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Catholic Leaders Challenge Bolivia’s President

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Although the stormy relations between President Evo Morales’ government and the Bolivian Catholic Church had moved into a sort of grace period for the past three years thanks to a great degree to Argentine Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio’s ascent to the Vatican throne, Bolivian bishops made an abrupt turn April 1 with the release of a document in which, without proof, they denounced government complicity with drug trafficking (NotiSur, Feb. 18, 2011, and Sept. 12, 2014).

The 48-page pastoral letter from the Conferencia Episcopal Boliviana (Bolivian Episcopal Conference, CEB), titled “Today I put Life and Death Before You,” said, “The drug trade, in its strategy of expansion and impunity, penetrates even state structures and law enforcement, both past and present, buying consciences.” It went on to define Bolivia as a producer of raw material and as manufacturer, country of transit, and consumer of cocaine. It called on judicial magistrates to “do their job according to the rules” and encouraged the armed forces and police to “resist all the temptations of corruption, which makes the war on drugs sterile and useless.”

A week later, the 101st National Assembly of Bishops was held in the city of Cochabamba, in the geographic center of the country. On April 8, the daily Página Siete, one of the many media outlets tied to the Catholic Church and particularly to the Society of Jesus, reported testimony from the CEB president, Monsignor Ricardo Centellas, in which he argued that Bolivia suffers from a vacuum of “authentic, truthful, and honest leaders” and called for the formation of new leadership that “respects the power and the voice of the people” and administers “the state’s wealth with honor.” In neither document, nor at any time, did the Catholic hierarchy name the president or any high government official, but it was obvious it was referring directly to President Morales and his vice president, Álvaro García Linera.

Morales accuses priests of racism

The government’s response was immediate and came from different actors. On April 1, after Carlos Romero, the minister of government, challenged the bishops to “provide at least one name,” Morales issued an ultimatum, demanding that the bishops “provide the names of the authorities linked to drug trafficking within the next 24 hours” and calling them “truly irresponsible persons.” According to the version the opposition daily Los Tiempos gave on April 4, Morales asked the CEB, “Who are [the persons tied to drug trafficking in the state]? Is it the president, vice president, deputies, or senators? Give the names. Give them if you are responsible for what you say. Fathers, Catholic hierarchy, I want to see these government authorities who are drug traffickers tomorrow, and if you don’t name names, I am going to think that what you want is to attack the indigenous movement as you have done in the past.”

Church spokesmen quoted by the media said the bishops would respond after the Cochabamba Assembly, but they didn’t.

On May 26, Morales brought the issue up again and accused the church’s media outlets of “acting like they did in colonial times. You are trying to humiliate me because I am an Indian.” That day, he posted on Twitter, “Jesus taught us to be patient and endure everything for the poor and the
humble.” The president referred to the daily El Deber, the radio network Erbol, the news agency Fides, and the daily Página Siete, the last three Society of Jesus property, which in an audience in Congress with Minister of the Presidency Juan Ramón Quintana, he accused of forming “a cartel of lies.”

Minister of Defense Raymi Ferreira joined the round of criticisms. He lamented the bishops had not considered the government’s achievements in the war on drugs following the expulsion of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) delegation in 2008 (NotiSur, Oct. 31, 2008). Ferreira, Quintana, and Romero, each in turn, indicated that between 2008 and 2015 there had been 121,095 operations against drug trafficking, 163% more than the previous decade, when the DEA directed the war on drugs. They added that in this period, the area the area under coca cultivation dropped an average of 3,000 hectares a year (NotiSur, Aug. 22, 2008). Romero maintained that these figures were from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which, on July 5, commended Bolivia on its success in this area.

On July 3, during an interview on the television station Abya Yala (the ancient name original inhabitants gave to America), Quintana referred to the “systematic attacks launched by Erbol and Fides against everything the government does, and denounced that “this attitude stems from our rejection of Fides’ blackmail” during Morales’ first term (2006-2010). At that time, Quintana said, the director of Radio Fides, the Jesuit priest Eduardo Pérez, had proposed signing a US$60,000 government contract to provide survey services. “Fides’ decision to systematically attack the government, and me personally, is a response to our rejection of Father Perez’s immoral proposal for us to buy a survey service. At that time, the price of those types of services didn’t exceed US $1,500. Perez set a ‘political price’ of US$60,000,” Quintana said.

Argentine pope had improved relations

The period of cordiality that began at the beginning of 2013 and continued until April coincides with Cardinal Bergoglio becoming Pope Francis, the top Vatican authority. Pope Francis and Morales had met in 2006, when the cardinal, as head of the Argentine Catholic Church, accompanied Morales, who had traveled to Argentina to help the families of five Bolivian children and a Bolivian youth burned to death in a fire inside an illegal factory. The factory, using slave labor, produced clothing for top world brands, among them Cheeky, the biggest Argentine producer of children’s designer clothing. It was owned by Juliana Awada, who in 2010 married Mauricio Macri, now the president of Argentina. Since 2006, the pope and Morales have maintained a friendly and frequent dialogue. They met three times in the Vatican (during the papal inauguration in March 2013, and in two private audiences in October 2014 and last April) and once in Bolivia when the Pope traveled there in July 2015 to preside over the second World Meeting of Popular Movements (NotiSur, July 31, 2015).

The bishops’ surprise attack served as a prologue to the last meeting between the pontiff and the president and a harbinger of the offensive that, a few days later, Catholic media launched along with Mexican Fernando del Rincón of CNN, the Asociación Nacional de la Prensa (National Press Association, ANP), and the international organization Reporters Without Borders accusing Morales of conducting an anti-democratic government. During his April trip to the Vatican, Morales carried a letter from the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB), a powerful workers’ union that flips between period of government support and opposition. Officially, no one discussed the content of the letter, but the Argentine news agency Télam confirmed that it “emphasizes the country’s social indicators as a
way of showing achievements, asks the Catholic Church to critically examine itself in regards to acts against indigenous peoples, calls for an end to hostilities against the president, and asks the pope to intercede to clear up the unfounded criticisms of the Episcopal Conference.”

In complaints before Congress and subsequent television interviews, Quintana alleged that the Catholic media and several of its journalists, the ANP, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) linked to certain leaders of indigenous movement were being financed by US organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (NotiSur, June 14, 2013). According to Quintana, the ANP alone has received more than US$1 million in “recent years” to destabilize Morales’ government, and “in the last eight years, ONGs with democratic fronts received approximately US$10 million.” Quintana’s latest complaint coincided with a public statement by Peter Brennan, chargé d’affaires at the US Embassy in La Paz, who echoed the ANP and Reporters Without Borders saying, “Democracy is incomplete where people don’t feel free to say what they think or publish what they want.”

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