

# Bolivia: Social Movements, Populism, and Democracy

Brooke Larson, Raúl Madrid, René Antonio Mayorga, and Jessica Varat

## INTRODUCTION

by Jessica Varat

Since Evo Morales' inauguration as president of Bolivia in January 2006, sharp debates have erupted within the country and abroad regarding the role in politics of the country's social movements; the revival of populist forms of governance and their compatibility with the institutions of liberal democracy; the resurgence of resource nationalism, this time in the natural gas sector; and Bolivia's foreign relations, particularly the country's relationship with Venezuela. This publication offers multiple perspectives on political conflict in the country and its implication for Bolivian democracy. The contributors, drawn from multiple disciplines, reflect the stark divisions that have emerged during Morales's first two years in office. Nonetheless, certain areas of convergence emerge: namely, that the current administration has had great difficulty effectively governing an increasingly fragmented and volatile political situation in the country.

The Morales administration has presided over a period of growing polarization in Bolivia against a backdrop of racial and economic inequality that has haunted the country for centuries. Morales' supporters have united around the convening of a Constituent Assembly to rewrite the country's constitution; indeed, the first measure of the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS)-led government upon taking office was to fulfill a pre-election promise by convening the Assembly. Many participants were to represent sectors of the population that had previously been excluded from the process of post-author-

itarian institution-building in Bolivia, principally indigenous peasants and workers. MAS supporters viewed the assembly as a revolutionary foundational moment for Bolivia, which offered the chance to take up such long-standing issues as land reform, the nationalization of the hydrocarbons sector, and the implementation of a regional governance structure composed of indigenous autonomies. However, the MAS has not commanded the majority it needed to pass articles which would institutionalize these sweeping reforms; in the meantime, various social groups within the MAS have pressured the government to quickly carry out its original mandate.

Representatives of the MAS and of the opposition parties in the assembly negotiated how new articles, and the constitution itself, would be approved. Attempts were made outside of the Constituent Assembly to broker agreements on the most conflictive issues, including regional and departmental autonomies. Yet these efforts were overwhelmed by a fiery national debate over whether the political capital of the country, La Paz, should be transferred to the judicial capital, Sucre. Tensions came to a head in November of 2007, when members of the Constituent Assembly approved the MAS-backed constitution in the absence of almost all opposition delegates, many of whom had not been present in the Oruro meeting where debates were taking place.<sup>1</sup>

While the constitution holds no legal weight until it is submitted to national referendum, the actions of the MAS enraged opposition forces which

---

*Jessica Varat is Program Associate for the Latin American Program. She would like to thank Cynthia J. Arnson, Director of the Latin American Program and LAP interns Sheree Adams, Angela Granum, Smith Monson, and Marisha Peña for their assistance in editing this document.*



Woodrow Wilson  
International Center  
for Scholars

LATIN AMERICAN PROGRAM



include both members of the political party PODEMOS, and political and civic leaders from the country's *media luna* region.<sup>2</sup> The backlash came in the form of a statute of autonomy proposed by the department of Santa Cruz; voters there approved the referendum on May 4, 2008, followed a few weeks later by similar votes in the provinces of Beni and Pando. The MAS-led government declared the autonomy votes illegal but now finds itself in a tenuous position: on August 10th, Bolivians will return to the ballot box to vote on whether or not to recall President Morales, Vice-President Álvaro García-Linera, and the nine departmental prefects from office. In order to maintain their current posts, the officials must win with the same percentage of votes—with at least the same voter turnout as in the 2005 elections—that originally brought them to office.<sup>3</sup>

In the meantime, violent manifestations of ethnic, social, and political tensions have become even more frequent. Recent instances of race-based violence against indigenous members of the MAS and continued street clashes between supporters and opponents of the government have raised questions about the country's long-term stability, the viability of the Morales government, and the future of democratic governance.<sup>4</sup>

The authors of this publication reflect on the circumstances which have brought Bolivia to this point. *Raúl Madrid* of the University of Texas-Austin examines the 2005 election of Evo Morales through the lens of ethnic politics and discusses the ways these elections signified a rupture from past electoral processes. *René Antonio Mayorga*, Centro Boliviano de Estudios Multidisciplinarios (CEBEM), examines the populist dilemmas facing the MAS as it confronts its dual identity as both a social movement and political party at the

head of a government. Finally, *Brooke Larson* of the State University of New York, Stony Brook, charts the historical participation of indigenous groups in Bolivian politics and society and questions to what degree the current administration will be able to address the inequalities that plague the country.

## The Indigenous Movement and Democracy in Bolivia

*Raúl Madrid*  
University of Texas-Austin

The emergence of indigenous parties in the Andes, particularly the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) in Bolivia, has had a mixed impact on democracy. Latin America has not traditionally had major ethnic parties. This phenomenon changed with the rise of the MAS in Bolivia, and the emergence of *Pachakuti* in Ecuador. Existing literature suggests that the development of ethnic parties would have a negative impact on democracy, primarily because they would focus exclusively on mobilizing members of their own ethnic group. The assumption is that the party cannot win votes from members of other ethnic groups, therefore they mobilize their own ethnic group through exclusionary appeals and by demonizing other groups.

This is not going to take place in Latin America; the fluidity of ethnic boundaries in the region makes it much more feasible for these ethno-populist parties to win votes from members of diverse ethnic groups. In fact, most people in Bolivia will identify both as indigenous and *mestizo*, depending on the circumstances. While it has not led to exclusionary ethnic politics, the rise of MAS

**THE LATIN AMERICAN PROGRAM** serves as a bridge between the United States and Latin America, encouraging a free flow of information and dialogue between the two regions. The Program also provides a nonpartisan forum for discussing Latin American and Caribbean issues in Washington, D.C., and for bringing these issues to the attention of opinion leaders and policy makers throughout the Western hemisphere. The Program sponsors major initiatives on Democratic Governance, Citizen Security, Comparative Peace Processes, Creating Community in the Americas, U.S.-Brazilian relations and U.S.-Mexican relations.

