

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6337>



Bolivia

The political crisis seen “from below”

- IV Online magazine - 2019 - IV539 - December 2019 -

Publication date: Wednesday 25 December 2019

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Since the disputed elections of October 20, 2019, Bolivia has been in crisis. Rural inhabitants are at the centre of the debate, with Evo Morales calling on them to mobilize against the cities, reconnecting with his historic base, while the extreme right has found in some rural organizations pragmatic allies to shed its “white” image. But the crisis remains seen from the cities and the games of alliances and oppositions of national organizations. However, analysing it from the bottom allows us to take into account the gap between the different levels of action and to reveal the fragmentation of the opposition as well as the crumbling of historical support for Evo Morales.

In November 2018, Emilio invited me to his home to drink a *mate*, in the community of Copalca, in North Potosi, in the heart of the Bolivian altiplano, at an altitude of 4,000 meters. [1] Emilio is an evangelist, schoolteacher and local leader of the Indian organization Federation of *Ayllus*, Original and Indigenous Peoples of North Potosi (FAOINP). [2] A few months before the presidential election, he was ready to do anything to bring down Evo Morales. It was difficult to know whether this feeling was widespread in Copalca. The leaders of the peasant union, a competitor of the FAOINP for control of the territory, are the main cadres of the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS – Movement to Socialism) at the local level (with certain leaders of the FAOINP) and they affirmed loud and clear that Evo would triumph 100%, as he has always done in Copalca. In any case, they would not allow other parties to campaign, as did the Federation of Peasant Trade Unions at the regional level of North Potosi. But when I ask my friends how they see the future elections, I realize that there is not the same view. Some prefer to change the subject, others tell me that the MAS is 60% -65% in Copalca, others simply answer “there is no other candidate”.

Fragmented campaigns

Emilio was ready to vote for the right-wing party Democratas. A doubt remains, however, “How is it a neoliberal government?” he asks me. To justify his choice, he explains to me that the only “organic” political instrument, emerging from the social organizations of North Potosi, is the Movimiento Originario Popular (MOP) and that this party has allied with Democratas in Potosi; so by voting for this party, he would be somehow represented in the elections. I learn that other FAOINP leaders went to a meeting organized by supporters of the candidate Félix Patzi, an Aymara intellectual and former minister of Evo Morales who joined the opposition. According to them, this choice is justified by the fact that Patzi was a professor at Siglo XX University in Llallagua (Emilio was one of his students) and that he is therefore linked to the *ayllus* (Indian territories) of North Potosi. Whether with Patzi or the MOP, it is therefore a question of seeking the candidate who best represents the region and the communities, to make it legitimate in the name of an alleged “organic” character. Emilio finally voted evangelist, finding in the candidate Chi Hyun Chung a compromise between his opposition to Morales and his religious convictions, revealing a new form of representation - religious - which marked the whole electoral campaign.

While much has been said about the hegemony of Evo Morales’ MAS at the national level, it should be noted that this has also been the case at the local level. Little by little, all the social organizations that created their own political instrument (like the MOP) abandoned it in favour of the governing party. This was followed by a struggle between social sectors (between peasant and indigenous organizations, sometimes also miners; between communities, between *ayllus*, between provinces) for control of the MAS. The election of the candidate has even become more important than the general election itself since Evo Morales’s party was almost the only legitimate party in the region. When different organizations clashed for control of the MAS, a rotation system (*muyu turno*) could be put in place to relieve tensions. As the vertical control of the MAS increased and the candidates were chosen not by the bases but by the partisan hierarchy (*a dedo*), new tensions appeared. Parallel instruments (such as the MOP) then served to

offer legitimacy to candidates and organizations excluded from the MAS, who could mobilize the “organic” character of their instrument to denounce the verticality of Evo Morales' party. Thus, the MOP, born from the peasant unions of North Potosi, was controlled sometimes by the Indian organization of the FAOINP, sometimes by the miners, and finally by the right which found a way to penetrate this rebel region. When Evo Morales fell, replaced by a transitional government of the radical right, the latter also offered a leader of the MOP (and former FAOINP authority) the post of deputy minister of decolonization, a way to thank and reward him for the alliance established

Even when they are controlled almost exclusively by the MAS, certain municipalities have become ungovernable, the link uniting elected officials with their organization resulting in clientelism, corruption and incessant clashes between rival groups. To these organizational and territorial tensions, the MAS thus added a new one - partisan - which rests mainly on the first while generating new tensions: to take control of the MAS means to secure a victory in the elections and future profits for one's group (development projects and so on). These local tensions did not prevent Evo Morales for years obtaining nearly 100% of the votes during national elections in these communities. Evo was seen as above the local divides - he embodied the Indian, the peasant and the miner.

