

Bolivia: 'Governing by Obeying the People'

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A new twist in the turbulent saga surrounding a proposed roadway through indigenous land has reignited a debate raging throughout Bolivia since the middle of last year.

The controversial highway — which would cut through the Isiboro-Secure National Park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS) — has been at the centre of protests and counter-protests. It has polarised Bolivian society and divided indigenous groups that are the heart of the Evo Morales government's social base.

Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president, was first elected in 2005 on the back of a wave of anti-neoliberal uprisings. An elected constituent assembly drew up a new constitution, adopted by referendum, that grants unprecedented rights to the nation's indigenous majority.

But the task of transforming the poor Andean nation, the victim of hundreds of years of colonial pillage, comes with serious obstacles. The TIPNIS dispute, in which different sectors of the indigenous population have competing views and interests, reveals one such challenge.

The source of renewed debate was the February 9 decision by parliament to pass a law approving a process to consult indigenous communities within TIPNIS about the roadway. This places the future of the project, which the government views as a strategic necessity to develop Bolivia, in the hands of those that will be most affected.

The government has also called on Bolivia's main social organisations to help draft a new law to set the legal parameters for future consultations, a right enshrined in the new constitution.

The aim is to set up a framework for greater popular participation and overcome the rising number of local conflicts of various development projects.

These moves may help rebuild fractured alliances and expand forms of participatory democracy. Or they may deepen rifts among Morales supporters.

A key factor will be how well the government isolates increasingly intransigent forces on both sides of the debate.

Two marches, two laws

The conflict first erupted in July last year. The TIPNIS Subcentral the legal bearers of the TIPNIS collective land title that is home to Yuracare, Chimán and Moxe indigenous communities said it would march onto the capital La Paz to oppose the proposed roadway.

Community leaders raised the lack of consultation and concerns over the impact the road could have on local communities.

The proposed march quickly gained support from two important indigenous organisations: the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia (CIDOB), which unites 34 lowland indigenous peoples, and the Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyu (CONAMAQ), comprised of 16 small indigenous communities.

After almost 70 days and a police attack, the march reached La Paz in October. Protesters succeeded in getting parliament to approve a law banning a highway through TIPNIS.

On enacting the law, Morales said his government was making good on its slogan of “governing by obeying”. He said those within TIPNIS who supported the highway would have to take their views up with their community leaders.

By December, a counter-march had been initiated by the Indigenous Council of the South (CONISUR), which groups some of the indigenous communities within TIPNIS and in “Poligono Seven” (a zone within TIPNIS but not part of the collective title).

Poligono Seven, whose population greatly outnumbers that of local indigenous peoples within the rest of TIPNIS, is mainly home to outside indigenous *campesinos* (peasants) who, searching for land to till, have settled in the area.

The CONISUR march received support from Bolivia’s three main national indigenous campesino groups and nearby coca-grower unions. All said the highway is essential to providing their communities with access to basic services and markets at which to sell their produce.

When the CONISUR march arrived in La Paz 39 days later, the government encouraged leaders of the first march to meet with CONISUR representatives to try to resolve the dispute.

When the request was rejected by CIDOB and the TIPNIS Subcentral, parliamentarians began meeting with CONISUR to discuss a new law to allow TIPNIS communities to decide the project’s fate.

However, critics of the new law, including CIDOB and TIPNIS Subcentral leaders, say the purpose of the consultation process is to reverse the government’s decision after the first march and open the way to allow the road to be built.

CIDOB leaders have pledged to organise another march to La Paz to oppose the recent moves. They have ruled out taking part in drafting a general law on consultations.

Let the people decide

The TIPNIS dispute reveals two key dilemmas the Morales government faces in making the concept of “governing by obeying” real.

Bolivian vice-president Alvaro Garcia Linera said in a November 28 speech: “To govern by obeying is to affirm every day that the sovereign is not the state. It is the people, who express themselves not only every five years by the vote, but each day they speak and put

forward their needs, expectations and collective requirements.

However, as Garcia Linera noted and the TIPNIS dispute reveals, “the people are not something homogeneous. There are social classes, there are identities, there are regions. The people are very diverse.

