

## Public Health and Political Unrest In Bolivia: [A talk with Professor Rene Soria from the Universidad Mayor de San Andres, La Paz, Bolivia](#)

### About Rene...

Rene Soria Saucedo is an accomplished public health expert from Bolivia. After completing his medical degree at the [Universidad Mayor de San Andrés](#) in Bolivia, he sought his Masters in Public Health from the [Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública](#) in Mexico and then moved to the United State to acquire his doctorate in Health Services and Research at [Boston University](#). Throughout his academic years he became involved with various research projects and publications, and eventually landed a job as an assistant professor and Associate Investigator at the [University of Florida](#), in Gainesville.

However, after many years living in the US, Rene finally returned to his home country and where he worked with Japan International Cooperation Agency ([JICA](#)) & the Bolivian Agency for Nuclear Energy ([ABEN](#)) prior to the pandemic exploding in Bolivia. He is currently a Public Health Professor at Universidad Mayor de San Andres in La Paz, Bolivia.

### Political Turmoil...

In order to better understand the covid-19 response in Bolivia, it helps to understand the socio-political situation which has rattled the country for the past 100 years as well as some of its cultural context.

To begin with, Bolivia has a long history of intercontinental war over resources, tied to an [incessant string of coups](#) for power over the country and systematic oppression of native indigenous peoples.

While the nation did experience a period of relative peace and prosperity by the turn of the [20th century](#), a coup in 1920 was the first event in a series that spiraled the country into disarray. From 1932 to roughly 1935 the government submerged the country in war over territory despite a downed economy, which was then followed by a military coup which gave rise to various quarrelling political parties. These [parties and the military waged battles](#) on each other and toggled for power, all the way through 1980 when democracy was restored. Nonetheless, the scars left on the nation and the distrust of the people in its government, still run very deep.

### Bolivia in the Pandemic...

While the country has enjoyed another period of relative tranquility since the 1980's, a new issue is always on the horizon; Most recently, [President Evo Morales](#), who is the head of the Socialist party in Bolivia and has held office since 2006, was [ran out of office](#) in November of 2019 with military support on the count of rigging the ballot. Now, massive distrust of the 'temporary' government which has taken residency in the capital along with strong religious outlooks makes fighting the pandemic in this country "a daily battle," says Dr. Rene Soria.

Since the outbreak, Rene has collaborated with the University of San Andres to create models and forecast the epidemiological effect of the disease on the national and sub-national levels. With his expertise he was able to attain a position working as an appointee on the presidential scientific committee where he is able to consult with the president on the possible health outcomes of policies and decrees as they unfold throughout the pandemic.

Nonetheless, amongst the greatest challenges he faces, is the political distrust. According to Rene, the government and its ministry of health “have not been able to own the narrative of the pandemic.” Rather, it seems that the political opposition are the ones who hold it, but they do not seem to be putting it to good use. While some of them seem to claim that the virus is not real and that the government is just using it as a convenient excuse to maintain power, others overdramatize the virus and create hysteria.

Yet another front that he and the presidential advisory have to fend is a religious one. Rene divulged that in the wake of all this, self-declared prophets have come forward and are providing areas of the population with ‘cures’ to the virus. Doctors and dentists, nonetheless, are amongst these and are prescribing “drug cocktails composed of antibiotics, steroids, hydroxychloroquine, ivermectin and sulfa-drugs,” says Rene. People are ending up hospitalized regularly including some with permanent kidney or liver damage.

### **A post Covid world...**

So the question stands: where do we go from here? According to Rene, there is nonstop work to be done and lessons to be learned from this situation. He seems to believe that the unstable political system and its lack of funding for public health directives are at the root of the dire conditions in which the country finds itself. “Bolivia,” he says “is a country where authorities have a tendency to hide things and not show the truth in fear that the nation will panic. However, a pandemic can only be faced with the truth.”

Going forward he believes the country needs to improve its databases and transparency to let the numbers and the data speak for itself. He says that the government should invest in its technical and technological resources to better disseminate factual information in ways that it is understood and well received by the public. He says that “the downside of being human, is that “we only learn in times of crisis.” He believes that one of the best lessons we can learn from this is “health in all policies.” A post-covid world is drastically different than before, yet Rene, alongside the other interviews we have conducted with Spanish counterparts, continues to leave us hopeful for the dynamic changes of our global health systems.