On the side of the peasant union, which is very close to the MAS, I could observe criticisms of the government party during certain regional assemblies, from 2010, notably by the founders of the MOP and their supporters (“the leader must have his bases”) who did not accept that an “outside” party had come to break with the instrument which they had taken years to build, and imposed a verticality contrary to their organic project. However, the MAS had gradually established itself as just as organic as the MOP and the critics never seemed to rise in the hierarchy. This undoubtedly explains the difficulties of the national leaders of the Unified Trade Union Confederation of Rural Workers of Bolivia (CSUTCB) in mobilizing their bases, during the first phase of the post-electoral political crisis, since few were really aware of what they were saying. [3]

For their part, the FAOINP Indians were the first to distance themselves from the MAS hierarchy. From the constituent assembly, during my first participation in a *cabildo* (assembly) of the FAOINP in 2006, the social bases threatened to *chicotear* the organic assembly members who had submitted to the directives of the MAS and had abandoned the constitutional project worked out at regional level by the communities for several months. [4] The *gasolinazo* (a rise in fuel prices, imposed by the Morales government) of December 2010 marked a new break: for the first time the faults were not imputed to the national leaders of the MAS but to Evo Morales himself. In 2012, the Mallku Khota mining conflict accelerated tensions within the Indian organization, while as at the national level the gradual alienation of the Indianist discourse of Evo Morales, to the point of generating - from the national level to the local - two parallel organizations: a CONAMAQ/FAOINP recognized by the MAS, ironically called CONAMAS by those declaring themselves to be “organic” CONAMAQ / FAOINP which claims to really represent the communities and not the government. [5] It's difficult to know, however, which has the most weight in the countryside, as both have lost a large part of their power of convocation, with the rank and file tired by the conflicts.

For the 2019 election, “Organic CONAMAQ” called for voting for Democratas, led by Oscar Ortiz. This does not mean that the Indians have become right-wing, this vote is surely very much a minority in the communities, but it shows that the game of alliances and oppositions - local, regional and national - blurs conventional analyses of the political field, and that opposition to Morales was such, in certain areas, that it brought leaders to associate with the neoliberal and racist right.

The national elections of 2019

Even before the opening of the poll, the 2019 elections once again generated their share of violence, notably in Llallagua, capital of North Potosi, during clashes between the Bustillo and Chayanta provinces, revealing the competition between territories as well as between organizations, the first being almost exclusively under the control

of the FAOINP, the second being a historic site of peasant trades unionism (although today divided). In May 2019, the MAS Regional Congress in Llallagua ended in a general clash over the election of the new regional party leader despite the initial presence of Evo Morales, who had insisted on putting aside “personal interests” (a term designating corporate or territorial competitions). He appealed for calm, indicating that today “everyone wants to be a candidate, but we have to be more organic... It is difficult to reach consensus”. The confrontation was later downplayed by the vice-president of the MAS, Gerardo Garc a Mendoza, for whom such a situation “was normal... It always happens, it is not the first time, it is not new, it has always happened in many events, and worse, for us it is not new that this problem has occurred in the Congress of North Potosi.” [6]

Despite these divisions, North Potosi is considered a bastion of the MAS, being at the same time an Indian, poor and mining area. When the offices of the Electoral Court of the Department of Potosi were set on fire by the opposition on the night of October 21-22, after the first accusations of fraud, it is not trivial that the Morales government transferred these offices to Llallagua in order to continue the counting of votes, halted at 75% in this department. This count was then done under the protection of the *ayllus*. Evo announced it the same evening as the election on television, it was the rural inhabitants who got him elected and who must defend democracy. The press therefore hastened to meet the “ayllus warriors” who played the role expected of them by declaring themselves in a state of emergency to enforce the vote of the indigenous peoples and saying “ask Carlos Mesa [the centre-right candidate who came second in the contested election] not to seek physical violence and aggression, this confrontation, because this will not be allowed in the north of Potosi. We are real *tinkus* (ritual fighters). We are not afraid. We can cope until the end.”. [7] Some leaders even claimed in front of the press, in their best clothes, that they would “dust off their Mauser rifles” in defence of the pluri-national state and so that Carlos Mesa would not reproduce the black October of 2003. [8] Road blockades were announced and, on October 26, the FAOINP together with the MAS organized a “*Jach’a Tantachawi* [large assembly] of the Charka Qhara *ayllus*, where they would assess the regional autonomy of the north of Potosi, taking account of the betrayal of departmental interests by the Civic Committee of Potosi (COMCIPO), whose members [including those of the MOP] have become loyal vassals of the neo-conservative and racist neoliberal mixed-race caste, led by Carlos Mesa.”. [9]

