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Bolivia

Bolivian Horizons: An Interview with Pablo Solón

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Bolivians went to the polls on Sunday, October 20, 2019. According to the country's electoral system, in order to avoid a second round in presidential elections the leading candidate must secure 51 percent of the vote, or more than 40 percent of the vote and a lead of 10 percent over the second place candidate.

With 83.8 percent of the quick-count votes verified, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal's website indicated that Evo Morales of the Movement Toward Socialism was leading with 45.3 percent, with Carlos Mesa of Citizen Community in second place with 38.2 percent. It appeared as though there would be a second round.

At this point, the TSE inexplicably shut down the live transmission of the quick-count tabulation of ballots after the 83 percent of votes had been counted. Twenty-two hours later, on Monday evening, the transmission of quick-count results was restarted, with the website now indicating 95.63 percent of votes counted. The distance between Morales, the front runner, and Mesa, the runner up, had grown significantly over the intervening period. The difference separating the two candidates was now said to be 10.12 percent according to the quick-count, and this after Morales had announced that once the rural votes were counted he was sure there would be no need for a run-off.

Oppositional protests contesting the results kicked off Monday evening throughout the country, including the torching of several departmental offices of the electoral tribunal, just as MAS supporters simultaneously took to the streets in celebration. It will be days before the detailed count is finished, but the margin of difference in the detailed account appears to be closer, making a run-off election very likely. It would be held on December 15, 2019.

It is useful in this context to take a step back and to consider what is at stake in these elections. One important perspective on this issue is captured below in the conversation I had with former Morales government official, and now left-opponent, Pablo Solón in La Paz, Bolivia on August 29, 2019.

Today, Solón is the director of Fundación Solón, an institution established in 1994 by Pablo's father, the artist Walter Solón Romero, with the intention of "fomenting creativity and the critical perspective of rebellious spirits." With the passage of time, and the death of Walter in 1999, the artistic foundation became a centre for the interpellation and search for alternatives through art, analysis, and activism with the aim of confronting social and environmental injustices and changing the socio-economic system fundamentally.

Jeffery R. Webber: I am in the offices of the Fundación Solón, in La Paz, Bolivia, with Pablo Solón, the director of the foundation. To start with some personal background – you were the Ambassador to the United Nations during Evo Morales's first term. What was your role within the administration in that initial period, and how would you characterize the government of Morales during his first term in office?

Pablo Solón: My relation to indigenous and peasant movements stretches back to the decade of the 1990s. Originally, we conceived of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) as a political instrument of social organizations. The objective was not to construct a political party in the traditional sense, but rather for the social movements, and in particular the peasant and indigenous movements, to have a political arm with which to intervene in elections, but with the social movement always retaining decision-making power, not the party.

In that period, I met Evo Morales. In 2000 the "Water War" against the privatization of water in the city of

Cochabamba occurred, and later the “Gas War” and the struggle against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Here in Bolivia we built a very strong movement that we called the Bolivian Movement of Struggle Against the FTAA, which was coordinated through the Fundación Solón.

In this context, as a result of the Electoral Court refusing to grant legal status to the political wing of the social movements under their initial preferred name, the Political Instrument for Sovereignty of the Peoples, the leaders of the political arm opted to appropriate the already legally existing but politically defunct acronym of the MAS, which had not been a party of the left, but rather an organization with origins in a split from a party with Phalangist characteristics – this is where the name “socialist” in the MAS comes from. It was thus under the banner of the MAS that the political instrument of the social movements intervened in the 2002 national elections.

I was never a member of the party, because we never thought it was necessary. When the MAS won the elections in 2005, Evo Morales invited me to form part of the government. In 2006, I formed part of a team which was charged with advising the government on themes of international politics and I was a representative on the themes of integration and trade. In that period, Bolivia sat in the *pro tempore* presidency of what was called the United Nations of South America, in which I was Bolivia’s ambassador. In that role I led the negotiation of the agreement which constituted the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR).

I was also in charge of undoing the trade agreement we had with Mexico and negotiating the proposed free trade agreement with the European Union, which obviously did not come to pass because the EU simply wanted us to sign off on whatever they desired. Later, I was the Bolivian ambassador to the United Nations, from 2009 to June, 2011.

JRW: And how would you characterize the first administration of Evo Morales in general terms?

PS: The first phase of the Morales government lasted from his assumption of the presidency in 2006 to the end of 2009. It was a period of heightened polarization and confrontation in Bolivia. At the beginning it was very difficult even to travel to some regions of the country which were in opposition to the government, such as Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando, and Sucre. We were almost at the brink of civil war.

