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THE CHEQUERED RAINBOW

IF LATIN AMERICA has been the site of the most radical opposition to neoliberal restructuring over the past five years, Bolivia has been its insurrectionary frontline. Popular mobilizations on a broad geographical scale, uniting a wide range of class and ethnic forces, have now brought down two presidents—Sánchez de Lozada in October 2003; Mesa in July 2005—and vetoed the constitutionally prescribed accession of a third, Senate leader Vaca Díez, in July 2005. With elections approaching in December 2005, these forces stand poised to exert a continuing influence on the country's future political and economic development.

But while Bolivia's tumultuous protests can be seen in the context of a series of regional challenges to the Washington consensus in South America, in which mass movements have shaken or displaced traditional governing elites in Argentina, Ecuador, Venezuela and Peru, we should avoid treating the crisis simply as a local effect of a predictable transnational phenomenon. We should not take either 'neoliberalism' or 'globalization' to be an autonomous agent that inevitably generates its own grave-diggers; nor should we assume that the mass uprisings form a single wave, sweeping inexorably from country to country. The protests in Bolivia between 2000 and 2005 have followed their own cycle, which we detail below. But their underlying dynamics can only be understood within the context of the country's distinctive insurrectionary traditions of the past 200 years; the memory and forgetting of previous revolutionary moments; and the tension-filled connections between indigenous and national-popular political expressions that these have involved.

The current cycle, we will argue, constitutes the third major revolutionary moment in Bolivian history. The first was indigenous. Starting in August of 1780, a regional insurgency in Potosí under the leadership of an Indian commoner called Tomás Katari set off a chain of local movements that have come to be known for the descendant of Inca royalty, José Gabriel Túpak Amaru, who symbolically headed the insurrection in Cuzco. The southern highlands of Oruro and La Paz ignited in early 1781, and Aymara and Quechua troops cleared the countryside of Spanish colonial control. The Aymara peasant commander in La Paz, Túpaj Katari, strangled Spanish forces holding out in the city in the course of a siege that lasted five months. Yet, lacking urban allies, Indian troops never succeeded in taking the city. In late 1781 Katari was drawn and quartered, and Spanish authorities held on to colonial rule until they were definitively overthrown in 1825. For creole elites, as well as Aymara protestors, the sieges of La Paz over the past few years have recalled the great anticolonial insurrection of two centuries ago.

The second great revolution in Bolivia, that of 1952, was also the first national-popular revolution in postwar Latin America. A three-day urban insurrection led by the middle-class National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), and backed by the armed force of Trotskyist (POR) tin miners' militias from the departments of Oruro and Potosí, as well as armed students and factory-workers from La Paz, brought the temporary destruction of the landlord class, the nationalization of the mines, the universal extension of the franchise and an end to oligarchic rule. State firms managed the extraction and export of natural resources, especially minerals and petroleum—a model that lasted, with alternation between MNR dominance in the political sphere and *de facto* authoritarian military regimes, until the tin-market collapse and neoliberal restructuring of 1985.

Though the memory of 1952–53 seemed obsolete after the revolution's own frustrations and the imposition of neoliberalism, a new national revolutionary horizon—Bolivia's third insurrectionary moment—was brought into being through insurgent Aymara initiative at the start of the 21st century. This process recalls the lessons of recent struggles, the vivid memory of more distant ones (1781), and the national-popular demands—especially regarding sovereignty over natural resources—associated with 1952.¹

¹ Sinclair Thomson, 'Revolutionary Memory in Bolivia: Anticolonial and National Projects from 1781 to 1952', in Merilee Grindle and Pilar Domingo, eds, *Proclaiming Revolution: Bolivia in Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge, MA 2003, pp. 117–34.

Generally, Indian and national-popular struggles in Bolivia have followed separate historical tracks, and misapprehension, suspicion, and manipulation have plagued the relations between Indian and progressive *mestizo* or creole political leaders and intellectuals. However, the infrequent moments of convergence between these struggles have created powerful radical movements and left lasting effects. In the current cycle, the October Days of 2003, which saw the overthrow of Sánchez de Lozada, and the June 2005 insurrection that led to Mesa's downfall stand out historically as exceptional conjunctures of this kind, combining elements of past Indian and national-popular struggles in novel ways. Rural peasant and urban workers from a range of formal and informal sectors mobilized simultaneously, and were ultimately supported by progressive middle classes.² The common objective was to sweep away an unrepresentative and repressive political regime, establish sovereign control over national resources, and convoke a constitutional assembly to restructure political and economic life. The crystallization of a new 'national-popular' bloc suddenly seemed possible.