This *Jach’a Tantachawi*, however, was far from bringing together as many people as the organization’s annual meetings. For several days, the media nevertheless systematically associated the *ayllus* with the term “warriors”, mentioning their presence in La Paz – recognizable by the wearing of the *montera* (helmet) of the *tinku*- harassing the opponents of Evo in the streets of the capital. According to some indigenous authorities, at the end of October there were 500 members of the North Potosi and South Oruro *ayllus* defending Evo Morales’ victory in La Paz. [10]

On November 7, Evo Morales summoned the FAOINP (pro-MAS) to La Paz, but also the region’s mining cooperatives who, unlike those in Potosi, did not join the opposition. He asked them to “defend the process of change” and not just his election, because the extreme right oppositionist Fernando Camacho had entered the game; the president specified: “we have agreed to work on the construction of dams and water treatment facilities in Copajira to protect the environment”, which strangely resembled a way of rewarding their mobilizations or buying future ones. [11]

Morales finally resigned on November 10, after a police mutiny two days earlier, and after being abandoned by the COB trade union federation and the army. At the instigation of the far right, a transitional government was “appointed”, the Bible, which had become a symbol of the opposition, entering the presidential palace. On 13 November, the North Potosi Peasant Trade Union Federation - and other peasant organizations in the country - announced “roadblocks and big marches in defence of the *wiphala* [Indian flag] and against the resignation of Evo”. [12] Thus, at the national level, everything suggested that North Potosi was in turmoil, and numerous videos, relayed abundantly in the press, showed peasant-Indian groups from the provinces of La Paz who entered El Alto and the capital with cries of “Now yes, civil war!” (“ jAhora s , guerra civil!”).

The 2019 elections seen from the local level

If the warlike rhetoric has been widely exploited - both by Evo Morales to show the combativeness of his rank and file and by the opposition and the press to testify to the violence of these “wild hordes” - it is striking to see that the rural dwellers of the North Potosi were ultimately relatively calm. My last stay in the region in November 2018 indicated to me that if not all of them affirmed an opposition to Morales as deep as that of Emilio, many did not seem at first glance very excited by this ballot, however important it was for the rest of the “process of change”. What is more, whereas in the past the national vote was independent of local conflicts, in 2019 Emilio wanted to vote against Evo to bring down the local *rosca*. To fight against Evo was to fight against “all those who lived from the MAS party in the different structures”.

The monitoring of the Facebook pages of several leaders, as well as collective groups in North Potosi, reveals that it was not until November 9 (one day before the resignation of Evo Morales) that the Jatun Ayllu Qhayana - to which Copalca belongs – “entered a state of emergency” and organized its first blockade. The fall of the Morales government, but especially the breakthrough of the extreme right and the mutiny of the police, seem to mark a turning point: we note on social networks that the rank and file are starting to organize from the bottom, while in the same time, in the media, the speeches of national peasant/indigenous leaders, very active during the first phase of the conflict, became much more rare. Social networks played a central role in these mobilizations, every action being filmed or photographed. The community dynamics that had been the strength of the peasant-Indian movement in the early 2000s seem to be re-emerging, after having been weakened by the co-optation by the MAS.

