



“Today we respect the *cato* of coca in peace:”
Interview with Leonardo Loza, Coca Union Leader of Bolivia’s Chapare Region

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Yanoff: Could you explain your role in the Six Federations of the Cochabamba Tropics (Chapare) and in coca policy?

Loza: I’m Leonardo Loza. I belong to the Intercultural Federation of the Chimore as the executive of this federation. I am also the Vice President of the Six Federations of the Cochabamba Tropics known as the *cocaleros*.¹ I am also the Departmental

President of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) Party of Cochabamba. I am also the National Executive of the Confederation of Intercultural Indigenous Communities of Bolivia.

In terms of community coca control, which we implement here in the Cochabamba Tropics, it is more communitarian, social, organic, and union-oriented. We don’t need a repressive force, worse if it is an external force. It is internal, between colleagues,

¹ In January 2016, Loza was the Vice President of the Six Federations of the Chapare. He no longer

holds this position, but is still a leader of MAS and a coordinator of the Six Federations.

person to person, member to member. They tend to their *catos* of coca and if anyone commits any infraction or doesn't respect their *cato* of coca he/she is sanctioned by the coca union; organic sanctions. First by drawing their attention to the issue, then eradicating the *cato* of coca. There are definitely also cases of expulsion [from the unions], for the colleagues that are absolutely undisciplined.

Yanoff: Could you describe a bit more what social changes are most evident since the *cato* agreement and the coca reforms? How have conditions changed in the Chapare?

Loza: Since 2006 pretty much everything has changed around here. Before 2006 during supposed coca and narcotics control, [they] sowed death in the Cochabamba Tropics. [They] sowed tears, pain and mourning. There were many prisoners, many people unjustly persecuted, accused of being terrorists and drug traffickers. There was not only coca eradication in the Chapare, but there was a definitive policy to exterminate the producers of the coca leaf; to displace them from their land. This was the Cochabamba Tropics of the past. We had more than 100 deaths from our marches, blockades and activities.



Photo Credit: Thomas Grisaffi

Thank God we made a political decision, with our brother, the current President Evo Morales leading us. It cost us almost twenty

years of struggle in the Chapare, and at the national level. We transformed our local struggle into an electoral one.

We built a political mechanism and ran for office in less than ten years. Our party has grown enormously across the country. And then in 2006 we won the elections for the first time with a political instrument built in the streets, in mobilizations, in syndical struggles...After this, we implemented the *cato* of coca. [This was] obviously an organic decision, a syndical decision, but also a political decision, because until then coca was penalized, demonized, sanctioned by different laws not only on a national level, but also internationally.

We have had a huge assignment since 2006. First we began with the Constitution...In which we included our coca leaf so that it is constitutionally respected, so that no neoliberals or political party can reverse it or talk about zero coca in the Cochabamba Tropics or in Bolivia.



Photo Credit: Thomas Grisaffi

Our *cato* of coca is 40 by 40, 1600 square meters per union member in the Cochabamba Tropics. Throughout the country we are trying to consolidate 20,000 hectares of coca.

Out of the 20,000, 7,000 are in the Cochabamba Tropics. We internally respect this quantity as an organization. If a

community member plants a parcel, he has the right to renew it or move it to another place, but there is a huge level of community control. In every union we have formed a committee of community control. Every month this committee goes around to check the plots and observe which colleagues are respecting the *cato* and which are not. This has been a great policy.

Another one of the best practices in all of Latin America that Bolivia has found is in the fight against drug trafficking. We do not need any uniformed American to come and help us anymore. We have created a policy against drug trafficking that belongs to the Bolivian people, between our government and the coca leaf producers, in which we monitor ourselves without deaths, injuries, persecutions, orphans, or widows. Today the *cato* of coca is respected in peace. Before, the neoliberal governments left us with more than 30,000 hectares of coca. Imagine that without the American DEA, without the U.S. embassy, now we have less...



Photo Credit: Thomas Grisaffi

This is the work and the fruit of the Bolivian people. And we will continue with this type of control. We will continue implementing community control and disciplining ourselves so that we create a social consciousness about having to industrialize and commercialize the coca leaf. Not only within Bolivia, but our idea is to consolidate

big health industries so that from here, from Bolivia, we can export products derived from coca leaf to the United States and the whole world.

Unfortunately, the United States thinks that [growing] coca is drug trafficking. So we will introduce them to how our industrialized coca leaf can save lives. It is not what they think: that coca destroys lives.

We are now developing a new General Coca Law, and after our electoral conjectures we will meet with our brothers in the Yungas of La Paz and we will develop a law to present to the national congress, and congress will create an explicit law on coca: how to produce it, how much can be produced, how it should be industrialized, how it should be commercialized, what will be the system to control the *catos* of coca.

One of the most harmful aspects of the old Law 1008 was combining coca with drug trafficking. We absolutely will separate a law clearly for coca and a different law clearly for controlling drug trafficking, which is something illegal and we do not support such activities that some community members unfortunately carry out. So I feel that on the coca issue, not only for the producers of coca leaf, but also for the Bolivian people overall, it is important to develop a consciousness that coca leaf was for years stigmatized, and that it should be definitively freed under industrialization.