There is a dilemma arising from tensions created when a project strategic to overall national development encounters resistance from those who will be locally affected.

Few in Bolivia, including those opposed to the current proposal, question the need for a roadway to connect Bolivia’s isolated northern Amazonian region with the country’s centre and west.

Given this, Garcia Linera said the role of those in government is not to substitute for the people but to harmonise the voices of the people, to synthesise its concerns.

Analysing the government’s handling of the TIPNIS dispute, Garcia Linera said February 4 the government had made two errors. These were, first, not consulting communities about the highway, and then failing to consult communities on the law that banned any highway through TIPNIS.

He said: “We have to correct both errors, and what is the best way to correct both errors? Let the [people] that live there decide... that is the most democratic, the most just manner ...

“The [people] there, those that suffer, should decide if there should be a roadway.”

Such an approach, combined with calling on Bolivia’s social movements to help draft a general law on consultation, stands in stark contrast to the record of previous neoliberal governments.

However, implementing this complex and difficult task will require overcoming two immediate challenges.

Challenges and opportunities

The first is confronting the growing alliance between some indigenous leaders opposed to Morales government policies such as the roadway and elements of Bolivia’s traditional elites. These elites were behind the wave of violence unleashed against indigenous peoples during the first Morales term.

While quick to denounce the Morales government, CIDOB leaders recently praised the right-wing Santa Cruz governor. They signed an agreement providing the indigenous organisation with a post in the Santa Cruz governorship.

The agreement has drawn fire even from CIDOB allies. On January 26, TIPNIS Subcentral president Fernando Vargas publicly rejected the move, saying CIDOB leaders had “put their foot in it” by signing such an agreement.

But CIDOB’s deal with the Santa Cruz governor does not seem to be an aberration. A recent string of events point to a burgeoning union between these traditional enemies.

This includes the alliance forged between indigenous deputies and right-wing parties in the Santa Cruz departmental council against the Morales-led Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), a favour repaid with more than US\$3.5 million for development projects in CIDOB communities.

There was also the comment by CIDOB leader Lazaro Tacoo on December 14 that indigenous people should “forgive” the Santa Cruz elite for its violent attacks against them, “as only now are they recognising the importance of indigenous peoples”.

The government faces the challenge of isolating those forces seeking alliances with the violent right wing and rebuilding a strong alliance with lowland indigenous groups.

However, Pablo Stefanoni, a critical sympathiser of the Morales government, wrote in a February 13 *Pagina Siete* article that this will require confronting “the idea held by a sector of the government of imposing a strategic defeat on the lowlands indigenous peoples in order to advance with development projects”.

This perspective is seen in the continued insistence of some government officials that the only possible path for the roadway is the one proposed.

However, Pablo Solon, a former Bolivian ambassador to the United Nations and critic of the government’s treatment of the TIPNIS issue, said it is incumbent on the government to prove that there is no alternative route. This is needed to show the consultation process is being carried out in good faith.

Solon proposed a commission made up of representatives from the TIPNIS Subcentral, CONISUR, the governors of Beni and Cochabamba and the government, along with engineers and environmentalists.

Such a body could study all possible alternative routes, taking into consideration the economic, environmental and social impact of each one.

“Only on the basis of all these alternatives is it possible to then carry out a serious and responsible consultation,” Solon said.

Such a move would complement other positive steps that have been taken towards defusing tensions. These include the February 14 announcement by the president of the Bolivian senate that the consultation process will not involve outside indigenous groups that have settled in Poligono Seven.

Instead, the process will be coordinated in agreement between the government and the three indigenous peoples within TIPNIS.

The proposal to directly involve different social movements in collectively debating how best to carry out consultation represents a further advance in expanding decision-making powers to local communities and social movements.

It may also prove an important step in broadening the necessary debate on how to flesh out the constitution’s provisions on indigenous autonomy and land reform.

This entails dealing with complex issues, such as how best to tackle poverty and develop Bolivia’s economy while protecting the environment and the rights of indigenous

communities.

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