Two flags

During those October Days the *wiphala*, the chequered-rainbow banner of indigenous self-determination, flapped side by side with the tri-coloured Bolivian flag in La Paz's Plaza San Francisco, as Aymara protesters repudiated neoliberal government in the name of the nation. The mingling of these symbols reflects the degree of overlap between Indian and Bolivian identities, and between Indian and national-popular struggles today. The effects of neoliberalism—above all, the massive population flows from the rural highlands to the cities and the eastern lowlands—might have been expected to break down long-standing ethnic solidarities as well as proletarian traditions; instead, such solidarities have been reconstituted in the swelling slums of El Alto and Cochabamba, and among the incoming rural labourers of the lowland agricultural regions. Many of the demonstrators who occupied the Bolivian capital in October 2003 came from the popular neighbourhood associations of El Alto, a city on the upper rim of La Paz with a population of more than 800,000, larger than La Paz itself, of whom

² Despite the impressive history of trade-unionism in the country, the term 'working class' must be used advisedly given the decomposition of organized labour and informalization since 1985. Urban 'reproletarianization' in sectors such as El Alto refers to small-scale manufacturing and service activities.

82 per cent claim indigenous Aymara identity. Others were members of the heavily Aymara hillside neighbourhood associations of Munaypata, Villa Victoria, and Villa Fátima; market-women, belonging to urban guild associations; students and unemployed youth; mine-workers from Huanuni, an enclave south of the city of Oruro; coca growers and peasant settlers from the subtropical Yungas valleys north-east of La Paz; and members of Aymara peasant communities from the high plateau, led by the insurgent district of Achacachi.

Unlike the protests of the 1970s and 1980s, however—when left parties and the still-robust Bolivian Workers' Central (COB) had united students and intellectuals as well as peasants and workers from urban and mining centres—in 2003, neither the opposition parties nor the trade unions provided comparable political leadership. The turnout of students and professionals from the *mestizo* and creole middle classes was lower, while the ranks of urban and rural labourers of Aymara descent swelled downtown streets. It was Sánchez de Lozada's decision to respond to the protests with tanks and open gunfire that triggered a wider insurrection, in which even creoles from middle- and upper middle-class neighbourhoods in La Paz launched hunger strikes and took to the streets and airwaves to demand the president's resignation.

The distinguishing features of the October crowds—their self-organization and largely indigenous profile—reflect the overall dynamic of Bolivia's third revolutionary moment. According to the 2001 census, 62 per cent of the population considers itself indigenous—per capita, the highest in the Americas.³ The underlying national implications of Indian

³ In El Alto, 74 per cent identified as Aymara and 6 per cent as Quechua, while in La Paz the figures were 50 and 10 per cent respectively. Nationwide, 25 per cent identified as Aymara, 31 as Quechua, and 6 per cent as one of thirty-one other indigenous groups (Uru-Chipaya, Tupi-Guaraní, etc.). Ethnic self-identification does not necessarily correspond to mastery of a mother tongue. Though one quarter of Bolivians identified as Aymara in 2001, for example, 14 per cent spoke the language; the equivalent proportions for Quechua are one third and 21 per cent respectively. The terms 'Aymara' and 'Quechua' derive from 20th-century linguistic anthropology rather than any historical self-attribution by native peoples; but positive self-identification has spread rapidly since the 1990s. Our terminology follows common usage in the country. The term '*mestizo*' implies mixture of Indian and European ancestry or heritage, but in the highlands normally implies distinction from 'Indians' or popular sectors of 'Aymara descent' (also known as '*cholos*'); in valley regions '*mestizo*' is more frequently applied to the peasantry and urban popular sectors. 'Creole' refers to people of predominantly European ancestry.

struggle today stem, firstly, from the inability of the 1952 revolution to resolve the central contradiction of the republican social formation—the cultural, political, and economic domination of the indigenous majority by a minority *mestizo* and creole elite. Hence the significance of the demand for a constitutional assembly, through which rural and urban indigenous people hope to obtain democratized, egalitarian forms of political representation at regional and national levels, and expand the domain of communal autonomy and indigenous sovereignty. Secondly, the role of creole elites in handing control over natural resources—water and, since 2003, gas in particular—to foreign firms, for foreign markets, has widely been seen as an abrogation of national sovereignty, from which only a small cohort of *comprador* cronies stood to benefit.

