

Bolivia: The Struggle for Change

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Having captured the imagination of progressives across the globe with scenes of indigenous uprisings confronting right-wing governments and multinationals, Bolivia has become a key focus point of discussion within the left regarding strategies for change.

However, starry-eyed notions and schemas rather than reality have often influenced the views of left commentators on the revolutionary process unfolding in South America's poorest nation.

At the centre of this debate is the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), led by indigenous President Evo Morales, and its strategy for refounding Bolivia.

After three years of the Morales government it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions about this social experiment.

This experiment expresses the desire of Bolivia's oppressed indigenous majority to take power in order to bring about real change — unlike the Mexican Zapatista's "change the world without taking power" strategy or the practice of Brazil's Workers' Party that combines power with as little change as possible.

Reformist MAS, revolutionary bases?

Two prominent figures that have consistently attacked the strategy of the MAS leadership have been US intellectual James Petras and Canadian socialist Jeffery Webber.

For Petras, the situation today in Bolivia is explained by the division between "a revolutionary impoverished peasant mass base and [the] electoral-reformist petit bourgeois leadership" of Morales.

The MAS has channelled this revolutionary base, argues Petras, towards "electoral politics culminating in [Morales's] successful electoral campaign for the presidency" and in doing so derailing a "revolutionary" outcome to the nation's political and social crisis.

Webber has argued that Bolivian social movements face the choice of MAS's "populist reformism" or "a turn toward indigenous liberation and a transition to socialism".

However, the MAS government and strategy can only be understood in the context of the intertwined and complex relationship between Morales, MAS and the social movements.

The social explosions of 2000 were only the first visible explosions of a growing discontent that had emerged against neoliberalism in Bolivia.

Since 1985, successive Bolivian governments turned it into a laboratory for neoliberal shock therapy.

Privatisation of mines, labour casualisation and market deregulation led to a massive fragmentation and dispersal of the militant miner's movement shattering any real resistance in the urban areas to the plundering of the country's economy and resources.

In the early 1990s, indigenous communities from the east — marching in defence of land and for a new constituent assembly to found a new, inclusive Bolivia — marked a revitalisation of indigenous movements.

Many ex-miners and Aymara indigenous people, who in the '80s sought out a livelihood growing coca following the mine privatisation and drought wave in the west of the country, found new political homes in the powerful cocalero unions.

Militant union traditions and indigenous communitarian organising, combined with increased militarisation in the coca-growing regions, led to the emergence of the militantly anti-imperialist cocaleros. Acting more as organs of local power than simple unions, the unions took on roles traditionally assigned to the state.

With disaffection growing with the neoliberal parties, the idea of the need for a political vehicle grew.

The cocaleros, together with the peasant movement predominately based in the west and the indigenous movement of the east, forged their own political instrument: the Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples (IPSP) — today more commonly known by its legally registered name, the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS).

Even today, it is these organisations (particularly the cocaleros) that make up the heart and organisational structure of the MAS. It is with these organisations that Morales continues to discuss and debate the next steps forward.

Ignored or downplayed by much of the urban left, the MAS-IPSP began to accumulate forces, attempting to reach out into the cities.

Elections and insurrection

Through a strategy of mobilisation, alliance building and the construction of a national project for change, the indigenous peasant movement burst onto the political scene in the 2002 national elections, where Morales came a close second with 21% of the vote.

While reflecting its still predominately rural base, the vote marked the first time that large sections of indigenous people had voted for "one of their own". Together with Felipe Quispe's Pachakutik Indigenous Movement, indigenous parties controlled a third of the parliament.

This led to a strengthened belief in the possibility of winning elections in order to use parliament as a tool for transforming Bolivia.

This in part explains the small role played by MAS and the cocaleros in the 2003 uprising against then-president Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada. They restricted themselves to

mobilisations and roadblocks in the Chapare, while the militant neighbourhood organisations of El Alto led the protests.

Divisions amongst the various leaders of the regionalised corporative social movements, who each mobilised independently around their respective sectoral demands, also explain the non-central role of Morales in these events.

The MAS, and particularly Morales, played a much more prominent role in the 2005 uprising against Carlos Mesa. While originally raising a more moderate proposal regarding gas nationalisations than other more “radical” social movements, MAS, listening to the ranks it had mobilised in large numbers, shifted its demands to the left.

