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Bolivia: Social tensions erupt

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Indigenous Quechua protesters blockaded the main road between La Paz and Potosi on August 8.

Recent scenes of roadblocks, strikes and even the dynamiting of a vice-minister's home in the Bolivian department (administrative district) of Potosi, reminiscent of the days of previous neoliberal governments, have left many asking themselves what is really going on in the "new" Bolivia of indigenous President Evo Morales.

Since July 29, the city of Potosi, which has 160,000 inhabitants, has ground to a halt. Locals are up in arms over what they perceive to be a lack of support for regional development on the part of the national government.

Potosi is Bolivia's poorest department but the most important for the mining sector, which is on the verge of surpassing gas as the country's principal export because of rising mineral prices.

Julio Quinonez, a miner's cooperative leader told *El Diario* on August 4: "We don't want to continue to be the dairy cow that the other regions live off as they always have. Potosi can move forward whether through independence, federalisation or autonomy as established in the constitution."

Local media reported that 100,000 people attended a rally in the city of Potosi on August 3. A hunger strike was initiated that swelled to include more than 600 political and social leaders, including the governor, some local deputies aligned with Morales' Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) and 20 sex-workers.

The trigger for the protests was an age-old dispute over departmental boundary demarcations with neighbouring Oruro following the discovery that a hill in the area contains minerals used to make cement.

Locals are demanding the government invest more in the region, frustrated that the government has not resolved the daily problems of a poverty-stricken region with an infant mortality rate of 101 in every 1000 babies born — despite sitting on 50% of the world's lithium.

They are proposing the construction of a cement factory, the completion of a road between Potosi and the department of Tarija, the reopening of the Karachipampa metallurgical plant and an international airport for what is one of Bolivia's premier tourist destinations.

Another demand is the preservation of the Cerro Rico. These legendary mountains overlooking the city of Potosi used to hold the world's largest silver mine. Now it is in danger

of collapsing as a result of centuries of rapacious looting dating back to colonial days, when Potosi was the same size as London and financed much of Europe's development.

Locals have occupied an electricity plant and threatened to cut off supplies to the nearby Japanese-owned San Cristobal mine — the largest in Bolivia.

Supplies of food and other essentials are beginning to run extremely low.

Many roadblocks have been lifted, but negotiations between the government and local authorities stalled as they demanded that Morales himself, and not his "right-wing" ministers, come to the table.

Meanwhile, locals in Uyuni in the south of the department, home to the famous salt lakes and Bolivia's lithium reserves, voted on August 12 to blockade roads against the protests being organised by the Potosi civic committee. They claim the civic committee wants a lithium processing plant to be built closer to the city so that it solely benefits the city of Potosi.

They are also demanding that the government install an interconnected electrical system in Uyuni and build a Uyuni-Huancarani highway.

These protests have been preceded by similar, though smaller protests, by workers over wages, clashes in Caravani between rival local peasant organisations over the site of a new citrus processing plant and a march by Amazonian indigenous peoples demanding consultation before any state activity to exploit natural resources.

These are warning signs of some of the challenges that the process for change underway in Bolivia faces.

To understand the protests it is necessary to look at the relationship that exists between social movements, the government and Morales.

The MAS, or Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples (IPSP), as it was originally known, emerged both as a result of the process of decentralisation of Bolivia's political system through the creation of municipal councils and local National Assembly deputies in the early 1990s as well as the crisis that this very system underwent around the same time.

With the old ruling political parties in a state of terminal decay and the old left-wing groups having either disintegrated or incorporated itself into the traditional party system, it was Bolivia's rising indigenous and peasant organisations that gave birth to their "political instrument" with the aim of entering the electoral arena and moving from resistance to power.

The core of this new political instrument were the peasant confederation, CSUTCB; the "Bartolinas," a peasant women's confederation confederation; the colonisers confederation, CSCB (now know as intercultural communities, CSCIB) and the coca growers of the Chapare, from whose ranks Morales emerged.

Through winning control of a number of local councils and seats in congress, the *cocaleros* became the core around which the various regional and sectoral organisations would coalesce in the late '90s to make up the IPSP (more commonly known as MAS, its electorally

registered name).

In 2000, an important cycle of revolutionary struggle exploded, beginning with the opposition to water privatisation in Cochabamba and uprisings in support of indigenous self-determination in the Aymara highlands.

The first wave of this cycle peaked with the overthrow of the-president Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada in October 2003, when a diverse range of worker, peasant and indigenous organisations first united against the government's attempts to cheaply export the country's gas via Chile. The movement demanded the president's resignation following the massacre of more than 60 people.

A second wave of resistance brought down his successor in June 2005, again with diverse organisations uniting around the issue of gas. This paved the way for Morales' victory in December 2005 presidential election, with a historic 54.7% of the vote.

Fierce resistance from the traditional elites, who felt they were being pushed out of power, triggered the third, most powerful revolutionary wave in this cycle of struggle.

Bunkered down in the wealthier eastern states, the right-wing opposition set off a chain of events aimed at overthrowing Morales. However, the combined action of Morales' government, the social movements and the armed forces crushed the coup attempt in September 2008, a blow the opposition has yet to fully recover from.

Ironically, while its electoral base grew to 64% in December 2009, the MAS itself was greatly weakened.

While the MAS was born in the countryside, where the structures of the "political instrument" and the powerful peasant and indigenous organisations were one and the same, it began to expand into the cities following its 2005 victory, where social organisations are much weaker and individual affiliation prevailed.

In many cases, due to the lack of trained professionals in the peasant and indigenous organisations, Morales was forced to rely on "invitees" from the already existing state bureaucracy to run the government.

Most of Morales' first cabinet came from these sectors, causing concern among the founding organisations of the MAS, who felt they were not being treated as they should be, with quotas in the government.

While the relatively autonomous social organisations united to defend "their" government during times of intense confrontation, they have also tended to retreat to more local and sectoral demands.

Now in government, many of these groups began to view the MAS as a vehicle to access employment in the public service, just as the middle classes did with their parties when they were in power.

The absence of internal structures in the MAS that could allow a debate over its future led to it becoming increasingly irrelevant as anything more than a place to look for work.

Above all this stood Morales: at the same time as leading the process of change, he was

head of state, head of the MAS and even continued to head the cocalero union in the Chapare.

With a debilitated MAS, Morales increasingly plays the role of mediator between ministers, social organisations, party leaders, militants, and "invitees".

This created the rise in demands on the government by various sectors, who having supported "their" government through the intense battles of the last few years, now want it to resolve all the problems inherited from centuries of colonialism.

Here the government is encountering a number of challenges. There is a state bureaucracy which works more to undermine than advance the government's projects and social organisations with political baggage inherited from the previous society. The government points out it is impossible to resolve century-old problems overnight.

According to an August 9 article by Pablo Stefanoni, Morales outlined the fight against narcotrafficking and contraband, low levels of public investment, personal ambitions and the industrialisation of natural resources as key problems.

"It is in the construction of the state that the success or failure of the reforms underway will play out" Stefanoni said.

But to do this, it is vital to reconstruct a political instrument that can truly become a space for the exchange of debates and ideas about the future of the process, capable of generating proposals and uniting the necessary forces to implement a coherent project of change.

Otherwise, indecision, improvisation, inaction and incoherence will continue to plague Bolivia's process of change.

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