This latest cycle of resistance has also been rooted in non-liberal forms of collective organization—Indian *ayllus* and peasant communities, neighbourhood and market vendors' associations, regional trade-union centrals, the miners' union, coca growers' federations—that are central to the daily lives of the majority of Bolivians. These forms of organization, under constant and apparently successful attack since neoliberal structural adjustment began in the mid-1980s, yield modes of struggle that derive from a subaltern political history whose legacies are still present today. A matrix of indigenous community politics, first crystallized in the anti-colonial struggles of the late 18th century, has shaped contemporary patterns of insurgency and base-level control over political representatives. Even as the once-powerful COB declined, the 'relocation' of vanguard mine-workers to El Alto, Cochabamba or the agricultural east transmitted traditions of syndicalist politics to new popular organizations and younger generations. Hence when Bolivians began the latest cycle of resistance and insurgency in 2000, these radical traditions provided unexpected reserves of strength. Revolutionary forces and aspirations, only recently thought to have been buried, have resurfaced with surprising energy and creativity, albeit in new forms and under new circumstances.

Indigenous currents

If the intense social flux of the neoliberal period has hastened the formulation of a new indigenous politics, its medium-term origins lie in the 1970s. The agrarian reforms carried out via land takeovers after 1952, along with the creation of *emenerista* peasant trade unions and rural

schools, had largely secured the political loyalty of the indigenous and smallholding peasantry for the MNR. By the 1960s, a military–*campesino* pact had solidified against militant tin-miners and the insurrectionary left. There were few peasant delegates to the radical Popular Assembly of June 1971, where it was argued that Aymara–Quechua sectors would have spoken for conservative military interests.

The military–peasant alliance began to unravel under the impact of Banzer’s repression during the 1970s, as Aymara trade unionists in La Paz, Oruro and Potosí renewed Indian peasant traditions of struggle. Two critical political currents—*katarismo* and *indianismo*—developed rapidly in the early 1970s. Both derived from the same discursive source, Fausto Reinaga, who criticized the use of ‘*mestizaje*’ as a national revolutionary ideology and placed colonialism and ‘the Indian question’ at the heart of his analysis.⁴ In 1973, *kataristas*—reclaiming the legacy of Túpaj Katari, his consort Bartolina Sisa, and the late-19th century Aymara leader Pablo Zárate Villca—issued the ‘Manifiesto of Tiwanaku’, in which peasant class consciousness and Aymara ethnic consciousness complemented, rather than contradicted, one another, and the gains from the national revolution were acknowledged, as well as the limits of those gains. Not just colonialism but capitalism was at the root of contemporary exploitation, *kataristas* argued; they were willing to seek out potential allies among the working class, non-Aymara peasantry and petty merchants. *Indianistas*, on the other hand, had less of a base in the peasant trade-union movement and placed greater emphasis on racial rather than class domination. Hence they spurned alliances with what they branded the ‘*mestizo-creole*’ left, arguing that it echoed the racist paternalism of the MNR governments and military dictatorships.

Between 1977 and 1984, *kataristas* helped overthrow three military dictatorships, founded the CSUTCB, an autonomous, indigenous peasant trade union federation and, in alliance with urban trade unions and left parties, helped to install representative democracy. After the mass mobilizations of October 1982, Hernán Siles Zuazo was elected president, and Jaime Paz Zamora vice-president, on the Democratic Popular Unity (UDP) ticket. However, initial hopes of a transition from ‘dictatorship’ to ‘democracy’ to ‘socialism’ were dashed against the rocks of mismanagement and crisis. Lacking a coherent project for government, the UDP

⁴ Fausto Reinaga, *La revolución India*, La Paz 1969.

coalition soon fractured and was pressured from both left and right by waves of strikes. Inflation spiralled, and the economic and political crisis opened the way for a neoliberal solution, implemented by the government of Paz Estenssoro. The political momentum accumulated through the mobilizations of the late 1970s and early 1980s was squandered, and the revolutionary horizon dimmed.