The Latin American Program's Project on Democratic Governance and the 'New Left' in Latin America explores political trends and policy outcomes in eight countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Uruguay, and Venezuela. The Project aims to understand how or why left governments have come to power at this moment in the region's history, and to assess the implications for democratic governance of specific public policies in such areas as social welfare, political inclusion, citizen participation, accountability, and human rights.

**WOODROW WILSON INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOLARS**

One Woodrow Wilson Plaza, 1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20004-3027

tel. (202) 691-4000, fax (202) 691-4001

[www.wilsoncenter.org/lap](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/lap)

*Support for the MAS may prove more stable than for other parties because of its foundation of identity-based ties, which do not change from election to election.*

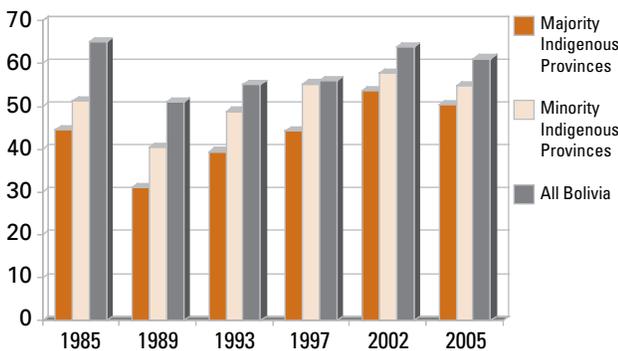
has impacted several facets of Bolivian democracy: political participation, party system fragmentation, electoral volatility, satisfaction with democracy, and democratic governance.

**Voter Turnout**

Voter turnout in Bolivia after the transition to democracy, as in most Latin American countries, started out quite high. People were excited about the return to democracy, but shortly thereafter, turnout began to fall. Throughout this process, turnout was consistently lower in areas with an indigenous majority than other areas. However, the emergence of the MAS—beginning in 2002—boosted voter turnout, measured as a percentage of the voting age population. Moreover, voter turnout in indigenous areas has risen faster than in other areas. Turnout in minority indigenous provinces continues to be higher than majority indigenous provinces, but the gap between the two has narrowed.

A variety of factors contributed to the increase in turnout. The MAS lobbied for more voting centers and pushed to make registration easier. More importantly, it campaigned heavily in indigenous areas. Unlike the traditionally dominant parties in Bolivia, which did not recruit many indigenous candidates or only recruited them for minor posts, the MAS recruited many indigenous candidates. The MAS embraced indigenous issues and groups that had close ties with indigenous organizations.

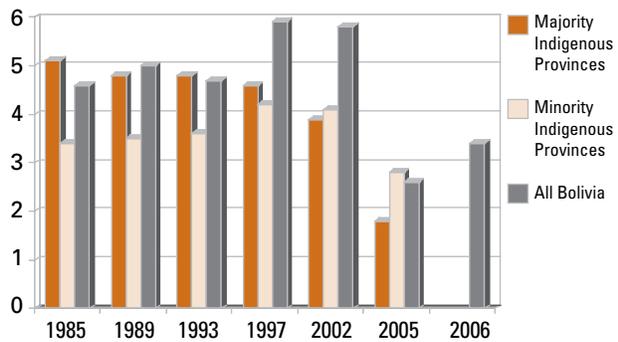
**Voter Turnout in Bolivia:  
(as a % of voting age population)**



**Party System Fragmentation**

The degree of party system fragmentation in Bolivia has traditionally been one of the highest in Latin America. This makes it difficult for the president to garner support from the range of different parties needed to pass legislation. As a result, the tradition of “pacted democracy” emerged in Bolivia, in which pacts were formed between different political parties to facilitate the political process.

**Effective Number of Parties in Bolivian Elections, 1985–2006**



Before the rise of the MAS, party system fragmentation was particularly prevalent in Bolivia’s indigenous areas, as these groups tended to split their vote much more widely than those from other ethnic groups. The rise of the MAS has helped reduce party system fragmentation in general and has had a significant impact in indigenous areas. This is, in large part, because indigenous voters flock to the MAS, concentrating their votes rather than disbursing them to other parties. At the same time, opponents of the MAS in non-indigenous areas coalesced around PODEMOS. In both non-indigenous and indigenous areas, there has been a decline in party system fragmentation in recent years. In the majority of indigenous provinces, party system fragmentation dropped under two effective parties.

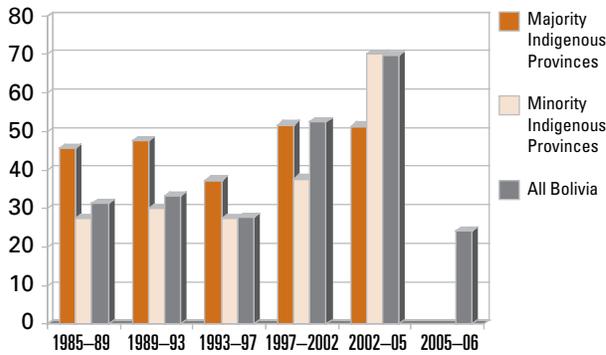
**Electoral Volatility**

Electoral volatility in Bolivia has also traditionally been high, especially in indigenous areas, posing a problem to effective governance. When parties are constantly changing, it becomes difficult to maintain and implement long-term plans and develop expertise. The rise of the MAS initially worsened volatility, particularly in indigenous areas, because many voters flocked to the MAS from a variety of other parties.

Recently, this volatility has begun to decline. Between the 2005 and 2006 elections it was low because voters—particularly indigenous and *mestizo* voters—stood with



### Electoral Volatility in Bolivia

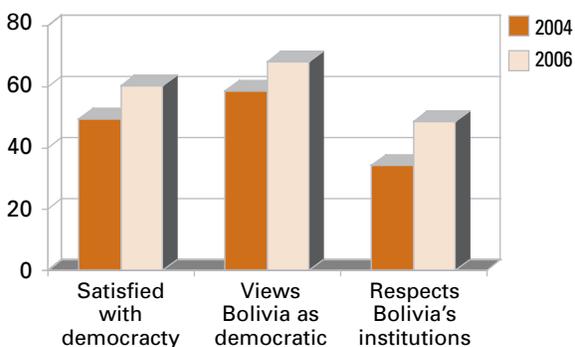


the MAS. Support for the MAS may prove more stable than for other parties because of its foundation of identity-based ties, which do not change from election to election. Voting patterns established on the basis of ethnic identity are likely to be more stable than those that rest on economic performance, which tends to fluctuate.

