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Bolivian President Evo Morales Reverses Stance on Transgenic Seeds

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In an unusual move for a head of state, Bolivian President Evo Morales responded to the opinions of his oldest allies—the indigenous, like him, and the campesinos, also like him—and, just hours before enacting a controversial law that would have introduced the use of seeds from genetically modified organisms (GMOs), accepted his allies' criticism and eliminated two strongly challenged articles from the bill.

In a quick process that lasted only two weeks—from its introduction and approval by the lower house on June 1 to Senate approval on June 17—the government managed to enact the Ley de la Revolución Productiva Comunitaria Agropecuaria (RPCA). It contains 51 articles through which the government aims to "increase food production" and free itself "of the need for imports," but it also would have ended the long-standing environmental discourse of Morales—undisputed indigenous and campesino leader since long before becoming president—by opening the country's doors to universally controversial transgenic organisms.

In those two hectic weeks in June, the president had received the most unwanted comments: excessive praise from his long-time critics, and even from his enemies; strong criticism from well-known researchers and academics from around the world; a clear and overwhelming distancing from old friends, the indigenous and campesinos who brought him to political prominence when he was merely a union leader of the cocoa growers deep in the Chapare region of eastern Bolivia.

On June 25, when he listened to his people's demands and eliminated the two contested articles from the bill, everything returned to the tense normality of recent times: unbridled criticism from his long-time critics, signs of respect from researchers and academics, and an immediate, clear, and warm resurgence of support from his life-long friends in the sectors that make up his historic social base, the indigenous and campesinos.

Morales cites food security in backing bill

When Morales publically presented the RPCA bill on June 2, he said his only aim was to "guarantee national food sovereignty with conditions of safety and quality for living well"—a concept dear to the philosophy of South American indigenous communities—"in the framework of a plural economy," but he neglected to mention that the law would authorize for the first time in Bolivia the production, importation, and marketing of GMOs.

The bill was, however, a real and confusing compendium of contradictions and incoherencies that tried to mesh the historic posture of Morales and his Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS)—favorable to organic agriculture—with the need to resolve a food-supply crisis that had, in the first three months of the year, already forced the government to divert unplanned resources to importing products in which Bolivia had previously been self-sufficient. For example, the government had to import the equivalent of 68% of the sugar and corn for domestic consumption.
The climatic crisis—the droughts to which GMOs are almost impervious and able to withstand, even guaranteeing a good production—and the rise in product prices acted as a dangerous cocktail to which Morales succumbed in an attempt to prioritize food security. Following the crisis, prices stabilized beginning in May.

With those elements at hand, it was not difficult to convince legislators to quickly pass the RPCA. MAS lawmakers were joined by many from the opposition, especially those tied to agrarian sectors.

This is where the contradictions and incoherencies come in. The bill said that the government was "prioritizing organic production in harmony and balance with the bounty of Mother Earth," the Pachamama loved by Andean Indians, but it added something that had always been taboo—that the executive "will establish provisions for controlling the production, importation, and marketing of genetically modified products."

The bill proposed: a) institutionalizing financial mechanisms to protect farmers affected by droughts, floods, and other natural disasters; b) creating technical agencies to produce fertilizers, store seeds, and monitor production; c) recognizing the always neglected—the original indigenous communities and intercultural and Afro-Bolivian communities—as the "productive, social, and cultural organic nucleus for living well"; d) creating a "social seal" to certify the use of local labor and inputs in food processing and industrialization; e) and also promoting initiatives from community organizations, cooperatives, producer associations, and campesino communities.

Two articles unacceptable to Morales’ allies

Everything seemed lovely, but Articles 15 and 19 contained a concept that the indigenous and campesinos were never going to agree to and three words that they hated—genetically modified organisms.

Article 15 said that "all products intended for human consumption, either directly or indirectly, that are, contain, or are derived from GMOs must be identified as such"; Article 19 said that "provisions will be established to control the production, importation, and marketing of GM products." Those are the two articles that Morales deleted from the bill hours before signing it.

For the indigenous and campesinos, as Morales had told them time and again, a transgenic organism is one that has a gene from another species artificially incorporated into its molecular map through genetic-engineering procedures. Any indigenous person or any campesino will give examples of these unnatural scientific occurrences: they are artificial organisms, they will say, that have been "crossed" with other species with which they would never be related in nature. In this way, tomatoes have been created with various animal genes, as have kiwis with rat genes, eggs with cotton genes, and corn with scorpion genes.

The "horror" of those three words was met by disparate reactions. Among the government's enemies, who did not imagine that Morales would change his mind at the last minute and who preferred to ignore that transgenic seeds are inexorably tied to intensive use of toxic agrochemicals dangerous to humans, the bill awakened unexpected sympathy toward a government for which they had always shown nothing but contempt and discrimination.

The soy producers (Asociación Nacional de Productores de Oleaginosas, ANAPO), which hoped that transgenic seeds would increase yields from 4 to 7 tons per planted hectare, said, "The government has taken a big step for the benefit of Bolivia."
The powerful Cámara Agropecuaria del Oriente (CAO)—the rich region that tried to secede from the poor Bolivia—heaped lavish and unimaginable praise on Morales for supporting a bill by which transgenic would cease to be a dirty word in the mouth of the veteran indigenous and campesino leader-turned-president. The free use of GMOs and the associated agrochemicals are the CAO’s number-one demand.

In the hours prior to the government's decision to listen to its old and unconditional friends, the organization of indigenous towns and regions (Consejo de Ayllus y Markas del Qullasuyu, CONAMAQ) and the Central Indígena del Oriente—the government's staunchest allies—had threatened to leave Morales high and dry.

CONAMAQ leader Rafael Quispe had said that Articles 15 and 19 "go against the Constitution's principles of living well, they violate the natural law of Mother Earth, and they are contrary to the government's discourse in favor of Pachamama."

To stress the incoherencies Morales had maintained to that point, Quispe added that, "just when developed countries are giving up transgenic consumption for ecological consumption, our government is implementing [GMOs]."

And, on another point, Enrique Ormachea, researcher in agrarian issues with the Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Laboral y Agrario (CEDLA) and sought-after expert within Bolivian academia, had objected, using political, philosophic, scientific, and even statistical reasons, to the government's premise that it would overcome the food crisis with the RPCA. He directed a scathing comment to Morales: "This law will favor only those who are always favored, agribusinesses and the richest campesinos."

In a move that was immediately valued, Morales also listened to CEDLA when, on June 25, 12 hours before signing the RPCA, he admitted that he had to eliminate the two articles referring to GMOs.

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