Water wars

The restructuring of the 1980s brought a halt to hyperinflation while plunging the country into recession. The tin mines were privatized. Thousands of miners were laid off, and subsequently displaced from their homes—leading to the dispersal of arguably Latin America's most combative proletariat. They moved either to the cities of El Alto and Cochabamba, joining an influx of peasant migrants escaping deteriorating conditions in the countryside, or else settled in the agricultural valley and lowland regions of La Paz, the Chapare and Santa Cruz, bringing with them the traditions of radical trade unionism forged over the previous half-century. Many of these migrants to the eastern lowlands grew coca, supplying both internal indigenous demand for coca leaf and a rising international market: during the 1980s, coca paste and cocaine became Bolivia's most profitable export commodities. The most vibrant resistance to the neoliberal onslaught came from the coca-growers' movement led by Evo Morales.⁵ Initially organized through local and regional trade-union federations, as well as rudimentary self-defence militias, the movement responded to the us-initiated 'war on drugs' by stressing coca's place in Andean cultural traditions, and denying responsibility for drug-trafficking. By the early 1990s it was 200,000 strong, and had become a force to contend with, preventing the governments of Jaime Paz Zamora (1989–93) and then Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (in his first term, 1993–97) from implementing in full the coca-eradication agenda drawn up in Washington.

⁵ Morales was born in Oruro in 1959. As a child, he migrated to Chapare with his family and has been involved in cocalero organizing since his early teens. In 1998, six coca-grower federations in rural Chapare set up the *Movimiento al Socialismo* to fight for electoral representation. Morales was elected MAS senator for the Cochabamba department, and MAS took several mayoralties in the region. It was not until the general election of 2002 that MAS would break out of its regional and sectoral base.

By the late 1990s, the economic panorama had darkened not just for coca growers, but for the population as a whole. Between 1997 and 2002—with Banzer now reinstated as a ‘democrat’—coca eradication is estimated to have cost the country \$600–\$900 million in revenue and over 50,000 jobs a year. The hydrocarbon sector sustained the greatest losses of all. In keeping with Sánchez de Lozada’s legislation in 1996, the state petroleum company YPFB was broken up and auctioned off, and the royalties to be paid by multinational firms under new contracts were lowered from 50 to 18 per cent; government revenues plummeted as a result, with the deficit reaching \$430 million in 1997. In the wake of the Asian financial crisis, international financial flows dried up across the region, and cash remittances from Bolivian migrant workers in Argentina dwindled to a trickle. It was in this context that in September 1999 the Banzer administration, in accordance with World Bank strictures, pushed through the privatization of the department of Cochabamba’s water supply. It was to be leased for 40 years to the sole bidder, a transnational consortium called Aguas del Tunari underwritten by Bechtel and Edison (Italy). In January 2000, massive rate hikes were announced that often doubled water costs, which now accounted for a quarter of the household budget of people earning the minimum wage of \$60.

The popular mobilizations that ensued, culminating in the ‘Water War’ of April 2000, were led by the Coalition for the Defence of Water and Life, known as the Coordinadora. It brought together factory workers, farmers, coca growers and ecological activists opposed to privatization. Led by factory-worker Oscar Olivera, the Coordinadora responded to the rate hikes of January 2000 by calling a general strike, shutting down the city of Cochabamba and cutting it off from the rest of the country. Faced with mass protest, the Banzer government agreed to review the rates; when it failed to produce fresh proposals, the Coordinadora called another strike for February. This time the government sent in 1,200 troops and police to take control of the city. More than 175 people were wounded, but the strike held, and the government announced a temporary lowering of the rates. As would be the case in October 2003, popular demands became rapidly radicalized in response to state repression, moving from calls for a reduction in rates to outright rejection of multinational control over water and natural resources.