### Satisfaction with Democracy

Bolivia has also traditionally had very low levels of satisfaction with democracy. This problem is common throughout the Andes. Citizens are dissatisfied with how democracy functions in their countries. However, according to the Latin American Public Opinion Project of Vanderbilt University, in the wake of Morales's elections satisfaction with democracy in Bolivia increased, particularly among the indigenous population. The Latinobarometer also suggests that satisfaction with democracy has increased in Bolivia over the years. Support for Bolivian institutions, namely political institutions, also rose sharply between 2004 and 2006. In addition, a larger percentage of Bolivians now view the country as being democratic. This is in large part due to the rise of Evo Morales. A large sector of the population—which was previously disenchanted and believed traditional parties were corrupt, did not represent them, and did not cater to their interests and needs—is more satisfied with Evo Morales and

### Satisfaction with Democracy in Bolivia



the MAS. Now, it remains to be seen whether that will continue in the future; the Andean electorate is notoriously fickle in this sense.

### Democratic Governance

Democratic governance in Bolivia paints a mixed picture. On the positive side, the MAS has expanded the influence of marginalized groups, as the indigenous population in Bolivia traditionally did not have much political influence. They began to reverse this trend through their social movement, utilizing demonstrations, mobilizations, and road blockages to exercise power. However, the indigenous populations did not have power in the legislature or the executive branch of government prior to the rise of the MAS.

Currently, the MAS is the dominant party in Bolivia. The social movements that represent the indigenous population, to one degree or another, also have a great deal of power. It is a positive development that these long unrepresented groups now have influence.

The MAS has, by and large, respected civil liberties and human rights. They have not infringed on freedom of expression to a large degree; in fact, many newspapers are extremely critical of the MAS. Though Evo Morales criticizes the media, he has not imposed on their ability to express themselves. In 2006, the U.S. State Department country report on human rights was critical of Bolivia in some aspects, but confirmed that there were no political killings. While there are problems with the police in Bolivia, these problems do not appear to be of a political nature.<sup>5</sup>

Under MAS rule, the government held certified free and fair elections in 2006 for the Constituent Assembly. The MAS has shown a great deal of moderation in social and economic policy, though its rhetoric is at times quite polarizing. In fact, the nationalization of the gas industry was not really a nationalization, but a moderate reform to try to increase tax revenue by raising the prices that foreign countries were paying for Bolivian gas. So far, the land reform initiatives put forth by the MAS have not amounted to much.

On the negative side, however, the MAS has at times employed very aggressive rhetoric. For example, Vice-President García Linera traveled to the Aymara highlands and told the local population to “keep their rifles ready to defend the revolution.” Additionally, Morales has been quite aggressive in denouncing the media. Even more troubling, Morales has sought to consolidate powers in ways that have authoritarian overtones. There has been a campaign to rid the government of some of the opposition prefects that have been very critical of Morales.<sup>6</sup> Morales also dramatically decreased the salaries of government officials by cutting his own salary and maintaining that no one could earn more than the president. Many speculated this measure was aimed at

**Raúl Madrid** is Associate Professor of Government at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of *Retiring the State: The Politics of Pension Privatization in Latin America and Beyond* (2003) and numerous articles on economic and social reform and indigenous political behavior in Latin America. His current research focuses on the emergence of ethno-populist parties in the Andean nations. Dr. Madrid also served as Associate Editor for *Latin American Research Review*, the journal of the Latin American Studies Association. He received his Ph.D from Stanford University in 1999.

motivating resignations, which would allow Morales to appoint new officials.

There have been a variety of efforts to take the opposition out of the running. The country's former president, Gonzalos Sánchez de Lozada, has been charged with various crimes. Morales has also encouraged street protests to put pressure on the opposition, members of the legislature, and the Constituent Assembly. This has been viewed by many as a negative development. In general, there has been an increase in regional polarization in Bolivia, and ethnic polarization has been less of an issue. Instead, polarization has taken on a regional character, occurring between the lowland provinces in the east and the highland provinces in the west.

In conclusion, the MAS has had a mixed impact on Bolivian democracy thus far. It has boosted participation and satisfaction with democracy and helped consolidate and stabilize the party system. However, it has also demonstrated some troubling authoritarian tendencies and contributed to the increasing polarization of Bolivian society.

## Populism in Bolivia: Can a Social Movement Govern without a Party?

*René Antonio Mayorga*  
*Centro Boliviano de Estudios Multidisciplinarios*

Bolivia is one of the most remarkable cases of populist resurgence in the Andean region. What is most striking is that this revival did not take place under the umbrella of outsiders, as in Ecuador, but rather was led by an indigenous peasant movement. The dual nature of the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) and its confrontational approach, rooted in social movements, has aggravated the primary roots of the political crisis in Bolivia: polarization and the regional stalemate. These factors were not only

the sources of President Evo Morales' rise to power, but also continue to define the current political situation.

As a political movement, the MAS has been able to gain power through a dual strategy of mobilization and participation in democratic elections. In the context of the prevailing populist tendencies in the region, the present Bolivian government constitutes a kind of laboratory, posing diverse puzzles about the nature of the relationship between social movements and political parties, and particularly, about the conflicts that arise when a successful social movement turns into a governing political movement.

The first objective of this paper is to examine the idea that the MAS is marked by a duality, as a political party and a social movement, and that this duality stands out vis-à-vis previous populist experiences. The second objective is to explore some of the consequences of this duality for MAS government formation and some of the policies it carried out in its first year in office. In this regard, there is no comparative historical experience, either in Bolivia or elsewhere. The core question is whether government by a social movement is feasible at all.

