Bolivia: Evo's Fall, the Fascist Right, and the Power of Memory

written by Raúl Zibechi | November 18, 2019

After nearly 14 years in power, the government of Evo Morales fell in a little less than a month, due to allegations of fraud and the desire to remain in power. Previously, Morales was a campesino leader, but this time he could not appeal, in the face of the rise of a racist and opportunist right wing, for support from Bolivian popular organizations, which have been weakened after years of cooptation and repression.

Between efforts towards restoration and the advance of a coup, the Bolivian people are preparing, again, to resist.

"Mr President, from the bottom of our hearts and with great sadness we ask: Where did you get lost? Why don't you live within the ancestral beliefs that says we should respect the *muyu* (circle): that we should govern only once? Why have you sold off our *Pachamama*? Why did you have the Chiquitanía burned? Why did you so mistreat our Indigenous brothers in Chaparina and Tariquía?" So reads the Manifesto of the Qhara Qhara nation. On November 7th, members of the Qhara Qhara nation participated with a sector of the Indigenous movment in actions against electoral fraud in Bolivia.

The Manifesto of the Qhara Qhara is one of the most damning documents against Evo Morales, perhaps because it comes from the same forces which brought him to power. "Respect our cultures, stop spreading hate between our brothers from the country and those in the cities, stop dividing the people, you already abused their free choice. Stop sending Indigenous people as cannon fodder to back up your interests and the interests of those around you, which are no longer ours, stop sending killers to abuse our people, let us live according to our law, stop speaking in the name of Indigenous people, as you have lost your identity," it reads.

There is a marked contrast between what is taking place today and what took place in October of 2003, during the first Gas War. Back then, the social movements fought the government of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, and paid a very high price: more than 60 dead, and hundreds of people were wounded and mutilated. Regardless of the repression–the army shot at demonstrators from helicopters–the population beat back the government, forcing the President to resign.

But this time, after three weeks of opposition protests and accusations of fraud during the October 20th elections in which Evo Morales proclaimed himself re-elected, there were expressions of hatred toward the government from the leaders and supporters of social organizations. By late afternoon on Sunday November 10th, many, including the Bolivian Workers Central (COB), the mining federation and Indigenous organizations, demanded the president resign. That is why the most extreme right was able to enter into the government offices without any trouble, and why no one was immediately in the streets to defend Morales when the army suggested he resign.

Over the last 14 years of rule by the official Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) party, there were things the government did that social movements can't forget. Between 2002 and 2006, a Unity Pact between the main campesino and indigenous organizations created the foundations for Evo Morales' government: the Unified Syndical Confederation of Rural Workers of Bolivia (CSUTCB), the National Council of Ayllus and Markas of the Qullasuyu (CONAMAQ), the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Eastern Bolivia (CIDOB), the National Confederation of Indigenous and Campesina

women of Bolivia “Bartolina Sisa,” and neighbourhood associations in El Alto.

By the end of 2011, the CIDOB and the CONAMAQ had decided to leave the Unity Pact, because “the executive branch has factionalized Indigenous organizations, and value those closest to the MAS above others,” which they said directly affected “our territories, cultures and our natural resources.”

In June of 2012, CIDOB denounced “the interference of the government, with the sole aim of manipulating, dividing, and affecting the organic and representative organizations of Indigenous peoples (pueblos) in Bolivia.” A group of dissidents from the Confederation, with the support of the government, refused to recognize the authorities and convened an “expanded commission” to elect new authorities.

In December of 2013, CONAMAQ dissidents who were “close the the MAS” took over the organization’s offices, beating and ejecting those who were present with the help of police, who remained to guard the locale and ensure that the legitimate authorities could not take it back. The communiqué of the CONAMAQ that followed these events said the attack against them happened so that “all of the policies against the Indigenous movement and the Bolivian people would be approved, without anyone saying anything.”