The Coordinadora called for a 'final battle' to begin in early April. The government responded by pre-emptively arresting its leaders and declaring martial law. When a government sniper fired into a crowd, killing a 17-year-old boy, the city erupted in protest, and the barricades went up. By this time the Coordinadora had managed to gather an impressive range of groups: small-scale water distributors, valley and highland peasants, coca growers, trade unions, factory workers, students, progressive intellectuals, civic organizations, neighbourhood associations—often led by displaced miners—as well as Aymara peasants, street children and some of the middle classes. On April 4 the strikers broke through the military cordon around the city's central square, and 50,000–100,000 people participated in an open air assembly. As a direct result of popular pressure, Aguas del Tunari was thrown out of Bolivia on April 8, and the sale, distribution and consumption of water turned over to a collective, self-managed enterprise (SEMAPA).

The Coordinadora was unable to maintain mobilizations in such significant numbers. But Cochabamba was a prelude to later events in two key respects. Firstly, it was here that earlier calls for a constitutional assembly gathered strength. Secondly, insofar as the Coordinadora lacked hierarchical leadership structures, and was uninfected by clientelism and *caudillismo*, it provided a dress rehearsal at municipal level of the nationwide drama of October 2003, as well as an inspirational political model for metropolitan anti-globalization activists.

April 2000 also saw *cocaleros* and peasant colonizers mobilizing against the threat of eradication in the Yungas and northern highlands. The CSUTCB, the peasant trade-union confederation, established a series of road blockades. A lead role was played by the Aymara communities of Omasuyos, to the northwest of La Paz, and in particular by the CSUTCB executive secretary Felipe Quispe—known as *el Mallku*, the condor.⁶ Quechua–Aymara communities in Sucre, Oruro and Potosí followed

⁶ Like other Aymara leaders of his generation, Quispe started out in rural trade-union organizing, and was closely involved in *indianista* politics in the mid-1970s and early 80s, when *katarista* factions within the CSUTCB lost ground as Aymara nationalism grew stronger. He served a five-year sentence for membership of the EGRK (Tupac Katari Guerrilla Army), active on the high plains from 1986 to the early 90s. On his release in 1998, he was elected executive secretary of the CSUTCB, a national peasant trade-union federation that under his leadership acquired renewed political force.

suit, as did the coca growers in the Chapare. The killing of two Aymaras in Achacachi on April 9 sparked popular revolt there, prompting the government to send 1,000 troops and planes to the area. The insurgents refused to pay for water or land, or to reduce coca production or consumption. By September–October 2000, the road blockades organized by the CSUTCВ and their calls for a march on the capital raised the revolutionary spectre of 1781. Food shortages started to affect La Paz. Quispe and his followers began to call for an Aymara nation composed of confederations of communities. The idea of ‘two Bolivias’, one indigenous, the other *q’ara*, or non-Indian, circulated not only within rapidly radicalized Aymara circles, but also throughout civil society.⁷

The mobilizations in Cochabamba, the Yungas valleys and the high plains, although limited regionally and sectorally, succeeded in extracting concessions on eradication from one of the most authoritarian political figures in contemporary Bolivia. Banzer at first proved incapable of containing the insurgent social movements in both the highlands and lowlands. He was saved by the failure of the strategic and tactical alliance between Quispe, Morales and the remnants of the Coordinadora. Olivera was unable to provide many foot-soldiers for the September–October 2000 blockades, and Quispe and Morales were locked in a *caudillo* rivalry that would plague the social movements until October 2003. Banzer shrewdly negotiated with Quispe, driving a wedge between the CSUTCВ and the other social movements in the run-up to elections in 2002. The result was the ‘Island of the Sun Accords’, in which the government pledged to ‘address’ peasant demands, including the repeal of neoliberal laws and ending forced eradication in the Yungas.

