he would, led to protests by labor and indigenous groups, who demanded the industry be nationalized, and unsettled the oil-rich south and east. Continuing demonstrations by supporters of nationalization and roadblocks that isolated Bolivia's major cities led Mesa to resign in June; Supreme Court president Eduardo Rodríguez Veltzé became interim president. In July the congress scheduled new presidential and congressional elections for December, and also approved calling a constitutional assembly and holding a referendum on greater autonomy for Bolivia's departments. The December elections resulted in a solid victory for opposition leader Evo Morales and his Movement toward Socialism (MAS). Morales, an opponent of the coca-eradication program, became the first Bolivian of indigenous birth to be elected president. The election also marked the beginning of increasing polarization between supporters of Morales, largely of indigenous descent and inhabitants of Bolivia's poorer western highlands, and his conservative opponents, largely of European descent and inhabitants of the wealthier eastern lowlands.

In May, 2006, Morales moved to nationalize the natural gas and oil industry, sparking anxieties in Argentina and Brazil, countries that were largely supportive of his presidency but were also Bolivia's major natural gas customers and investors. In August, however, the nationalization process was temporarily suspended because of a lack of resources on the part of Bolivia's state energy company. A move in September to nationalize Brazilian-owned oil and gas refineries without compensation was suspended after Brazil's government protested, but the refineries were sold to Bolivia in June, 2007. In Oct., 2006, the government signed new agreements with the foreign energy companies. The nationalizations, while increasing government development funds in subsequent years, also led Argentina and Brazil to proceed with energy projects that would reduce their dependence on Bolivia.

Meanwhile, in June, 2006, the government began a land redistribution program, which met with resistance from landowners in E Bolivia. despite the fact that, at least initially, only government-owned land was involved; subsequent attempts to expand the program were stymied in Congress until late in 2006, but even then the program's passage depended on questionable votes by two senators’
assistants. Also in June plans were announced to reassert government control over telecommunications, electric, and rail companies that previously had been privatized. Morales also formed a close relationship with the like-minded president of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, who offered financial aid to (and later, military support for) Morales's government.

The July constitutional assembly balloting gave the MAS a majority of seats in the body but not the two-thirds majority required to enact constitutional changes freely, and subsequent attempts to limit the two-thirds requirement only to final approval of a new constitution provoked anti- and progovernment demonstrations. The referendum on increased autonomy for Bolivia's departments, voted on at the same time, failed to win a national majority, but four departments voted for it. The Morales government was also subjected to strikes and blockages by opponents of its policies and by supporters angered over unmet expectations.

In Jan., 2007, there were violent demonstrations in Cochabamba against the governor, who had denounced Morales and supported increased autonomy for the departments, and clashes between supporters of both men. The government announced in 2007 that it planned to extend its nationalizations to the mining and telecommunications industries and to the railways, and it later moved to nationalize the largest private electricity companies (2010–12) and three Spanish-owned airports (2013). By late 2007 the constitutional assembly had failed to deliver a new constitution on time and had its deadline extended; a number of divisive issues frustrated its work, including the status of Sucre as the capital and land reform.

The approval (Nov.–Dec., 2007) of a draft constitution without the presence of opposition constitutional assembly members sparked sometimes violent protests and led four departments to declare themselves autonomous, but Morales and the governors subsequently agreed to negotiations concerning the constitution. In late Feb., 2008, however, the Congress approved a national referendum on the new constitution, setting it for May 4; the vote was taken largely in the absence of opposition legislators. The National Electoral Court subsequently ruled that the referendum date failed to meet the constitutional requirement that it be set at least 90 days after congressional approval.

In May–June, four eastern departments voted for autonomy in referendums rejected by Morales; the governors of those departments and a fifth subsequently rejected Morales's call for a recall vote on himself, the vice president, and all the governors. The recall referendum was nonetheless held in Aug., 2008, and Morales and most of the opposition governors were returned to office. Turmoil continued as the country remained polarized; demonstrations increased with violence on both sides and relations with the United States also worsened sharply. In October, however, an agreement was reached, setting a constitutional referendum for Jan., 2009, with new elections the following December. As part of the agreement, Morales agreed to seek only one additional term as president; the constitution was approved by a substantial majority, but failed to win majorities in the eastern departments. In the 2009 elections Morales was easily reelected, and his MAS secured control of both houses of the legislative assembly. Manfred Reyes Villa, Morales's opponent, was subsequently charged with election fraud; he accused the government of political prosecution and fled the country. In the Apr., 2010, regional and local elections MAS won six of nine department governorships but won the majorities of only two department capitals. The MAS subsequently used a new law that allowed for removal of an officeholder who had been charged with (but not convicted of) a crime to oust a number of prominent opponents, including a governor, from office.
Morales faced a number of protests from his ostensible supporters in the second half of 2010, including a nearly three-week-long one in Potosí in July–August involving a range of local demands. After subsidized fuel prices were nearly doubled in late December, protests and strikes forced the government to rescind the increases after less than a week. Antigovernment protests and union strikes recurred in 2011 and 2012, including one that forced the government to suspend constructing a road through an Amazon reserve.

In Apr., 2013, the constitutional court ruled that the presidential two-term limit did not apply to Morales's term before the 2009 constitution was adopted and he could run again. In Oct., 2014, elections, Morales easily won reelection, and MAS again won control of both houses of the legislative assembly despite losing a few seats. In the Mar. and May, 2015, regional elections, however, MAS suffered losses in its share of the vote and in the regional posts it controlled. A constitutional amendment that would have permitted Morales to run for a fourth term was rejected in a referendum in Feb., 2016, but in Nov., 2017, the constitutional court set aside the result, saying that term limits violated voters' and candidates' human rights and that an illegal defamatory campaign against Morales had influenced the vote.

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