On November 13, a *cabildo* brought together *comunarios* from the far north of Potosi (municipalities of San Pedro de Buena Vista and Sacaca) in Mallku Khota. Miners from the Bolivian Federation of Mining Workers (FSTMB) organized their own demonstration, while caravans of trucks and minibuses, by the dozen, disturbed the silence of the mountain to attend the *cabildo* and other processions arrived by foot. Although firmly opposed to Evo Morales, Emilio attended so as “not to let the far right take power”. Like him, many did not seem ready to mobilize for Evo Morales, but they would do so to defend the *wiphala*, the Indian flag that the extreme right and the police defiled by burning it and removing it from certain places of power. For Emilio, the objective was to organize “new elections and seek the unity of the indigenous people”. “Personal interests”, however, prevented the adoption of a joint resolution during this *cabildo*. As Emilio indicated, “our ex-president also divided us within social organizations”, the reference to the “ex-president” being crucial here to show that, for him, a page was turned and that this was not about saving Evo's skin, unlike the local supporters of the MAS. A break was requested and the *cabildo* was rescheduled to Sunday November 17 with the hypothesis of launching a march to La Paz on Monday.

Elsewhere in North Potosi, things were also accelerating. On November 12, in Uncia, a rally brought together the *ayllus* of the municipality with shouts of “Evo is not alone” and “Mesa, Camacho, Pumari, we want your heads!”. Faced with the violence of the words, the Indian authorities denied rumours of an attack directed against the urban population. Following the Sacaba massacre, the actions aimed at unity. [13] A march was organized by the *ayllus* in Uncia, with *wiphala* and white flags, to demand peace and respect for the *wiphala*. Finally, on November 17, the resolution of the *ayllus* of Uncia stated: “1. We request the resignation of the self-proclaimed president, Mrs. Jeanine Añez; 2. Blockade of main roads in the region; 3. Return of the army to barracks; IF THESE REQUESTS ARE NOT TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT, ON TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, WE WILL MOVE TO THE SEAT OF GOVERNMENT BY INCREASING THE MOBILIZATIONS” (in capital letters in the original text). In Lllallagua, in the same way, the *ayllus* mobilized for the resignation of the acting president, Jeanine Añez, and the defence of the *wiphala*. The white flags also came out during a peaceful march. Divisions, however, appeared in a *cabildo*, organized on the road during a blockade, because of “personal interests”.

In other provinces of North Potosi (Chayanta), on the evening of the Sacaba massacre, communities were once again showing restraint, in contrast to the warlike image sustained at the national level. After an impressive march to the sound of the *pututu*, “almost 500 peasants linked to the MAS, from the provinces of Chayanta and Frías,

entered the town of Potosi last night, in a peaceful march to hoist the *wiphala* on the pediment of the seat of government in Potosi. On entering the city, many people welcomed the march with applause and waving the *wiphala* and, above all, the white flags which constitute a symbol of peace between the countryside and the city... The peasant leader Ever Rojas [who had wanted to ban the entry of political parties other than the MAS in the region a few months earlier] was the first to speak during this historic act of pacification. [He said:] “We are all *potosino* brothers. Country and town we are brothers. There are people who have led to discrimination and racism with a personal appetite. Here ends discrimination, here ends racism, my brothers’.” [14]

Back in Copalca, finally, on November 17, a new march led the *ayllus* from far North Potosi to Mallku Khota for a new *cabildo*. During this, Jatun Ayllu Qhayana reached an agreement and adopted a simple resolution to conduct “permanent blockades of strategic points [of the region]” by going into “red alert” and declaring “permanent mobilization” in the face of possible political developments. The *ayllus* say in this resolution: “We firmly reject the discrimination and the burning of our *wiphala*, which is the symbol of our ancestors, the Tiwanaku. We do not tolerate these life threatening attitudes”. Among other things, it demanded “the immediate return of the police and the army to their barracks, because we will not let our brothers continue to die in the mobilizations”. Finally, it demanded “respect for the integrity of human life throughout the pluri-national state of Bolivia”.

Following the massacre in Senkata by the army (9 dead), in El Alto, on November 19, Jatun Ayllu Qhayana and other *ayllus* from North Potosi finally decide to join La Paz. A video shows a procession leaving Copalca at night, women at the head with the *wiphala*, in the presence of the Mallku Khota miners, while a voice comments: “the Qhayana district, always standing, never on your knees! On the way to La Paz in support of the *AlteÑ±os*”. A text accompanies the video, demanding “the immediate resignation of the self-proclaimed president *AÑ±ez* for having repressed our brothers in the tropics and El Alto; the immediate return of the police and the army to the barracks; respect for the *wiphala*, our millennial symbol of the indigenous peoples.” No reference was made to Evo Morales.