---

*The MAS's mutation into a governing party has, in fact, triggered an unintentional process of differentiation between the social movement, its social base, and the party organization.*

---

The MAS is, on the one hand, a loose and heterogeneous coalition of mainly indigenous organizations. Given its anti-apartheid rhetoric and the assumption that the MAS is an entity of self-representation for each of these social organizations, the MAS leadership is reluctant to build a political party. On the other hand, the MAS has unwittingly turned into an organization responsible for building a government, and therefore, for ruling the country.

Does this process entail, necessarily, the political movement's transformation into political party? Will the MAS develop a well differentiated political organization which is autonomous from its social base like the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT) in Brazil? Are the union leaders, above all Evo Morales himself, reshaping their roles into those of party leaders? The MAS's mutation into a governing party has, in fact, triggered an unintentional process of differentiation between the social movement, its social base, and the party organization. Moreover, this process is reversing the organization's bottom-up grass roots mobilization, resulting in a top-down relationship between the MAS and the social organizations with which it aligns.



Thus, it is appropriate to examine the internal duality of the MAS. The MAS itself rejects this duality and understands itself basically as a social movement. This is the reason for the triple role of Evo Morales as president, party chief, and secretary general of the Chapare coca peasant unions, and why his style of governance as president has strongly resembled that of a union leader. Given the assumed symbioses of social movement and party, there is supposedly no pattern of subordination of the MAS as a party to its social base, nor is there any pattern of autonomy of the MAS vis-à-vis a social base.

The MAS claims that its government is a government by social movements, a new type of government in which a predominately indigenous social movement is represented politically through the MAS, and thereby directly gains control of the state apparatus. Its main spokesperson, Vice-President Álvaro García Linera, enthusiastically argues that the MAS government reflects not only a historically new pattern of relationships between state and society, but also an enhanced form of direct participatory democracy.

In fact, this supposedly new pattern constitutes a stark utopian claim which incorporates social movements into the state apparatus and erases the boundaries between state and civil society. In an article in which he upholds the total, unified identity of party, state, and indigenous social movement, García Linera extols the political figure of Evo Morales by defining the MAS as all-encompassing. He boasts that the MAS has not only overcome a century long Marxist debate on the role of partisan unions, but also is a unique historical project with continental and even worldwide scope and implications.

This notion is too romantic to be true; currently, the ideological self-image of the MAS and political reality are clashing in Bolivia. The MAS governing party is undergoing a differentiation between social movement and party, and even between party and government. At the root of this process is the pressure to perform inherent in the exercise of government power, which prompts an inchoate and unintentional party-building process, straining the MAS self-identity as a confederation of social movements. Party logic and social movement logic tend to diverge, and clear trends towards unintentional party formation are becoming apparent.

First, power has become extremely concentrated in the leadership of Evo Morales and a small group of his close associates. This centralization entails a reversal of the original linkages between Morales and the social organizations and the emergence of a new, top-down arrangement. Second, an authoritarian and hierarchical relationship has emerged between the leadership and MAS representatives in Congress, as well as the rank and file. This reflects its roots in the non-democratic practices of the unions. Given its confused collectivist and leftist ideology, the MAS is increasingly evolving as a non-

**René Mayorga** is Senior Researcher at the Centro Boliviano de Estudios Multidisciplinarios. He has also been a Visiting Fellow of the Kellogg Institute at the University of Notre Dame (1994, 2001), Associate Professor of FLACSO, Ecuador (1999-2004), and Visiting Professor at Brown University (2004-2005). His research interests include the institutional development of democracy in Latin America and political parties and governance in the Andean region. He is author of “Outsiders and Neo-Populism: The Road to Plebiscitary Democracy” in *The Crisis of Political Representation in the Andes*, eds. Ana María Bejarano, Eduardo Pizarro, and Scott Mainwaring (2006) and *Antipolítica y Neopopulismo* (1995). Dr. Mayorga was a fellow at the Wilson Center (2006–07) where he researched the relationship between institutional reform and the erosion of state capacity in the Andes for a publication tentatively entitled “Weak States and Institutional Reforms in the Andean Region.” He received his Ph.D from the Free University of Berlin.

democratic party, grounded in the central figure of Evo Morales, hailed by his followers as the light of the continent and the harbinger of a new era.

Third, government formation is moving into a clear-cut detachment process. Most ministers and vice ministers holding key positions in Morales’s two cabinets are far from indigenous peasant union leaders. They have urban, middle-class origins, and most have non-governmental organization backgrounds and joined the MAS at the beginning of the campaign or during the government building. Given the lack of competence and experience present in the ranks of the MAS, collaboration between the MAS and NGOs seems justified.

Conversely, there is only moderate, low-key participation of union leaders and party members, and only at lower levels of government. This represents a shift from direct participation of popular organization leaders to the delegation of government responsibilities to professional party officials and cadres, under the unquestionable leadership of Morales. This shift is fraught with strains and contradictions that could undermine the MAS and its government. In summary, the MAS is undergoing an uneven process in which former union leaders and individuals alien to the MAS are turned into party leaders and government officials, distinguishing themselves from the MAS representatives in Congress who are union leaders and members of the rank and file of the social organizations which support the MAS.

In a way, having become a state actor, the MAS has turned out to be a party in denial, which governs on behalf of the indigenous movement. It is also an ethno-leftist populist movement, whose main ideological and political characteristic is the belief in communitarian democracy, taking the traditional *ayllu* model as a model for the reform of the state. However, indigenous culture does not in fact reject institutions of representative democracy and does not promote the centralization of power in the head executive while local power is atomized at the grass roots.

It must be taken into account that political radicalism does not necessarily translate into economic populism, at least in the traditional way. Interestingly, the Morales government, until now, has been characterized by political radicalism, but moderation in economic policies. Morales has been very careful to preserve the fiscal balance of the state. He has not engaged in populist overspending or expenses. For example, he has committed to preserving the windfall revenues from gas exports for future domestic programs. It is important to note, however, that these windfalls came at a cost. Morales' nationalization of gas resources dramatically changed the role of the state in the economy and significantly increased state revenues, up 57 percent in 2006 from the year before. The way he handled the process caused tensions with Brazil, the main investor for the Bolivian gas industry. The Brazilian state firm Petrobras has repeatedly declared that it will not continue to invest in Bolivia because of the rules Morales is trying to impose.