But as has frequently been the case during the last five years, grassroots mobilizations outpaced the leadership. Radical Aymara nationalism gained coherence, though it remained geographically and sectorally isolated. In June 2001, the CSUTCВ blockade in the La Paz highlands led to the formation of the General Headquarters of Qalachaqa.⁸ In the Yungas valleys, coca growers of Aymara descent mobilized independently of parties or *caudillos*, and in the same month succeeded in driving out the US–Bolivian ‘joint task force’ and blocking forced eradication

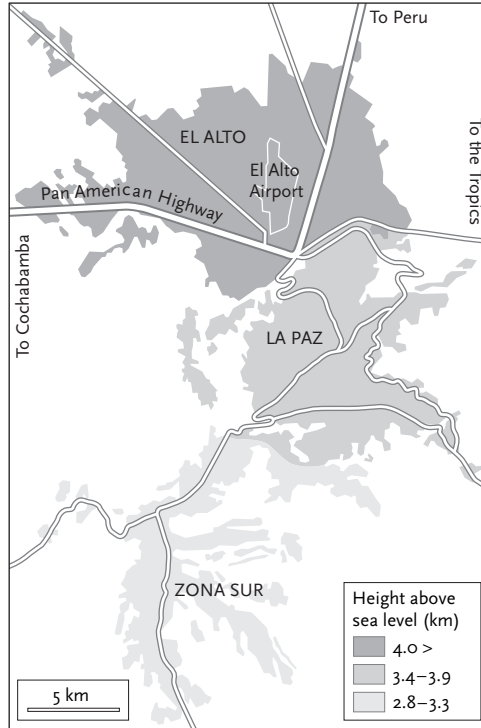
⁷ *Q’ara*: lit. naked or bald, someone who lives parasitically off the community; frequently used as a synonym for ‘whites’, or *mestizos*.

⁸ Gathering point for Aymara community militias, outside Achacachi on the road to La Paz.

in their region. At the same time, neighbourhood organizations were growing increasingly active in El Alto and indigenous peasants organizing in the south.

The rising political profile of the indigenous and peasant communities was clearly revealed in the parliamentary elections of 2002. MAS, led by Evo Morales, obtained 27 seats out of 130 in the Chamber of Deputies, and the MIP (Indigenous Pachakuti Party), led by Felipe Quispe, secured 6; MAS also won 8 of a total 27 Senate seats. In the presidential contest, Morales, with 20.9 per cent, was narrowly defeated by Sánchez de Lozada, with 22.5 per cent. No left party in Bolivia had ever secured more than 5 per cent of the national vote on its own. These successes raised hopes of a gradual transition 'from above' as a way out of the long-term crisis. The election results were a clear sign that the social movements—lowland and subtropical coca growers, trade union federations of the east and northeast, Quechua–Aymara communities in Sucre and Potosí, Aymara communities of the western highlands, the civic, anti-privatization movement in Cochabamba—were tilting the balance of political forces. A small but important sector of the urban middle class, alienated by the domination of the multinationals, widespread corruption and economic crisis, also voted MAS, which was given a last-minute boost by us Ambassador Manuel Rocha's threat to cut off aid in the event of a Morales victory.

Sánchez de Lozada thus returned to power in 2002 with little public backing and no clear project, in a weak governing coalition with the MIR (Revolutionary Left Movement). After seventeen years of financial orthodoxy, the neoliberal programme was increasingly seen as sheer plunder. Per capita income had not risen since 1986, and Bolivia had the second most unequal distribution of income in the continent—only Brazil was worse. The top 20 per cent of the population owned 30 times more than the bottom 20 per cent, and 60 per cent lived in poverty; in rural areas, the figure reached 90 per cent. The official unemployment rate had tripled, to 13.9 per cent, while the proportion of people working in the 'informal sector' had risen from 58 to 68 per cent in fifteen years. Infant mortality was 60 out of 1,000 births, and life expectancy was 63 years—compared to continent-wide averages of 28 per 1,000 and 70 years respectively. Infrastructure remained rudimentary in much of the countryside: over 70 per cent of roads were unpaved, and in rural areas only a quarter of households had electricity.



Misery has perhaps been most concentrated in El Alto, whose population had more than doubled between 1988 and 2002. The arrivals have mostly been migrants from the heavily Aymara provinces of La Paz, who have joined an economy revolving almost entirely around informal, artisanal, commercial and service activities, with some small-scale manufacturing. However, waged employment is limited. Basic urban services are either minimal or non-existent: 53 per cent of households in El Alto lack running water and the average family income is \$2 per day.