The government was able to dismantle that conspiracy through fundamentally democratic mechanisms, convening referenda and elections. Referendums in order to decide if the government would continue in office, as well as the prefects of the departments, which are now called governors. There was also a referendum to approve the new constitution, followed by national elections in 2009.

Support for the government went up in each of these democratic consultations, and for proposals arising from the Constituent Assembly process. It was a period of high polarization which in a sense had a happy ending, because Evo Morales obtained more than two thirds in congress and was re-elected as president in 2009. The resistance and the sabotage of the extremely reactionary oligarchy was defeated.

However, this first government already exhibited some negative elements which would later rise to the surface. The government of the MAS is a government of individuals who when they entered government didn’t have any experience of governing. The overwhelming majority had not played any part in previous governments. They were new to this, lacking experience in state administration and with uneven capacities and training.

One of the mistakes that the government made, for which I am also responsible, was to involve too many leaders from social movement organizations in the administration of the government. We weakened the social organizations through the incorporation of their leaders into the state apparatus.

This was a grave error. We did not consider the importance of maintaining the independence of social organizations from the state. The error was to fail to recognize that within the state we were going to suffer through a process of transformation and that, therefore, there had to be a kind of capable counter-power – not only to exercise control over those of us who were in government, but also to transfer more areas of decision-making and action from the state toward this counter-power of social organizations.

We did precisely the opposite. We build an ever more important cult of personality around the figure of Evo Morales. This allowed him to win the second election overwhelmingly, but it laid the basis for the disaster that would come later.

Once two thirds of congress had been secured, a dynamic of monopolizing all of the institutions of the state began. From the position of the central government, judicial power was monopolized, as was the Comptroller's Office, and the Human Rights Ombudsman. It was a totally incorrect perspective to see this as the strengthening rather than the weakening of the process of change. The independence and authority between powers of the state ended up being abolished, and there was no counter-power from civil society. Everything fell under control of the power of the executive, and a government extremely personalized around the figure of Evo Morales. After the election of 2009 there was a change of direction in the orientation of the government.

In 2008, Evo Morales put forward 10 commandments which were seen as necessary to save the planet, in which he opposed biofuels, mega-hydroelectric projects, and genetically modified crops. Once he had obtained an absolute majority he did not deepen the original program that we had, but instead sought out pacts with sectors of the opposition, based on serious concessions, and in particular with the agribusiness sector of the eastern lowlands, which had sabotaged his government during the first term. These concessions included everything from allowing genetically modified organisms to promoting biofuels, promoting the export of meat, and not following through on the regulation of the social-economic functions of medium-sized landholdings and business-scale landholdings, which allowed large landowners to preserve their ownership of land.

The sectors that were against the government in the first term began to vote together with the government on almost all the laws having to do with agribusiness. For example, the law on ethanol was approved unanimously in congress, as much by the opposition as by the MAS officialdom. The laws that incentivize the burning of forests (Laws 337, 741, 303, 1171, and others) were approved with the support of the opposition, which expressed the interests of the agribusiness elite of the departments of Santa Cruz and Beni.

JRW: What was the motive, or state rationality, of the pact with the agribusiness elite? Because, in a sense, they had just been defeated in political terms by 2009, so why negotiate, and why on their terms?

PA: The prevailing logic in the government was no longer to advance toward agro-ecology, but rather to guarantee governability and their next re-election. From this perspective it was better to have these sectors on our side, so that they didn't generate conflicts and instead supported us. In order for this to work you have to give them some of the things they ask for, but they repeatedly ask for more, and, in the end, the government ended up implementing the agribusiness program. How did the "process of change" benefit from this arrangement? There have been three terms of this government and there is a possibility for a fourth one. If one listens to the agribusiness sectors in meat, soy, sugar, and so on, they are very content. They have gained with this government what they were unable to gain previously, including under neoliberal governments.

JRW: So is this the fraction of capital with the most power in the government today?

PS: The government made an alliance with this sector, which provides them with certain benefits, in exchange for

continuity in power. They are not two equal partners. This agribusiness sector, ultimately, does not want Evo. It is profoundly oligarchic and racist, but it has been doing good business under this first indigenous government. So, its logic is: we do good business, they are in power. And we continue going forward.

Therefore, in the midst of all of the forest fires occurring in Bolivia at the moment, both actors, the government and the agribusiness oligarchy, have announced with jubilation the first shipment of meat to China. No other government could have done this in the midst of the tragedy of the fires. There are various studies demonstrating the large-scale impact of ranching on forest fires and deforestation. However, the government has prioritized this alliance, thinking that it's the best way to increase the probability of re-election.