On the other hand, the MAS is politically populist because it is trying to establish a political regime based on a personalistic leader (Morales). The tendency towards personalization of power erodes the democratic regime and the state, deepening the vicious cycle and engendering populism. These features are characteristic of conservative populism, and therefore do not allow the MAS to be convincingly presented as a modern leftist populist movement or modern leftist movement, let alone as a social democratic political movement.

The notion of left politics, in fact the very idea of a democratic left, involves a forward looking perspective towards the continued struggle to expand citizenship, strengthen democratic rule, promote the separation of state powers, engage in institution building, and support modernity. But the thrust of indigenous inclusion and its democratizing effects, the advancement and struggle for recognition and equal dignity, and the goal of a tolerant, multicultural society is about to fade under this brand of ethnic fundamentalism. The acrimonious rhetoric in the name of restoring ancient indigenous cultural identities underlines MAS' efforts to turn the tables and change government policies along those same lines.

The government's political decisions and policies so far demonstrate that the MAS has not changed its pre-

dominantly confrontational approach, which is grounded in its roots as a social movement. As a governing party, the MAS behaves like a social movement and employs anti-institutional confrontational strategies. The MAS has, for example, transformed its social organizations into instruments of violent mobilizations, and even into *de facto* troops for political coercion, intimidation, and to deter the opposition. They were used for these purposes in Santa Cruz in December of 2005 and particularly during the violent mobilization against Cochabamba's governor in January of 2007. This strategy to overthrow a democratically elected governor was well received by the MAS-led Constituent Assembly in 2007, although the party had to distance itself from it two weeks later when the violent offensive failed.

The predominantly confrontational logic of the MAS has permanently mobilized the peasants against the opposition. Additionally, the presence of corporatist interests in government has resulted in severe tensions and contradictory policies. This is exemplified by a violent miners clash in November of 2006, in which a conflict between independent cooperative miners and state-employed miners resulted in the death of 26 people. The government promised concessions to various groups before its formation, including the miners. In the case of an increase in mining taxes, Morales was forced to acquiesce to the cooperatives, who opposed the increase.

The MAS has also brought ethnically based, divisive, and inflammatory discourse to bear on relations with the eastern part of the country, as well as the opposition in Congress and the Constituent Assembly. The MAS tried to impose a majority vote in the Constituent Assembly without success, proclaiming the originary and pleni-potentiary corrective of Constituent Assembly, thereby breaching the constitution and the law with which Morales, himself, convened the Constituent Assembly. The MAS disregarded the autonomy referendum results and other decisions made in the assemblies of the so-called "half moon," the half of the country which opposes Morales.

One issue that has emerged in the Constituent Assembly as particularly divisive for Bolivia is land reform. The soil in the western highlands is exhausted, making land reform a necessary project. The only way for the labor force which resides in the western highlands to find new lands is to look east. The problem is that Evo Morales wants to align a land reform in the east by establishing collective properties along the structures of ancient indigenous communities. The MAS's plan is very clear: to foster an economy based on solidarity, reciprocity, and the institutions of the ancient community.

Morales' proposition to reconstruct the economy along the lines of ancient organizations is problematic, and ultimately unfeasible. It calls for an anti-capitalistic road whereas the lowlands are dominated by capitalistic



modes of production. If Morales wants to push this strategy, it will lead to violence. That is the key issue behind the demands for autonomy coming from the eastern lowlands, and behind the MAS plan in the Constituent Assembly to revitalize indigenous communities.

Finally, the government has no policy to strengthen state bureaucracy and efficiency, due to of the presence of corporatist interests in the government and the predominance of patronage in the MAS government. Evo Morales has not been able to carry out a policy of strengthening state management and state efficiency, which runs counter to his goal of enhancing the state's role through the nationalization of natural resources. There has been a great instability in state management, above all in the state oil company, which deposed its president four times in one year. There is no stability, nor any competent personnel, in the most important state company in the country.

When a competitive political party system exists, it can curb authoritarian tendencies in a governing party, and to a certain extent, Bolivia's political system is competitive. Morales's triumph by an absolute majority did not ensure control over all mechanisms of power. He does not control the constitutional tribunal or the congress, where the opposition leads the Senate. He does not have an overwhelming majority and does not control six out of the nine governorships. A journalist recently described him as a mini-Chávez. In a way, this is true; although he would like to control the state, he may be prevented from doing so because of the opposition he faces in certain state institutions.

Evo Morales's political plan to implement state reform through a Constituent Assembly in order to institutionalize indigenous hegemony and make it possible for him to stay in power permanently has failed in the face of the challenge presented by the eastern lowlands, and by the six opposition governors. As the conflict continues the future of his democratic and cultural revolution, which until now has been neither democratic nor cultural, looks bleaker than ever.

## **Bolivia: Social Movements, Populism, and Democracy**

*Brooke Larson*

*State University of New York–Stony Brook*

The purpose of this paper is to bring an historical perspective to contemporary indigenous movements on the national political stage in Bolivia. Scholarly literature on contemporary indigenous movements is a new growth industry. There is an abundance of sociological and political science studies on social movements and the challenges they pose to citizenship regimes and democracy in the region. Scholars like Donna Van Cott, Deborah Yashar, Xavier Albó, and others have focused on Indian

Rights Movements in Colombia, Ecuador, and especially Bolivia.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, historians have been engaged in uncovering the long underground processes through which modernizing nation states have tried (and mostly failed) to integrate marginal native peoples into oligarchic and populist states over much of the 20th century.

Yet there is a curious disconnect between these scholarly bodies of literature. Political scientists and sociologists interested in contemporary social movements sometimes seem to think that Indian Rights Movements sprang out of the air, as indigenous peoples suddenly transformed themselves into political actors and subjects under a new host of circumstances in the 1980s and 1990s. Historians, on the other hand, know that indigenous peasants have been actively engaging their wider political worlds for most of the colonial and postcolonial periods. But historians generally fail to link up their long-term historical studies to contemporary indigenous movements on the scene today.