Into the Void

On Wednesday the 13th, an unprecedented series of events occurred, in a turn as important as the resignation of Morales three days earlier. Jeanine Áñez was named President in a parliament that was without quorum. The representatives of the MAS, which holds an absolute majority, as well as MAS senator Adriana Salvatierra, were unable to enter the building. Salvatierra had publicly resigned her position as president of the senate on the same day as Evo Morales and Vice President Álvaro Garcia Linera did the same, but she did not give up her seat. When she and others from her party tried to enter parliament, they were kept out by security forces.

For her part, Áñez was vice president of the second chamber. She was able to arrive to the presidency of the republic because all of the others in the line of succession, who were from the MAS, had resigned as part of the government’s policy of denouncing a coup. Áñez is a member of the Democratic Union, an opposition alliance, and she is an unconditional ally of the racist elites from the department of Santa Cruz. This is how, three days after the resignation of Evo, a true coup was consolidated, though in reality a combination of interests led to this situation.

The chronology of these events begins with the elections on October 20, but especially with the interruption of the vote count and its re-starting, 24 hours later, with data that contradicted what was released the day before. This arose suspicions of the repetition of a very obvious fraud in a pattern long-established in Latin America, which could not be ignored. This led to protests, led by civic groups made up of middle class sectors that are well established in eastern Bolivia. These protests grew slowly until Friday, November 8th.

It appears that the Morales government underestimated the magnitude of these protests. The MAS had maintained an alliance with the Civic Committee of Santa Cruz after having defeated a separatist movement spearheaded from Santa Cruz in 2008. Initially, the circumstances appeared to continue to favor the MAS, which had a good relationship with the Organization of American States (OAS), and especially with its general secretary Luis Almagro, to the point that the opposition candidate Carlos Mesa had initially rejected the audit agreed to between the OAS and the government.

The situation changed abruptly on Friday the 8th, when a police mutiny that began in Santa Cruz and La Paz began to spread across the country. Versions claiming the police had been "bought" with money from a company with its headquarters in Santa Cruz began to circulate on social networks. What is known is that the police mutiny was an inflection point, and one that will be important to study going forward so we can better understand what took place.

The government couldn't count on the police, nor could it send the armed forces against demonstrators, creating an unsustainable situation. Worse yet, they couldn't count on strong popular organizations to defend them, as those had been purged and many of their leaders had been removed and condemned, some ostracized and others jailed. At this point, the President and Vice President decided to take a risk. Last Sunday, they left La Paz, which was full of barricades and protests, with the intention of returning later in better conditions.

The right continued to operate, and as is common in these cases, probably did so with the support of the US embassy. A sinister man came to the forefront in this moment: Santa Cruz businessman Luis Fernando Camacho. Employing radical and ultraconservative discourse, with a clear racist and colonial content, Camacho came up as a leader of the white middle classes of eastern Bolivia and a representative of the land owing elites in the richest part of the country. He called a town hall (*cabildo*) in which the results of the election were disqualified; his incendiary language went beyond both the "*civicos*" from Santa Cruz–who had previously co-existed perfectly well with the MAS–as well as beyond Mesa, who Camacho eclipsed as the face of the opposition within a few days. Camacho is an opportunist ultra-rightist, who should have asked for forgiveness after the burning of *wiphalas* by his supporters, in an action that demonstrates the thin line the conservatives hold in Bolivia today.

Women and War

The Santa Cruz oligarchy showed its extremism through Camacho, but officialism didn't lag far behind. As tensions built in the run up to November 10, Juan Ramón Quintana, the Minister of the Presidency of Bolivia, told *Sputnik* "Bolivia is going to be converted into a great battlefield, a modern Vietnam."

As one of the highest officials in the government of Evo Morales, Quintana showed how separated he is from reality when he said that "there is a political accumulation of the social movements that are ready to fight." He proposed a strategy that consisted of "a pitched battle in the face of the virulent lies of the media," which, in his opinion, is part of "a war that is very complex, with unknown dimensions, that is going to demand that we sharpen our thinking, our strategy of self defense."