In defence of gas

The new Sánchez de Lozada administration was dedicated to staying the neoliberal course. Popular mobilizations flared up early in 2003, in response to two measures decreed in Washington. In January, after us envoy Otto Reich had threatened to cut off aid if coca eradication were not resumed, 30,000 *cocaleros* from Chuquisaca marched on Sucre, and

blockades went up in Potosí, the Chapare and the Yungas. In February, the implementation of an IMF-dictated tax increase brought crowds onto the streets of La Paz. Aymara youths stoned the presidential palace, and the Presidential Guard fired on protesting police. The unrest soon spread to El Alto, where neighbourhood associations mobilized against the threat of state violence and looting.⁹ Repression was swift and brutal: 29 were killed and 205 injured in the space of twenty-four hours. A semblance of order was restored when Sánchez de Lozada repealed the tax increase and fired his entire cabinet on 18 February. But the revolt had exposed the extent of the erosion of government control.

The opening manoeuvres in what would become the ‘Gas War’ came in September 2003, in response to the government’s scheme to export gas reserves via Chile—the traditional enemy for Bolivians since the loss of the country’s coastline to its neighbour in the War of the Pacific of 1879–83. On September 8, led by their *jilaqatas* and *mama t’allas*—traditional male authorities and their female consorts—10,000 Aymara from Los Andes province joined with FEJUVE in El Alto, students from El Alto’s public university (UPEA) and inter-provincial truckers to march from El Alto to Plaza San Francisco in downtown La Paz. From there they went to the prison in Plaza San Pedro, where they demanded the release of Edwin Huampu, general secretary of the peasant trade union in Cota Cota, La Paz department.¹⁰ Meanwhile, four hundred metres above, the first of many civic strikes that would paralyse El Alto began in opposition to a mayoral plan designed to facilitate raising taxes on building and home construction. Demands included university autonomy and rejection of the FTAA, Bush’s scheme for a Pan-American free-trade zone; but the common thread uniting protesters was No to the export of Bolivian gas via Chile, the old national enemy.

On September 9–10, a 1,000-strong Aymara delegation led by Quispe initiated a hunger strike, along with UPEA students and transport workers, at Radio San Gabriel in La Paz, and called for blockades to begin immediately. Aymara communities in Omasuyos shut the roads ‘in

⁹ Largely self-organized, in moments of political crisis neighbourhood associations co-ordinate through the Federación de Juntas Vecinales. FEJUVEs exist nationwide, but El Alto’s, benefiting in part from political traditions of migrants from the former mining regions, has played a far more militant role than most in recent years.

¹⁰ Imprisoned for carrying out a death sentence—an unusually extreme measure—handed down by a community assembly for cattle-rustling.

defence of gas', as did FEJUVE and the regional workers' central (COR) in El Alto.¹¹ The entire department, including the capital, was incommunicado: many of the roads were blockaded and under community control. By September 19, the MAS-backed 'Coordinadora for the Defence and Recuperation of Gas', led by Oscar Olivera and Morales, had mobilized more than 50,000 in La Paz and 20,000 in Cochabamba to protest the proposed export of gas to Chile. As in April 2000, Olivera presided over mass open-air meetings of factory workers, Chapare coca growers, students and peasant farmers in Cochabamba's Plaza 14 de Septiembre.

When government troops were sent to extricate tourists stranded by the road blockades, near Lake Titicaca, three Aymaras were killed, and local representatives meeting in nearby Warisata called on community militias to respond. Word spread around the *altiplano*, on foot and via radio stations broadcasting the decision four times daily in Aymara. The mobilization grew, encompassing Aroma, the southernmost province of La Paz, where eleven protestors were arrested on September 23, and more the following day (though Huampu was now released). Quispe broke off talks with the government. The Landless Workers' movement called for land takeovers, and coca growers in the Chapare declared they would block the road from Santa Cruz to Cochabamba. The COB announced a general strike for September 30 and its leader, Jaime Solares, called for daily blockades and marches. The COB march on central La Paz on September 29 was joined by striking butchers and transport workers, market vendors' associations and UPEA students, while the next day, Olivera and the Coordinadora led a 300-strong march to Warisata.