JW: When and why did you leave your position in the government?

PS: I resigned from being ambassador in New York because my mother was ill. I told Evo Morales that I had to take care of my mother, that one who does not take care of one's mother cannot care for Mother Earth. But I always maintained a close relationship with him. Although I was no longer in government I went to see him when necessary, without any problems. But we began to part ways, first over genetically modified crops, in 2011; and secondly, the rupture came over the matter of the TIPNIS, the construction of a highway through indigenous territory and a national park. The drop of water that overflowed the glass was the repression over the TIPNIS project in Chaparina on September 25, 2011. At that moment, publicly, I sent a letter to Evo Morales telling him that this was intolerable. Since then, we have never spoken again.

JRW: We are now in a pre-electoral period and you have noted publicly that there are no parties which have a perspective on the environment appropriate to the scale of the ecological crisis. Can you explain the key features of the various party programs and provide a cartography of the electoral contest and the options, in electoral terms, facing Bolivians at the moment?

PS: The opposition to Evo Morales is an opposition focused more on democratic themes than on economic ones. Morales made a mockery of the 2016 constitutional referendum which said no to his re-election. Evo, through the control that he exercises over the constitutional tribunal, illegally modified the constitution with a totally absurd argument that the right of indefinite re-election is a human right.

So we have an opposition that concentrates on these democratic aspects, but in terms of agro-industry, and the agribusiness sector, they do not offer any alternative, with some even advocating the much further strengthening of the existing orientation of the government in this respect. I don't see any of the political parties wanting a change in the course of action in relation to big agribusiness. Almost all of the party programs give very little importance to the question of nature, they don't mention the subject of the rights of Mother Earth. The governing party is the only one that mentions them, but as they themselves admit it is only something to promote in international forums, they don't offer any measures to make it a reality in Bolivia.

The opposition has not made this issue an axis of contention. Citizen Community, the party of ex-president Carlos Mesa, has some important policies in relation to the environment, for example, regarding the generation and distribution of electricity, but when it comes to the eastern lowlands the party prefers not to touch the problem of agribusiness. None of the parties have expressed opposition to mega-hydroelectric projects, much less opposition to Rositas, which is the mega-hydroelectric project that they want to build in Santa Cruz.

JW: OK, this is your sense of the party terrain. You mentioned earlier that a critical error of the first term of Morales's rule was the integration of social movement leaders into the state. Turning to the area of social movements, then, what is your take on their power and significance in the current conjuncture?

PS: It's very poor. We all wanted the government to win a second term in 2009, and to win decisively to put an end to the resistance of the oligarchy. But very shortly after obtaining two thirds in congress the ideology that came to prevail within government circles, of which vice president Álvaro García-Linera is the purest expression, said: we don't accept independent thinkers, there can be no independent thinkers. Here everyone must agree with what Evo Morales and Álvaro García-Linera say.

So what they have done is weaken social organizations, transforming them into simple echoes of the government's line, without a critical or positive position of their own. The social movements are in a much worse state than they were prior to the Water War of 2000. They have less capacity for autonomy, for projecting demands, for self-determination.

Those which have confronted the government have been divided, criminalized, and in some cases incarcerated. Fear has been generalized. Within the government there are many people who disagree with the official line, but they are not going to say this publicly because they will lose their jobs. Anyone who wants to keep their job has to accept the line coming from above. It's a type of totalitarianism which is distinct from the military dictatorships. There are some cases in which the mechanisms are more perverse, and in others more subtle, designed to keep quiet those who have a different position.

JRW: In the present conjuncture, what is the position of the most important business confederations, such as CAINCO, the Chamber of Industry and Commerce in Santa Cruz? Are they openly supporting some parties more than others? What are the desires of domestic and international capital in these elections?

PS: They are not going to say anything publicly. What they hope is to be able to continue their business no matter who wins. If Evo wins, they'll continue alongside Evo. If the opposition wins they will go along with it. At the moment they are not involved in any public campaign in favour of one or another candidate, but simply thinking of their pockets.

JW: But apart from their apparent neutrality, you don't think they are financing specific parties, that they have a preferred outcome?

PS: Well, they haven't said anything publicly, so one cannot say with any evidence.

JRW: There is no publicly available financing of particular campaigns?

