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Tension Continues Between Bolivian President Evo Morales and Native People

By Andrés Gaudín

The appearance of pockets of the Bolivian indigenous population who are withdrawing the support that they have always given the administration of President Evo Morales has given the political right some cause for celebration. After six years in the opposition, the old structures that historically dominated and led the country have been unable to reinvent themselves, to create a new party, or to generate a program capable of attracting citizens and presenting itself as a valid alternative to the governing Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS). But the emergence of indigenous leaders who, for various reasons, broke with their former leader is giving the white descendants of European colonizers breathing space.

The latest chapter in that distancing was written on Jan. 25, and "for Evo Morales it was a stab in the back," said Carlos Valdez, Associated Press (AP) correspondent in Bolivia. In an analysis on Feb. 14, the journalist described the scene: "To the sound of traditional drum and flute music, indigenous leaders accustomed to eating the meat of wild animals attended a lavish banquet in their honor at an exclusive club hosted by their staunchest enemies: the large landowners of the eastern department of Santa Cruz."

That day, in the salons of the best Santa Cruz hotel—where indigenous people were previously denied service—the Indian Adolfo Chávez and Santa Cruz Gov. Rubén Costas and others shared a meal. On that occasion, they sealed a political pact. Chávez was one of the founders of MAS and as such was always seen with Morales. He is now president of the Central Indígena de Pueblos del Oriente Boliviano (CIPDOB). Costas belonged to the now defunct Verdad y Democracia Social (Verdes) party and was president of the powerful Confederación de Ganaderos de Bolivia (CONGABOL). Valdez described him as a rightist leader and "Morales' arch-nemesis."

Strange bedfellows

In his article, the AP correspondent recalled that in 2008, "when the country was undergoing a period of profound political polarization, roving gangs [civilian commando groups of white youth] at the service of Santa Cruz ultraconservatives, who rejected a government of Indians, beat and insulted those same indigenous, because of their loyalty at the time to Morales, with whom they now shared a banquet."

The article said that "Adolfo Chávez was himself slapped in the face." A slap in the face, with an open hand, has been the most humiliating form of punishment of indigenous people since colonial times and its slavery-like practices.

Chávez said the objectives of the lowlands Indians—the ethnic minorities living in the Bolivian Amazonía, with interests often very different from those in the Andean highlands—is "to overturn and get rid of this authoritarian government." At the reception, Chávez addressed Costas, saying, "We must open spaces for the community without sowing discord or looking back."

During that period in 2008, "overthrow the Indian"—a disrespectful and direct reference to Morales—was the slogan of the civilian commandos who slapped the face of the CIPDOB leader on a Santa Cruz street.

Now, following the actions of his former companions in the struggle, Morales responded painfully, "Traitors are never scarce. I don't understand how some of our leaders can sign agreements with representatives of the big landowners, with the oppressors of the past." Morales, an Aymara Indian from the highlands, has been the standard bearer of the native peoples and, with their support, was re-elected in 2009 with more than 63% of the votes.

Analysts recalled that the indigenous have been Morales' natural allies. Nevertheless, following a series of disputes, the native peoples today are one of the major threats to a possible second re-election of the president in the 2014 general elections, said Valdez.

Government missteps alienate many indigenous

The first signs of conflict appeared in 2009, in the weeks before the legislative elections, when former Morales allies in the cities of La Paz, El alto, and Oruro—three of the major cities in the country—broke with MAS to protest the party's designation of candidates. They said that Morales had imposed the candidates, ignoring the traditional practice by which local leaders nominated those who would run. The situation was repeated in the 2010 municipal elections.

The end of that year saw the first major clash that went beyond the native peoples and touched large sectors of Bolivian society. The key incident was the government's decision to eliminate fuel subsidies, which led to an immediate increase in food and transportation prices. A week later, Morales had to reverse course and apologize to the population, but the measure had already opened a large wound.

Finally, August 2011 saw perhaps the harshest confrontation with the indigenous when construction began on a highway that is vital to the development of vast areas of the country but crosses a natural reserve where various ethnic groups live, those that Valdez describes as "accustomed to eating wild-animal meat." The ensuing demonstration brought strong police repression that was never clarified, and, weeks later, when a protest march arrived in the capital, Morales had to once again reverse himself and declare the territory intangible, making it a protected area permanently off limits for development or extractive exploitation.

Nevertheless, at Morales' request, the legislature recently passed a law codifying the call for a consultation with inhabitants of the reserve so that they have the definitive say on whether to accept or reject construction of the highway.

However, as a sign of protest, and pointing out that the consultation is not applicable because it should have been held prior to the initiation of any such project, five indigenous legislators withdrew from the governing-party bloc in the Asamblea Legislativa (AL) to form their own bloc. Although five does not seem like many, it is enough to cost the government its two-thirds majority in the lower house, necessary for approving certain laws that require a supermajority.

Guaraní join ranks of disaffected

The government is facing other troubling signs as well. At the end of January, the Guaraní, who live in the highlands and are the third largest ethnic group, after the Quechua and the Aymara, added their discontent to that of the Amazonian indigenous. Members of the Takovo Mora community live in the south, near the rich gas and oil fields belonging to the state-owned Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Bolivianos (YPFB), where million-dollar hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation projects are being developed but are presently on hold because of demands for compensation for anticipated environmental damages.

Morales called the Guaraní golpistas (coup supporters) and complained that "they are blackmailing us, they ask for US\$35 million in compensation for an investment of US\$160 million." And he asked, "How are we going to give a group of brothers and sisters US\$35 million?"

Prior consultation is bottom line

Underlying all these disputes is the same issue—prior consultation. And, under international agreements and by mandate of the Constitution, the government is obliged to consult residents before beginning any venture that can have an impact on their natural habitat. That was what was belatedly proposed to be done before June 15 with residents of the Amazonian reserve, who in August 2011 arrived at the doors of the government palace demanding that the road in question not be built. The consultation that should have been carried out last year is now rejected.

Bienvenido Zacu, an indigenous deputy from Santa Cruz who is also a CIPDOB leader and one of the five deputies who left MAS, said on Feb. 15, "The consultation can be done," but he asked that a dialogue first be opened between the parties and that the dialogue be public and include representatives from all communities that feel affected by the road's construction. What he asked was that the state matter be dealt with in a public assembly, in keeping with ethnic groups' ancestral way of resolving conflicts.

The government did not respond, but José Luis Gutiérrez, former hydrocarbons and energy minister, said what many surely wanted to say but did not dare for reasons of political strategy.

"The indigenous have assumed a radical environmentalist discourse but in reality they are not looking out for the interests of the land but for economic interests."

Last year this issue had led to a debate among intellectuals and indigenists that both parties opted to "postpone until a better time," as journalist Sebastián Ochoa said. It was at the time that the march arrived at the government palace and led Morales to suspend construction of the highway.

The intellectuals said that indigenous leaders were developing a discourse "laden with a fundamentalist world view of reality." The term they used to describe fundamentalist indigenism seemed disrespectful to many: pachamamismo, referring to Pachamama, the Quechua-Aymara word for the Mother Earth of South American Andean indigenous.