This paper attempts to bridge that gap by offering historical ways to think about contemporary indigenous movements (the resurgence of ethnic politics) in the Bolivian Andes, especially in light of the 2005 election of Evo Morales. The events that have taken place since 2000 mark a critical juncture—that is, a rupture and turning point in Bolivia's sociopolitical history of nation making.

A brief review of the insurgent cycle of events begins with the Water Wars in 1999 and 2000; which escalated into a series of popular mobilizations in 2003. As a result, road blocks and military retaliations shut down the cities—and virtually the whole country—during “Red October,” 2003, and then led to the fall of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. The insurgent cycle finally culminated—not in street mobilizations or revolution—but rather in the constitutional resolution of conflict and change, with the landslide election of Evo Morales, the country's first indigenous president. As the leader of the MAS, he soared to political prominence on the wing of a popular coalition of forces and growing political aspirations for a broader, deeper kind of democracy that would finally bring the nation's indigenous majority into the center of political life. And he was elected in December, 2005, with an unprecedented 54% of the vote.

From an historical perspective, it is much too soon to offer a calibrated assessment of the political achievements and/or short-comings of the Morales regime. Of course, there have been some glaring errors of judgments, failures of policy, and excesses that can be chalked up to inexperience or power grabs. The new government's problems were compounded by the powerful coalition of opposition forces, based in Santa Cruz. And there is, of course, the perennial worry about whether the MAS is consolidating itself as a hegemonic party (taking over the MNR's historic one-party dominance after 1952).

On the other hand, the year 2006 closed with “strongly positive economic indicators” at the same time Morales was redefining Bolivia’s position vis-à-vis the global economy.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, Evo Morales has positioned himself at the forefront of anti-globalization forces—reversing twenty-years of market-crazed economic policies pressed on the country from abroad. Growing coca leaves is not the central issue, here, except on a symbolic level. But recovering national control over gas and oil, privatized away at bargain prices in the 1990s is the main issue. Yet there is a deep sense of pragmatism that runs through Morales’s rejection of market fundamentalism. As one political commentator observed, Evo may talk like a revolutionary populist, but the much vaunted “nationalization” of Bolivia’s natural gas reserves really amounted to a massive hike in royalties and taxes paid into Bolivia’s government coffers by Petrobras and other foreign energy companies.

On the international front, Evo’s relationship with Chávez and Castro has brought Bolivia much needed economic and technical assistance (cheap diesel fuel, energy industry technicians, etc. from Venezuela, and a cadre of literacy workers and doctors from Cuba), but Evo Morales has resisted the tutelage of Chávez or Castro. (In fact, the “lesson” he took away from his visit to Fidel Castro in early 2006 was to avoid any head-long rush into revolutionary rhetoric and actions, and instead to concentrate on the slow institutional work of reforming health care and education in Bolivia).<sup>9</sup> In the meantime, Bolivia has widened its circle of economic and political alliances, cultivating relations with Brazil and Argentina, and it is looking to negotiate future commercial agreements with India, China, and South Africa.

---

**Clearly, Evo Morales has positioned himself at the forefront of anti-globalization forces—reversing twenty-years of market-crazed economic policies pressed on the country from abroad.**

---

Ultimately, however, the legitimacy of this government rests with the MAS’ broadest and most volatile constituency—the nation’s indigenous underclass, which makes up almost two-thirds of nation’s population (and which correlates, almost exactly, with that two-thirds of the nation’s total population that lives below the poverty level. And indeed, according to a 2002 UN report, 66.9% of the nation’s rural indigenous population falls into its category of “extreme poverty”).<sup>10</sup> The fate of Evo’s legitimacy (and, indeed, Bolivia’s citizenship democracy) rests on the fragile hope that Bolivia’s windfall tax revenues will go a long way towards solving Bolivia’s intractable social

**Brooke Larson** is Professor of History at State University of New York-Stony Brook. She has written extensively on the historic struggles of Andean indigenous peoples and major publications include *Trials of Nation Making. Liberalism, Race, and Ethnicity in the Andes, 1810-1910* (2004), *Cochabamba, 1550-1900. Colonialism and Agrarian Transformation in Bolivia* (1998), and the co-edited book, *Ethnicity, Markets and Migration. At the Crossroads of History and Anthropology* (1995). Dr. Larson was a fellow at the Wilson Center (2006–07) where she researched Indian mobilization, the contest over social citizenship, and the role of education in forging multicultural models of nationhood in the 20th century for a book, entitled *Aymara Indians and the Lettered City: knowledge, power, and struggle in the Bolivian Andes*. She received her Ph.D in History from Columbia University.

problems—poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, ill health and high infant mortality rates, social marginalization, racial discrimination, political disenfranchisement, etc.

To put it more broadly, the social basis of Bolivian democracy lies at the grassroots—in the ability of the MAS to refashion Bolivian democracy around the ideals of social and economic justice. This is hardly an innovative platform, since Bolivia’s post 1952 revolutionary-nationalist regime was at the forefront of Latin American populist regimes that that began to broaden the notion of citizenship rights to include social rights to basic economic livelihood and security. Clearly, the Morales regime is not planning to turn back the nation’s clock to the MNR era. But the political legacy of that era was to mobilize and instruct indigenous and laboring groups as to their “social rights” to livelihood, universal literacy and education, healthcare, and participatory unionization and democracy. Generations of Bolivian peasants, miners, urban laborers, union members, rural teachers, popular housewives committees, etc. were nurtured in a local political culture that defined citizenship rights, not only in classical liberal political terms, but as constitutive ‘social rights’ (along the lines defined by T. H. Marshall)<sup>11</sup> to basic life needs—land or livelihood, literacy and schooling, healthcare, and the forms of collective self-representation.