PS: Public? No. Behind the scenes, all of the parties must be receiving something. For example, Bolivia Says No, the party of Áscar Ortiz, surely has the financial support of agribusiness. Bolivia Says No is the party which most closely represents their interests. Bolivia Says No's platform is to export the Santa Cruz model to the rest of the country. They want to introduce a new export plan for the Amazon.

The Santa Cruz oligarchy has learned that, first, it has to protect its business interests, and so it is not going to confront the government, especially when they are receiving such benefits. They are not going to campaign openly against the government. Under the table, they might be financing here or there, but they know that Bolivia Says No has no chance of winning these elections. So why would they do it publicly?

JRW: The global crisis of 2008 began to have a serious impact on many parts of South America beginning in 2012, more or less, depending on the country. But Bolivia was something of an exception, insofar as it exhibited higher levels of growth and macroeconomic stability. It's obvious that the Morales government

never loses an opportunity to announce this fact. How do you explain Bolivian economic growth, in contrast, say, to the open crises in Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, and elsewhere? Is it going to last, or has the crisis simply not yet arrived in Bolivia?

PS: Here as elsewhere – Brazil, Venezuela – we lived through a boom, in spite of the crisis of 2008, because of the price of commodities, and in particular the oil price continued climbing until 2014. The crisis began that year when the price of oil began to fall.

Until 2014, Bolivia and various other countries in the region, were in ascent thanks to an export model rooted in certain products that enjoyed a high price on the international market. The crisis began in Bolivia when the price of oil fell to almost \$40 per barrel, having reached a high of \$100 per barrel, and the price of oil impacted upon the price of Bolivian natural gas sales to Argentina and Brazil.

The government was able to accumulate enormous foreign reserves during the boom period. Foreign reserves reached \$15 billion. Before the Morales government, Bolivia's foreign reserves never surpassed \$1 or \$2 billion.

In order to avoid the repercussions of the crisis, the government began to spend its foreign reserves, and began to take on debt. Today the external debt is around 25 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), and growing. The government also sells national treasury bonds on Wall Street, which is another form of indebtedness. In this way the crisis has been alleviated. The government has controlled the crisis in anticipation of the October elections.

After the elections, whichever party wins there will be an economic austerity package. It is almost impossible to maintain an exchange rate of 6.96 Bolivianos to the dollar, when one looks at the fall of currencies in Argentina and Brazil. The fall has already begun, but it has been tempered momentarily by strong public investment. Unfortunately, these investments by the state have not been in viable productive sectors. There has been a lot of investment in infrastructure. Investments directed toward productive sectors have been very poorly chosen, for example, the sugar mill in San Buenaventura or the urea plant. That is, these investments haven't generated a new productive economic matrix capable of generating resources in the short term.

The current economy no longer depends primarily on the export of natural gas, as was the case until 2014. Today mining mineral exports are first, and in third place is agribusiness. But the international situation is terrible due to the crash in soy prices. The government maintains this sector with subsidies, but they cannot do so forever. After the elections, we are going to see an increase in gas, diesel, and electric light tariffs.

JRW: Do you think Morales is going to win in the first round? Is there any possibility that he won't win the election?

PS: I don't know, because Bolivia is a very volatile country. A month ago, everything suggested that Evo would win in the first round, but today I don't know. The impact of the ecological disaster of the forest fires will have an effect on his chances. Whether he will recover or not in the coming days and weeks, we don't know. In any case, no one is going to win in the first round. There's going to be a second round. Today, I don't think it's possible that Evo will win in the first round. But the situation could change – Bolivia is a very dynamic country.

JRW: How do you understand the particular political situation in Bolivia within the wider region's dynamics? For example, if we look at immediate neighbours, we see the extreme right in power in Brazil, and the possible return of (Kirchner) Fernández-Fernández in Argentina. So if the situation is volatile in Bolivia, this is also true at the regional level. What is the role of Bolivia within this regional scenario?

PS: For the government of Evo Morales the best scenario would be the return of Kirchnerism in Argentina. It would give him oxygen, and the government is supporting the campaign for Kirchnerism's return. Were Evo to win, the government would likely prolong for a longer period the maintenance of certain subsidies than if a more neoliberal government were to be formed. But there will come a time at which you can't prolong the subsidies even if you want to, because you haven't created a new economic structure that would allow you to do so. If Evo wins he is going to implement a package of economic austerity, whether in a gradual or shock manner. I don't see political options in the region which are proposing the kind of genuine change that would allow us to escape from this vicious circle, between populisms of the right and populisms of the left, which have distinct political discourses, but which in essence combine in supporting an extractivist economic model for export to the detriment of nature.