It was women who responded with the most clarity and transparency, working to undo the mechanisms of war. In La Paz, the *Mujeres Creando* collective convened a Women's Parliament (a handful of men attended), where they worked to build "collective voices" to challenge the polarization underway. Meanwhile, in the city of El Alto, thousands of youth yelled "Yes, it is time for civil war," while flying the wiphala.

Many women manifested a double outrage: against Morales's fraud and against the racist right. In general there was a predominance of defending the advances that took place over the last 15 years, not all of which could be attributed to the MAS, but rather to the creative potential of the movements, which the authorities were never able to ignore.

I'd like to highlight the words of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, a historian and sociologist:

> I don't believe in the two hypotheses that are being pushed. The triumphalism that with

> the fall of Evo we have recovered democracy seems to me an excess, an analysis that is out of focus… The second wrong hypothesis, which seems to me to be extremely dangerous, is that of the coup d'etat, which simply legitimizes in a complete package, wrapped in cellophane, the entire Evo Morales government in the moment when it is most deteriorated. To legitimize all this deterioration with the idea of a coup d'etat is criminal, therefore how this deterioration began must be considered.

Along the same lines, María Galindo, the spokesperson for Mujeres Creando, wrote the following in her column in *Página Siete:* "The feeling of abandonment and orphanhood that comes with seeing Evo Morales take off towards Mexico can be felt in the streets. People are calling the radio, and they are broken, sobbing and unable to speak, their feeling of weakness and abandonment means that the memories of the violences and arbitrariness of [Morales] (el caudillo) are forgotten, the people miss him as a protective father and benefactor."

An Uncertain Future

Morales and García Linera's plan to return as "pacifiers" failed, and gave way to a complex situation. The fascist and racist ultra right has momentum, as well as a huge amount of material resources and media support, which allowed them to assume power, though they lack the legitimacy to maintain it.



Evo Morales gives a press conference in Mexico City on November 13. Photo: EneasMx, Wikimedia Commons.

Long memory, which is one of Rivera Cusicanqui's concepts, teaches us that the racist elites can stay in power for an extended period of time by way of blood and fire, even without social support, because they possess the means necessary to do so. However, short memory, which is complementary, points toward something different–at least since 2000–in Bolivia: the power of those from below impedes racist and patriarchal regimes from enjoying stability and longevity. Women

and Indigenous people don't let themselves get walked on, as we have learned from the people in the streets of Santiago de Chile and Quito, where new alliances are emerging on the ground and through actions, best represented by the Mapuche flag being lifted in the hands of non-Indigenous Chileans, and by women who were able to open a fissure of hope in the heat of the conflict in Ecuador.

An exit to the tremendous situation that Bolivia is currently living could be found through general elections, which the usurper government of Áñez ought to convene immediately. As sociologist Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar notes, the choices appear to be "general elections or civil war." If the ballot boxes speak, it is probable that the next president would be Carlos Mesa, but the MAS would retain an important number of legislators, and could even be the party that receives the most votes.

Sooner rather than later, the diverse alliance that the MAS used to represent will return to the Palacio Quemado [the official residence of the president], as it makes up the social and cultural majority in the Andean country. It would be ideal that it not be a copy of the current MAS, which has deteriorated just as the passage of time spoils standing water.

To avoid a repeat, a new political culture would need to take shape, among leaders and members of organizations and movements. A culture that is capable of nourishing itself from the waters of Andean traditions of rotating leadership and complementarity between genders, ages and world views. A culture that is permeated by the feminist rejection of the patriarchy, as they work to undo caudillo leadership and hierarchical organization.

Bolivia, like few regions in our America, offers contributions from both lineages, without which it will be impossible to communally weave an emancipatory future in which the oppressions that impact us all are overcome.

Translated by Toward Freedom *with permission of the author. Published in Spanish at* Brecha *on Friday, November 15, 2019.*