Yanoff: In the Law 1008 reforms, in making this distinction between coca and drug trafficking, how do you think that will change the process of penalizing drugs? As the current Law 1008 ambiguously classifies different sentences, will reforming this law have a more hardline effect on drug trafficking?

Loza: First of all, our coca leaf has to be legally and technically recognized and respected. Not only on the national level, but

also around the world. Because the coca leaf in its natural state has never hurt anyone, has never drugged anyone, has never made anyone crazy. On the contrary, the person who chews coca leaf is a colleague who thinks better. For example, for President Evo Morales, if we are developing a general law on coca it is so that the rest of the world legally recognizes that coca leaf in its natural state is not harmful and should be commercialized like any other product. This is our political and legal intention.

For drug trafficking, we will of course pass a law to address this... But we want the law against drug trafficking to involve many national organisms as well as countries around the world. Even if Bolivia or parts of Latin America produce coca, even if some community members malignantly use coca to traffic drugs, this drug trafficking can't only be combatted at home. If here there is drug trafficking it is because someone outside is consuming it.

So we want to get consumers, users, those that pay millions for drug trafficking involved. These countries that are part of the problem have to invest economic resources to fight drug trafficking. So that they don't just criticize, observe, disparage, and disqualify, as they have done thus far. If the demand for drugs disappeared, I am sure that there would be zero drug trafficking...

Yanoff: Following the expulsion of the DEA how has Bolivia worked with other international forces in the implementation of these policies, such as the UN or the EU?



FONADAL palm heart plant, Gov.

Loza: Expelling the U.S. embassy, the CIA, and the American military was one of the best policies of our government. There are plenty of other regions and other organizations, such as the United Nations and the European Union. What is our understanding with the European Union? First, that Bolivia has to be respected. Just because they give us funding does not mean, like in the past, that they can dictate the policies that should be implemented by the Bolivian people. In this sense, we have had a good understanding with the European Union.

The European Union cooperates with us economically, but the policies are decided in Bolivia, transparently, with sovereignty. Resources from the European Union are converted into policies, social programs, productive [diversification] programs, programs that improve [industrial] production in coca growing regions, but also in surrounding areas near where coca is produced to ensure that coca production does not expand...

Yanoff: You spoke of the commercialization of coca, how is this project advancing. Is there more international support for this or not yet?

Loza: We have made progress... We were very pleased and celebrated that our brother President [Evo Morales] lifted and showed the coca leaf in the United Nations. Maybe

many countries thought that a tree directly produced drug trafficking. But our brother, the President, publically showed to the world that the coca leaf is a natural renewable resource that can be especially beneficial to poor people around the world.



Government Palace Website March 2013

Our President, and international officials, spread the word about exporting coca leaf in its natural state as well as in industrialized form, obviously following all of the norms of the international community... We are prepared for national control, and international control, as long as each person's dignity is respected.

Q: Do you think community control has changed international prohibitionist norms? How has Bolivia been a part of a new movement for alternatives to prohibitionism and questioned longstanding norms?

A: Yes, absolutely. It has been an alternative and a unique example... Because the classic War on Drugs imposes policies, imposes funding, imposes arms, and deaths. This kind of fight against drug trafficking is gone and has accomplished nothing. If we look at Peru, if we look at Colombia: they [U.S.] invest so much money, they send millions of dollars, and how is the fight against drug trafficking going in Peru and Colombia? Production of coca is rising. In Bolivia we don't have support from the U.S., we don't

have support from the International Monetary Fund and how is our fight against drug trafficking? A shining example. We have another form of fighting drug trafficking. In Bolivia we have set a great example for the rest of the world that you can fight drug trafficking with cooperation and participation, without any imposition...

I hope that our brother countries like Peru and Colombia obtain what we have adopted in Bolivia. To rid themselves of foreign policies in the interest of a group, of a country, of some politicians in the empire [U.S.] that will not solve anything. The fight against drug trafficking can change with a policy based on the participation of my fellow coca growers, who know and express what they think, not only in Bolivia where we are advancing, but also in the rest of the world.

Q: So you do not think that tensions still exist with armed forces in the Chapare or in the rest of Bolivia? Even with the implementation of eradication and interdiction measures?

A: No. In the past, coca producers and uniformed officials were like water and oil, we could not trust each other and we hated each other. It was a very troubling situation. Today, the control comes from the state: the military and national police. And we are like brothers in the union, in the federation, in all of Bolivia. We plan in a cooperative way how we will intervene if a community member has exceeded his/her *cato* of coca. We organize between producers, the government, the police and the military. We plan with these four or five state institutions how we can intervene, in peace and tranquility, with consensus... Today we are very happy that we have found this kind of fight against drug trafficking that no one imposes, but rather, works together.

Q: My last question: how do you think the system of community control could be

improved? What are the next steps to make it better?

A: I am sure that as time passes, new things will come up. Things always change, time passes, time progresses, and in this sense I am sure that we will continue to perfect

community control, and will continue to implement new things... We are not all the same, we don't know everything, there will always be something missing. But as necessary, we will keep thinking in the fight against drug trafficking, keep thinking of Bolivia, and we will keep perfecting it.



Departmental Government Cochabamba

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