Conclusion

At the time of concluding this brief analysis, it is difficult to imagine the future of Bolivia, the government combining street repression and negotiations with the MAS and social organizations, a form of corporatism which sometimes generates the most improbable agreements. Conversely, the violence of the transitional government can generate new popular solidarity, which can go against national directives. The monitoring of mobilizations in North Potosi nevertheless reveals several dynamics. First, the *ayllus* distanced themselves from the warlike image used both by the Morales government and by the opposition, in an area that was nevertheless used to violence. Second, the fractures of previous years between social organizations remain open, which explains the difficulty in establishing a compromise between the different sectors. Finally, in North Potosi the mobilization is not done in the name of Evo Morales but mainly for the defence of the pluri-national state and the *wiphala*, due to the presence of a sector which was not ready to mobilize to defend Evo Morales but is in favour of the gains of the “process of change” and against the far right.

If each territory has its own dynamics, how, in our case, to explain that the North Potosi did not respond massively to the call launched by Evo Morales to defend his election, and that it took several weeks for the region to really mobilize? The answers are to be found in the past actions of the Morales government itself. The Pact of Unity between social organizations which had favoured the rise of Evo Morales and the establishment of a pluri-national state has been shattered, the “government of social movements” promised by the former president having strengthened the corporatist struggles of each sector. It is this unity that the social organizations first wanted to restore at the local level. This return to the local and to community forms of mobilization also reveals the distances that have been created between the increased verticality of the MAS and grassroots organizations, a distance which may explain the difficulties of national leaders in massively mobilizing the campaigns. as they attempted at the start

of the conflict. Finally, it is Evo Morales’ strategy to mobilize these same rural dwellers against the city that raises questions. The development of the country, the construction of hundreds of kilometres of road, but also the failure of aid to traditional peasant agriculture, strengthened the connections (already numerous) between the countryside and the cities. Today, more than before, people no longer live in communities solely of agricultural production, they are also masons or drivers in the city, miners in cooperatives.

In Copalca, the trucks that loaded residents into their dumpsters twice a week from Llallagua have been replaced by daily buses and minibuses. The probable construction of a new road opens new economic prospects, everyone improvises as a restaurateur, opens a business. While a few years ago the inhabitants reinvented local democracy by introducing Indian “customs”, the main objective today is to be recognized as an “urban area” in order to better regulate land ownership and obtain credits to improve housing. Traditional festivals are becoming heritage, with the help of schools, in the hope of maintaining the local culture but also of generating tourist activity. One of the paradoxes of Evo Morales is that he romanticized an Indianness that he himself dissolved by his actions. It will undoubtedly remain alive, but no longer with the same aspirations and the same representations. An Indianness in any case more ready than in the past to face the “brothers” of the towns.

The original version of this article appeared in the weekly [lundimatin #218, November 15, 2019](#).

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[1] The man’s name has been changed, as has the community.

[2] The FAOINP was created in 1993 from a new generation of activists trained in Indianism who distinguished themselves from the Federation of Peasant Trade Unions of North Potosi, created in 1978, which was more Marxist in origin although today it has a more Indian approach. FAOINP aims to reconstitute the Indian territories (*ayllus*) and organizational forms, it is attached at the national level to the Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyu (CONAMAQ), created in 1997.

[3] The CSUTCB is the national peasant organization, to which the North Potosi Peasant Federation is attached.

[4] That is, to lash them with the traditional whip of the indigenous authorities, the *chicote*.

[5] In relation to Mallku Khota, the mobilization of the communities against a Canadian mining company, and for the creation of a community company managed according to “customs and habits”, led to the arrest of their main leader, which was perceived as a “political imprisonment” organized by the Morales government.

[6] *El Correo del Sur* July 13, 2019.

[7] *El Potosi*, October 24, 2019.

[8] *EjuTV*, October 24, 2019. Carlos Mesa was the vice-president to Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada during the October 2003 “gas war”, when crackdowns killed 60 people.

[9] Testimony of a leader on Facebook, October 26, 2019.

[10] *Urgente.bo*, October 29, 2019.

[11] *TeleSur*, November 7, 2019.

[12] *Exito Noticias*, November 13, 2019.

[13] On November 15, the army brutally repressed coca producers from Chapare who were advancing on the city of Cochabamba, with a total of 9 deaths and scores wounded.

[14] *El PotosÃ*-, November 16, 2019.