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Controversial Highway a Step Closer in Bolivia

By Andrés Gaudín

On July 29, the Bolivian government began an unprecedented popular consultation to ascertain whether the 69 indigenous groups living in the Amazonía supported construction of a highway that would bisect the Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isíboro Secure (TIPNIS). The 306 km highway would open the door to developing a vast area of the departments of Beni and Cochabamba, which are now isolated from the rest of the country.

The consultation with the communities of the Mojeño-Trinitario, Chimane, and Yuracaré peoples was to have lasted until Aug. 25. During this four week period, "dialogue brigades" would visit each community, following ancestral practices. However, the process did not finish until Dec. 9, and 11 communities refused to participate in the consultation.

Why did a small but highly significant project force the government to expend the effort to organize such a consultation? Why did the consultation take almost four months longer than anticipated? And why did some communities refuse to participate in a dialogue carried out according to their own norms and customs? There is basically one comprehensive answer: President Evo Morales' administration has begun a process of changes that hurts large economic interests. In that process, sectors that have historically governed the country continue controlling the media—opposed to the Morales administration—and their economic power gives them the capacity to penetrate indigenous communities that have little political experience and are often isolated and disconnected from one another.

Consultative democracy at work?

The consultation process has unique characteristics. The main one is that, within each community, decisions are made by consensus and not by majority; discussion continues until differences disappear and a unified position emerges. The dialogue is led by six-member "brigades": one representative each from the Ministerios de Obras Públicas and Medio Ambiente y Aguas; three indigenous facilitators who serve as guarantors and translators; and one logistics coordinator.

The Organization of American States (OAS) and the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR) observed the consultation from the sidelines. The Bolivian Constitution (Constitución del Estado Plurinacional) describes the consultation process as a participatory and consultative construct, a variation of representative democracy. OAS delegate Enrique Reina says it is "an

expression of maturity, a novel process of deepening democracy in which communities define issues connected to their own development." UNASUR representative Pedro Sassone said, "On July 29, the native peoples of Bolivia began a historic process, unprecedented in South America."

Minister of Public Works Vladimir Sánchez said, "In the Plurinational State of Bolivia, we are moving from representative democracy to participatory democracy, and it is precisely the consultation that is putting to the test the most profound participation, the deepening of democracy."

The Amazonian communities had to decide whether they agreed with the declaration of the TIPNIS as "intangible," that is, a geographic area that cannot be altered by human activity. That decision would determine whether the highway could be built.

During the almost four-month-long consultation, a group of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and some indigenous leaders with strong ties to the political right in the department of Santa Cruz—the rich pro-secession department in eastern Bolivia—unleashed a major offensive against the administration trying to discredit the process. In the end, 82% of the 58 communities that participated in the dialogue supported removing the "intangible" designation from the TIPNIS.

Conditions could make highway untenable

The highway will be built, "but with a series of constraints that will at least double the original cost estimate of US\$415 million," said Minister Sánchez. These "constraints" make evident the difficulty of carrying out such a consultation and, most importantly, the vulnerability of native peoples without practical political experience when they are bombarded by dominant media discourse, agencies that purport to be environmental, and an indigenous leadership allied with the large economic groups.

The constraints include, for example, that "for the highway to be built, in a 16.7 km section, a viaduct will have to be built, a type of very high bridge that will go over the trees so as to not affect the virgin forest," said Sánchez. "There will have to be overpasses to allow large vertebrates to go from one side of the highway to the other. And we will also have to make 'tree tunnels' in several sections so vertebrates that live in the treetops can move freely and migrate." And there must be a "guarantee that the Isíboro and Secure rivers will never be contaminated."

Groups that infiltrated the TIPNIS communities not only delayed the consultation, they convinced 11 communities to boycott it, and in the end they succeeded in incorporating the practically unfeasible "constraints." They also succeeded in ensuring that the TIPNIS remain the only region in the country where a census of the population and a mapping update cannot be carried out. The same indigenous leaders who opposed the highway construction project started the rumor that the census, carried out every ten years, is intended to reverse land ownership that has always been under community control.

"The census is not conceived or designed to take away lands or levy taxes, the purpose of the census is to obtain basic, demographic information and data on housing quality. We are not asking about property titles but rather whether people have water, electricity, plumbing; the census can then be used to design public policies that benefit the population," said Minister of Planning Viviana Caro. But so far, she has not been listened to.

At the peak of the offensive against the administration, when the consultation was in danger of failing because of sabotage by some indigenous leaders who mobilized to prevent the brigades from arriving in the communities, two polls were released that showed firm support for the administration of President Morales, the major promoter of the dialogue.

On Oct. 30, the private firm Ipsos released the results of its poll in the daily *Página Siete*. In the city of El Alto, on the outskirts of La Paz, and in the department of Santa Cruz—the two major bastions of opposition—support for the Morales administration was 43%, much higher than in earlier polls and much higher than the percentage who had a favorable impression of the opposition leadership.

A month earlier, the daily *La Razón* had published the results of a poll by Americas Barometer of the Latin America Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. In that poll, 64.2% of Bolivian respondents rated the government as "very good," the same percentage that voted for Morales when he was re-elected in December 2009.

Vice president assesses geopolitical dimensions of highway

Brazilian political analyst Emir Sader questions the opposition media campaign against Morales within and outside Bolivia, especially its contention that the highway that would cross the TIPNIS would be designed to favor transnational companies that export Brazilian products from Pacific ports using Bolivian territory. In an article published Oct. 2 in the online magazine *Carta Maior*, Sader goes along with the reasoning put forth by Bolivian Vice President Álvaro García Linera in his book *Geopolítica de la Amazonía*. Refuting the most widespread suppositions, he says that the highway that will unite the departments of Cochabamba and Beni begins and ends in Bolivian territory and is aimed at unifying the historically fragmented and dependent country, not against the exterior but rather against the secessionist and anti-indigenous department of Santa Cruz, in eastern Bolivia on the border with Brazil. In the departments of Cochabamba and Beni, the government is developing agriculture projects that will free the region's economy from the bonds that tie it to Santa Cruz (and Brazil).

Sader, who describes García Linera as "the most important contemporary Latin American intellectual," writes: "Another aspect has to do with a supposed image of the TIPNIS as a virgin reserve violated by the highway that the government plans to build. In *Geopolítica de la Amazonía*, García Linera proves with facts, maps, and photographs that the region is already being intensely exploited by large international companies in the lumber and livestock-raising sectors and by alligator poaching, among other activities. The reserve has several clandestine airstrips to take products out, which also serve as a base for intensive international adventure tourism. Thus, the picture of no state presence pushed by many NGOs and some small

indigenous groups aim not to keep the reserve intangible but rather to ensure the permanence and expansion of those activities with the complete absence of national Bolivian government control."

The Brazilian analyst said that García Linera denounces NGOs and indigenous groups that act on behalf of the interests of multinational companies and foreign governments. "Thus, on a continent that needs to return to high levels of development after the prolonged global recession, in that Bolivian region it is perfectly clear how interconnected economic development and environmental protection are," Sader concludes.