

## Devastating Fires in Bolivia: A Political Tool

Uncontrolled fires linked to agricultural expansions are being used as a political tool during this election year in Bolivia and are causing catastrophic consequences

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*The fires in the lowlands of Bolivia have burnt more than 1 million hectares, affecting forest reserves, protected areas and national parks. These fires represent the environmental tensions generated by the agricultural extractivism (McKay, 2018) that drives the Bolivian government, which in recent years has favoured the agribusiness and livestock sectors, through laws and political agreements and, generating an agro-state alliance based around land occupation as a source of wealth.*

Given the fall in price of hydrocarbons and minerals in 2013, the government then saw it as appropriate to promote the increase of exportation of monocultures (3rd highest export product), in order to raise its contribution to Bolivia's GDP, which in the past 10 years has seen an average growth of 4,5%, data which the government boasts about. So, in 2015 agricultural industries and the government organised an agricultural summit, where the details of the new plans for agricultural expansion were discussed, consolidating the political relationship between agriculture and the state.

One of the goals of the agricultural summit is to extend the agricultural frontier by 10 million hectares by 2025. Expanding in the east, over the Bolivian Chiquitania (the area that is currently affected by fires) and to the north-eastern lands neighbouring the Beni province in order to increase monoculture exports (soy, sorghum and corn), livestock, ethanol production and biofuels. This has meant promoting and strengthening partnerships with the countries landowning elite and transnational food companies (Monsanto, Cargill, Bayern Syngenta), who are in charge of the monoculture production chain, by giving transgenic seeds and chemical inputs to the farmers, being involved in the transformation of products in commodities (cake, flour) and the commercialisation them to the international markets. All this, through the agricultural cluster established in Santa Cruz in the nineties.

In this context, you can see how agricultural policies in Bolivia are designed to prioritize monocultures which has led to an obsession with increasing productivity and cultivation areas, with a purpose of increasing the income that this type of agriculture brings. This has put the modern agricultural development model in tension with the preservation of the environment. It also highlights the governments contractions between its commitment to agrarian capitalism and its rhetorical discourse about respect for mother earth.

Another key actor in understanding these fires and the deforestation, is the peasant's unions who are linked to the governing party and play a key role in this conflict. Firstly, they benefit from the government provision of land to farming communities in protected areas that are unfit for cultivation. The government does this on purpose as it has positive

consequences for them. Firstly, the farmers take part in land clearing (deforestation) and establish a territorial presence for the governing party in the East. The land they are given is also dependent on them becoming part of the monoculture circuit and becoming small and medium producers. Finally, large parts of the land that is initially endowed to farmers and peasants is subsequently sold on and/ or rented to agricultural or livestock owners due to the land trafficking that occurs in the area.

As well as facing social stigma for their land clearing practises the farmers are unable to plant anything other than soy, sorghum or other monocultures given that their land and financial credits are tied to monoculture cultivation. They have to pay for machinery and chemical inputs (herbicides and pesticides such as glyphosate that cause desertification of the soil), and also try to avoid floods, droughts or pests affecting their crop and thereby ruining their investment. This generates an unequal agriculture that enriches large companies, impoverishes small families and destroys the environment.

The uncontrolled fires that are affecting the dry forests of Chiquitano are thanks to the irresponsibility of the government in offering land in protected areas and due to the ignorance of the farmers, who have practised land clearing in the area. The Chiquitano dry forest is a transitional ecoregion, that sits somewhere in between the humidity of the Brazilian and the aridity of the Paraguayan Chaco and, due to the characteristics of the found there vegetation it houses more than 200 species of wood many of the flammable, particularly in dry seasons, such as right now (Ibisch & Mérida: 2008).

The loss of biodiversity and natural wealth is incalculable; the Otuquis National Park, the Tucabaca Valley, the San Matias Area of Integrated Management, the Chiquitana mountain range, among others, are natural areas that give the area an ecological balance. It is estimated that between 50 and 170 years will have to pass before the natural wealth of the forest is recovered. Preliminary data suggests that around 500 different animal species are in a vulnerable position and more than 50 farming communities have seen their crops and pastures turn to ash. The fire has also damaged the Ñembi Guazú Nature Reserve, home of the Ayoreo indigenous people who are some of the very few uncontacted people that are now threatened by the dispossession of their land.

This disaster shows how policies relating to land, the environment and indigenous people are considered inferior to the model of extractive development, that threatens the country's natural and cultural heritage. The destruction of the environment in exchange for economic growth and modern agriculture is also a consequence of the lack of agricultural policies that promote sustainable and diversified agriculture, which would take advantage of current cultivation areas and whose products would be intended for internal consumption and therefore do not obey the pressures of international market.

Despite this, the agricultural model that the government is promoting is successful for their political aims. It fulfils the promise of giving land to their peasant bases; increases its territorial and political presence in the East; satisfies the interests of the agro-industrial elites by expanding monoculture production and securing international markets (China) which will aid future production; and in turn, multiplies income from agriculture.

However, it is not only agricultural policy that is being used as a political tool, the uncontrolled fires are also being exploited by the president particularly since the Bolivian presidential elections take place on 20th October. This can be seen in the fact that the

government have refused to declare a national emergency, there has been a lack of coordination between the different levels of government and a delayed response to international aid. The fires have also revealed the government's inability and lack of political will to deal with a disaster of magnitude.

In this light, we can see that the fires and deforestation that is occurring within Bolivia is matching up with global agricultural trends, where the agro-state alliance obeys the demands of the multinational food companies, who dictate that monocultures should be grown in the Southern Cone countries. At the same time, the model is used politically by the government who can give land to farmers in protected areas, ignoring the significance of the land and the irreparable ecological damage.

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