The movement towards broader and deeper citizenship rights as ‘social rights,’ which had substantially raised popular political expectations, came to an abrupt halt in 1964. The military overthrew the MNR government that year and ruled for the next 18 years. It was only in the early 1980s, that Bolivia restored civilian rule



under electoral democracy. The restoration of civilian rule in 1982 (part of Latin America's "third wave democracy") restored basic civil and political rights, but I would argue that Bolivia's neo-liberal policies over the past two decades have eroded even the most limited social rights, as successive Bolivian governments have cut back on government subsidies to food, agriculture, and social programs, dismantled state-owned mines and privatized other enterprises, and introduced the painful 'structural adjustments' aimed at limiting inflation and opening up the Bolivian economy to foreign investment and trade. Neo-liberal policies did make a positive impact in some areas: they tamed inflation and attracted foreign investment capital. But they also ended the government's role as economic actor and provider of basic public services.<sup>12</sup>

Most scholars agree that neo-liberalism "has generated pervasive market failures, new forms of social polarization, and a dramatic intensification of uneven development at all spatial scales."<sup>13</sup> To take but one human example of the price neo-liberalism exacted on Bolivia's laboring class: the government's decision to sack 12,000 mine workers in the process of divesting the state-owned tin mines in the mid-1980s. (Morales's family was caught in that vice-grip, and followed the tracks of thousands of displaced workers of newly de-nationalized mines, who fled east into the valleys and lowlands in search of an alternative farming livelihood. Chapare's coca fields became one destination of choice.) Meanwhile, as government revenues dropped, state subsidies of agriculture, education, and health suffered drastic cuts. For all intents and purposes, neo-liberalism's "trickle down" agenda went into reverse, by redistributing income upwards, towards the top of Bolivia's rigid and steep class hierarchy. (Proverbial "rich got richer"....etc.) Bolivia thus entered the 1990s burdened by a grotesque pseudo-democracy that had all but forsaken the nation's revolutionary-populist heritage of 'social rights.' Inevitably, perhaps, it is Evo Morales and his movement, the MAS, that now carry the mantle of recovering and revitalizing the idea of 'social citizenship' rights that was, and continues to be what shapes popular political expectations and social mobilizations.

Of course, there is no going back to the revolutionary-populist pact of 1952. Those days are long gone. Not only has the nation, and the global economy, changed in fundamental ways over the past half-century, but Bolivia's popular political landscape has also shifted rather dramatically—just in the past 25 years or so, with the onset of powerful indigenous social movements in both the highlands and, more recently, in parts of the vast eastern lowlands. The late 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of a new set of social actors in Bolivia: a variety of indigenous activists and their constituencies who have broadened and deepened the older (T.H. Marshall) idea of "social rights" to encompass communal or patrimonial rights to indigenous traditions, identities, and territoriality. This is not to argue

that Bolivian indigenous politics suddenly sprang out of the mountains and jungles, beginning around 1980. On the contrary, indigenous activism and resistance have been woven into the fabric of social life since colonial times. In fact, recurring historical cycles of indigenous mobilization and ethnic militancy can be traced throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. But it is equally true that ethnic politics were temporarily buried and forgotten during and after the 1952 nationalist-populist revolution, only to spring back into political action in the 1980s and 1990s.

What were the historical conditions that gave rise to Bolivia's contemporary indigenous movement—which is, arguably, now one of the most powerful Indian Rights Movement in the Americas? Without delving into details, I would point to the paradoxes of neo-liberalism and re-democratization in Bolivia during the 1980s and 1990s. Bolivia presents a classic case of neo-liberalism's very mixed blessings. On the one hand, free-trade capitalism and neo-liberal reforms inflicted economic hardship, as we have seen. On the other hand, re-democratization was a hard-fought political process that opened political and discursive spaces for new groups to bubble up from below, and stake their claims in the nation's political system. In the 1980s, the *Katarista* indigenous movement (and its union, CSUTCB) emerged as important venues in which Aymara and Quechua laborers and peasants began to press their demands for certain social and cultural rights. A vibrant urban group of Aymara intellectuals began to assert their rights and identities as the descendants of Bolivia's "originary communities." They had a crucial impact on reshaping historical narratives and social memories, and on popularizing indigenous oral history through Aymara-language radio programs, bilingual books, and street-theater. In the 1990s, those grassroots pressures for inclusion began to trickle up and seep into the normative institutions of Bolivian society. It was during Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada's first administration, in the mid-1990s, that the Bolivian state began to institutionalize the idea that Bolivia was, historically and still today, a "pluri-ethnic and multicultural" nation. Some of this official 'pluri-multi' posturing was simply political theater, or worse, window-dressing for what was, otherwise, a cruel neo-liberal regime bearing down on the most vulnerable sectors of Bolivian society. But there were also important substantive political reforms coming out of the *Ley de Participación Popular* (LPP), for example, which ended up catapulting some indigenous leaders into municipal and later congressional positions of power. Thus, did Bolivia's indigenous movement become broader, more diversified, and more deeply rooted in the political system during the 1990s.<sup>14</sup>

Another development that boosted and broadened Bolivia's indigenous movement in the 1980s and 1990s was the emergence of multiple, lowland tribal groups

onto the national political stage. The shocking clash between global capitalism and tribal peoples is a familiar story that has rippled across the vast Amazonian basin, and it galvanized some progressive groups in the Global North into taking action on behalf of ecological preservation, biodiversity and cultural survival. Indeed, it was the convergence of ecological and indigenous rights on the international stage in the 1990s that created a crucial set of transnational (non-state) activists and infrastructures, which have helped put local indigenous (especially tribal) movements on the world map. Thanks to the convergence of movements for ecological protection and indigenous protection, Indian activists have ways to incorporate their own local struggles into transnational networks and resources, based in London, Washington, New York, Geneva, etc. This is now the case, in fact, with most indigenous activist groups.