Morales’s call for mobilisations to block the swearing-in of the next two in line to assume the presidency following Mesa’s resignation was crucial to opening the path towards early elections.

This was an outcome that all the social movements — including the “radicals” — accepted.

With no alternative project on the left posed, MAS won the 2005 election with over 90% support in the Chapare, 80% in the impoverished Aymara city of El Alto, a clean sweep of the middle-class areas in La Paz, and 30% in the eastern department of Santa Cruz.

Indigenous nationalism

This emergence of a militant indigenous nationalism, expressed in the vote for Morales, acts as the cohering force that has drawn around it important sections of white-mestizos, and whose vision involves promoting inclusion and power distribution with the indigenous majority.

While some of the social movements have proposed more radical actions or demands — expressed in the divisions that exist within MAS over whether to use dialogue or directly confront the oligarchy — no real movement expressing a radically different project for change, let alone a socialist project, exists.

Instead today, the movements are more united than ever behind “their” government, with the unity pact that exists between the National Coalition for Change (CONALCAM — the largest indigenous, peasant and urban social movements) and the Bolivian Workers Central.

What makes this national movement different from previous nationalist experiences is that for the first time, it is not sections of the middle class or military, but indigenous plebeian sectors that are leading the forces of change.

The Morales government has focussed on modernising the country, promoting industrialisation, increased state intervention in the economy, promoted social and cultural inclusion, and a more democratic redistribution of rent from natural resources through various social programs.

In a country where only a few years ago the president spoke Spanish with a strong US accent, the rise of the first indigenous president marks a new era. The Morales government opened up the possibility of fulfilling the aim of this indigenous majority of a new constitution.

Right-wing counter-offensive

Such a project of change encountered the reaction of the old elite, who see in these changes Bolivia's version of the Bolshevik revolution.

The focal point of this resistance has been the department of Santa Cruz, the origin of 30% of national GDP, more 50% of tax revenue and food production and home to 47.6% of foreign investment.

These elites violently opposed any steps towards a new constitution that, far from representing the outcome of some idealistic counter-power of the social movements, was always aimed at institutionalising and deepening the gains of the MAS government.

Together with the business elites from the half moon — the eastern departments of Pando, Beni and Tarija — these forces unleashed a virulent campaign against the government, culminating in an open attempt at overthrowing the government in September.

In response, the social movements — both those that make up the organic structure of the MAS and those that remain outside it, all of whom maintain a relationship with Morales that is characterised by a contradictory mix of verticalism and autonomy — mobilised to defeat the coup-plotting offensive.

The outcome was the approval by Congress — where the opposition controls the Senate — of a modified text that, while including temporary retreats on questions of land reform, maintained the essence of the constitutional text — a plurinational state with greater indigenous rights and state control of natural resources — which the opposition had vowed to oppose to the death.

This text will be put to a referendum in January next year.

Demoralised and divided, the opposition split over whether to support the new constitution. Meanwhile MAS and the social movements, closing ranks around the new text, are campaigning to ensure a massive vote in support of the new constitution on January 25, hoping to use this momentum to gain complete control of parliament in the national elections scheduled from next December.

Challenges

However, important challenges remained to be tackled.

The opposition will undoubtedly begin to regroup and plan its next offensive. Conflict has re-emerged as the government has made clear its intention to study the validity of large landholdings in order to redistribute illegally owned land.

The world economic crisis, which has resulted in declining mineral prices, also poses a challenge.

The fact that the Bolivian state that MAS has inherited continues to be dominated by right-wing elements that actively work against the process will continue to be a hindrance — something Morales has emphasised, arguing that winning the elections did not signify taking power.

Yet the biggest challenge will undoubtedly come from within.

Acting more like a federation of unions and social organisations than a political instrument, MAS is permeated by sectoral self-interest. The lack of political cadres has also led to a reliance on urban intellectuals and NGO leaders, without a space to articulate the different perspectives.

MAS also faces the challenge of preventing a transformation into a “traditional” political party. It appears that the future of MAS will be greatly influenced by the rise of the broader CONALCAM.

Yet there remains a lack of organic spaces for the elaboration of policies and a program to drive the process forward.

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