JRW: In the Brazilian case, Dilma Rousseff introduced an austerity package in 2014, after having campaigned on precisely the opposite political program. In hindsight, we can see that this was a turning point in the process which eventually resulted in Jair Bolsonaro gaining the presidency. So it would seem there are political dangers which accompany the implementation of austerity by progressive governments. If you are correct that in the Bolivian case should Evo win he will introduce austerity measures, what forms will the likely political complexities that follow assume in the immediate aftermath?

PS: If Evo wins, the right will radicalize and if Evo doesn't win, in five years we will have a similar situation to that in Argentina today. Because if Evo doesn't win, it will be Carlos Mesa of the opposition who will have to apply the hard measures. As soon as Mesa begins to apply such measures it will be incendiary for the population and supporters of the MAS, and Evo will be seen as a saviour. Essentially, however, there are no structural differences in the programs, whoever wins, in relation to key sectors such as agribusiness.

JRW: What is the strategy, then, for people such as yourself, who are trying to maintain a leftist position independent from that of the government? What to do in the present moment? Should the emphasis be on re-building a movement from below over the medium- to long-term?

PS: I don't think there is any other alternative. Between the two existing electoral poles there is no alternative. We have to build and rebuild something different, and learn from our mistakes. Because we had very strong movements until 2006, until we arrived in government. So we have to be very self-critical concerning the errors we committed so that the new movements don't repeat them.

At this point, the dichotomy between the left and right is not essential. We are not talking about building another big boss politician (caudillo) with which to confront Evo Morales or another neoliberal party. We are talking about rebuilding the social fabric of social movements and of new actors so that they can begin to self-govern and self-organize. That kind of movement, today, is very incipient in Bolivia.

Fourteen years ago it wasn't the case. There was a very mobilized, autonomous, and self-governing movement. To recompose that will be difficult. The worst aspect is that this disarticulation of social movements, of the social subject, was not done by a government of the right, but by a government of the left. The social subject was able to survive despite the repression and brutality of the dictatorships and the policies of neoliberal governments. At certain moments it was severely damaged. But under this government, our own government, a government that we brought to office, a terrible phenomenon has been produced: the Aymara and Quechua indigenous community, which resisted colonization for 500 years, is today very weak because an indigenous government is promoting a very consumerist, developmentalist perspective of western modernity. As a result, Aymara and Quechua communities, and their alternative vision of Living Well (Vivir Bien), is weaker today than before the arrival of this government. It should have been exactly the opposite scenario.

JRW: Changing themes, let's concentrate for a moment on the catastrophe of the fires in Chiquitania, the

tropical savannas of the department of Santa Cruz. In general terms, what is the scale and depth of this ecological crisis, and what does it entail?

PS: Well, in quantitative terms we are talking about a burnt area of 1.8 million hectares (JRW note: now 5.3 million hectares). The Minister of Defence said yesterday: "But it wasn't all forest, only 500,000 hectares was forest." Even with the figure of 500,000 hectares of burnt forest, it's a catastrophe.

In 2016, a year of high deforestation, almost 300,000 hectares were deforested. Now we are surpassing 500,000 deforested hectares. According to a report on the hotspots generated by NASA satellites, a third of the fires are in protected areas of Bolivia. That's incredible! Ten percent of these fires are in untouched, primary forests.

It's terrible from the perspective of the forests, greenhouse gas emissions, animal life, and ecosystems. These are life systems that are being destroyed. This is going to have impacts on water and rain not only in those zones but in other regions as well. We are accelerating the sixth extinction of life on earth.

JRW: What kind of economic transition, then, is needed in Bolivia?

PS: What the government should have done is what we had originally proposed. When we arrived in government we said we are not going to support agribusiness, we were going to support communitarian agro-ecology which would preserve nature, fundamentally directed toward the local market. But the government, prioritizing re-election, preferred to make agreements with agribusiness and this is the result.

Other options are possible. For example, if one wants to export meat one can do it, but in smaller quantities and within limits – meat produced in an ecological manner, without destroying forests, meat with a high price, directed toward consumer markets that are willing to pay more to preserve forests. In order to do this, it is necessary to totally reorient agricultural activities so that they can exist alongside the forest, rather than being developed at the cost of the forest. Promoting exports of chestnuts, of asaÑ- fruit, in short a series of other products that are in the forests and which can be cultivated without destroying the forests.

From the point of view of lithium, Bolivia also has an opportunity if we develop it in an appropriate manner; likewise, in the case of solar energy, especially given that we are one of the countries with the highest levels of solar radiation.

This would imply a break with the developmentalist model.

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