The entry of lowland tribal groups onto the national stage in Bolivia happened dramatically, in 1990, with the 700 mile March for Territory and Dignity. It was there that indigenous lowlanders, who had trekked across hundreds of miles of lowland forest and up over

the mountains, encountered their highland counterparts, the leaders of Aymara and Quechua communities, in a moving ritualized encounter of unity and solidarity in struggle. Perhaps this was a political spectacle, but the encounter opened the compass of political possibility and hope under an inter-ethnic indigenous coalition of unprecedented scope and ambition. As the new decade began, the indigenous groups were to press their agenda of political inclusion and cultural pluralism onto the ruling elite. They insisted on a broader and deeper meaning of citizenship, which included specified 'cultural rights' for the nation's indigenous populations.

In many ways, Evo Morales embodies, or hopes to embody, the synthesis of an older brand of 'social rights' (defining Bolivia's revolutionary-populist order of the 1950s) and the recent indigenous mobilization for ethnic rights. Clearly, one of Evo Morales' great challenges is to nurture the nation's fragile participatory-multicultural democracy, while also attacking the intractable problems of poverty and social marginalization. That Evo has done so well, thus far, is perhaps little less than a miracle in Bolivia's volatile political climate.

## Endnotes

1. Juan Karita, "Bolivian Assembly Endorses New Charter," Associated Press, December 10, 2007.

2. The *media luna* (half moon) region of Bolivia is a crescent shape land area in the eastern part of the country, and includes four of the nine departments of Bolivia: Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando, and Tarija. These four provinces generate a large part of the nation's wealth and are home to large natural gas fields as well as a booming agro-business sector (Ed).

3. "Morales sets Bolivia recall date." May 12, 2008. *BBC News*. The rules proposed by Morales may be adjusted before the August 10th referendum. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7396809.stm>

4. See, for example, Juan Karita, "Two Dead in Bolivia as Protestors Attack Police Offices, Burn Jail in Conflict Over Constitution," Associated Press, "November 25, 2007; "Bolivia." Amnesty International Report 2008 State of the of the World's Human Rights, <http://thereport.amnesty.org/eng/regions/americas/bolivia>; "Grupos violentos evitan el viaje del Presidente al Sucre," *La Razón*, May 25, 2008.

5. The 2007 State Department country report on human rights reaffirms this trend, noting "the government or its agents did not commit any politically motivated killings during the year, but security forces apparently killed five persons in separate incidents" [Ed.]

6. In December of 2007, President Morales proposed a recall referendum which would allow citizens to revoke the mandates of the president, vice-president, and the nine regional prefects. This proposal was passed by the opposition-controlled Senate in May of 2008, and the referendum will take place on August 10, 2008 [Ed].

7. D. L. Van Cott, *The Friendly Liquidation of the Past: the Politics of Diversity in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000); Deborah Yashar, *Contesting Citizenship*

*in Latin America. The Rise of Indigenous Movements and the Postliberal Challenge*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; Xavier Albó, *Pueblos indios en la política*. La Paz: CIPCA, 2002.

8. Mark Weisbrot, "Bolivia's Economy: The First Year," Center for Economic and Policy Research, cited by the Washington Office on Latin America web newsletter, January 19, 2007. That report cites, in turn, International Monetary Fund Country Report, No. 06/270, July 2006 on government revenue increases from the hydrocarbon industry.

9. Carlos Valdéz, "Castro Once Advised Morales to Shun Arms," Associated Press, December 29, 2006; EFE News Service, "Bolivia's Morales rejects labels, stresses problem-solving," February 19, 2007, <http://global.factiva.com/ha/default.aspx>.

10. United Nations Development Group, *Pueblos Indígenas Originarios y Objetivos de Desarrollo del Milenio*, 2007, *Anexo 1*.

11. See T. H Marshall, *Class, Citizenship, and Social Development* [1949], New York: Doubleday, 1964.

12. See Benjamin Kohl and Linda Farthing, *Impasse in Bolivia*. London: Zed Press, 2006, 89-90.

13. N. Brenner and N. Theodore, "Cities and Geographies of 'Actually Existing Neo-liberalism,'" *Antipode*, 34: 2002, quoted in Kohl and Farthing, 122; Harry Sanabria, "Consolidating States, Restructuring Economies, and Confronting Workers and Peasants: The Antinomies of Bolivian Neoliberalism," *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 43:3 (1999): 535-562.

14. John-Andrew McNeish, "Stones on the Road: The Politics of Participation and the Generation of Crisis in Bolivia," *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 25:2 (2006): 220-240; Andrew Canessa, "Todos somos indígenas: Towards a New Language of National Political Identity," *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 25:2 (2006): 241-263.



**WOODROW WILSON INTERNATIONAL CENTER FOR SCHOLARS**

Lee H. Hamilton, President and Director

**BOARD OF TRUSTEES**Joseph B. Gildenhorn, Chair  
David A. Metzner, Vice Chair**Public Members:** James H. Billington, Librarian of Congress; Bruce Cole, Chair, National Endowment for the Humanities; Michael O. Leavitt, Secretary, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Condoleezza Rice, Secretary, U.S. Department of State; Cristián Samper, Acting Secretary, Smithsonian Institution; Margaret Spellings, Secretary, U.S. Department of Education; Allen Weinstein, Archivist of the United States**Private Citizen Members:** Robert B. Cook, Donald E. Garcia, Bruce S. Gelb, Sander Gerber, Charles L. Glazer, Susan Hutchison, Ignacio E. Sanchez**ABOUT THE WOODROW WILSON CENTER**

The Woodrow Wilson Center is one of Washington's most respected institutions of policy research and public dialogue. Created by an act of Congress in 1966, the Center is a living memorial to President Woodrow Wilson and his ideals of a more informed public policy community in Washington. It supports research on international policy issues; organizes conferences, seminars, and working groups; and offers residential fellowships for scholars, journalists and policymakers. Center director Lee H. Hamilton is a widely respected former member of Congress who chaired the House International Relations Committee. The Latin American Program focuses attention on U.S.-Latin American relations and important issues in the region, including democratic governance, citizen security, peace processes, drug policy, decentralization, and economic development and equality.



**Woodrow Wilson  
International  
Center  
for Scholars**

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION  
OFFICIAL BUSINESS  
PENALTY FOR PRIVATE USE, \$300