By October 1, a set of common demands had been worked out: the resignation of Sánchez de Lozada; national processing of gas and not its export through Chile; abrogation of the 'Citizen Protection and Security' law—which decreed jail terms of up to eight years for blockading roads—and no to the FTAA. To these were soon added the call for a constitutional assembly, and for trials of those responsible for the killing of demonstrators. On October 2, at the COB's assembly in La Paz, crowds demanded the ouster of Sánchez de Lozada. In El Alto, COR and UPEA students marched to meet community hunger strikers at Radio San Gabriel, engaging in fierce combat with security forces on

¹¹ Like FEJUVEs, CORs exist across the country as umbrella organizations for urban trade unions; again, COR-El Alto has played a role in co-ordinating insurrectionary struggle in recent years.

the Avenida 6 de Marzo that resulted in the arrest of twelve *alteños*. On October 8, the COR and FEJUVE in El Alto called a general strike against the export of gas. They were supported by the Huanuni miners, who had played a key role in the National Revolution of 1952 and in forging traditions of resistance after 1960. In 2003, however, many of this contingent were asserting their own 'indigenous' roots too. When the police fired on them at Ventilla on October 9, on the outskirts of El Alto, miners became the latest martyrs to fall 'in defence of gas'. From Warisata to El Alto, mourning was becoming a means of expressing collective grief and fury, as Aymaras were killed defending national assets against foreign control. In gathering support from other sectors, however, the wave of mobilizations went from being an Indian to a 'popular' struggle, led by Aymaras—rural and urban.

On October 10, combining the Aymara tactic of surrounding the city from the countryside with street fighting reminiscent of earlier uprisings, barricades went up all over El Alto. Protesters cut the supply of gas to La Paz by surrounding the state petroleum company's Senkata plant. The government ordered a military operation to bring 37 gas tankers to La Paz the next day; eleven protesters were killed as helicopters circled above and tanks clattered through streets. The crisis intensified on October 12—date of Columbus's landfall in the Americas—when twenty-three civilians were killed. On the following day, the death-toll rose to fifty-three. On October 13, a 100,000-strong crowd from El Alto marched down to Plaza San Francisco in the middle of La Paz, where the police, overwhelmed and out of ammunition, tendered white flags and withdrew, leaving the Aymara-dominated masses in control of the city centre.

The mobilizations continued to spread. On October 14, peasant colonizers converged on Santa Cruz from Yapacaní to the north and San Julián in the east. The lowland region of the former Jesuit reductions was also closed. In Potosí, confederated *ayllus*—Quechua and Aymara communities—shut down all the roads in the department, while Sucre was likewise impassable, except to the 25,000 who marched on the country's judicial capital and stoned the Supreme Court. The entire mining axis centred on Huanuni was blocked. There was a civic strike in Oruro, the city closest to the mining region, where markets closed, marchers circulated around the central plaza and university students clashed with security forces. In Cochabamba, peasant farmers cut off the road to La Paz, while street fighting broke out in the city centre. In the afternoon,

1,300 coca growers arrived in La Paz from the Yungas; representatives from Omasuyos reached El Alto by nightfall.

Everything in La Paz was closed: the main arteries of the hillside neighbourhoods were blockaded, and the wealthy *zona sur* was surrounded by marches and blockades. The mayor, Juan del Granado, joined with the former Human Rights Ombudswoman, Ana María Campero, and factions of the MIR and NFR to demand Sánchez de Losada's resignation. *Alteños* announced a march on the capital for October 16, and under cover of darkness that night, thousands of men, women and children dragged train cars for several kilometres as far as the bridge where the highway from La Paz meets El Alto, where they pushed the cars off the tracks. Not even tanks could get through.

The next day, 2,500 miners from Huanuni were ambushed by soldiers as they stopped for breakfast in Patacamaya, 60 miles south of La Paz. Two miners were killed and another fatally wounded. The leader of the co-operative miners' union declared that all 50,000 of its members should prepare to march on La Paz. The Mantego Rangers Regiment—once responsible for hunting down Che Guevara—was deployed in the *zona sur* to keep Aymaras from Chaskipampa out of the capital. In the afternoon, a series of hunger strikes were proclaimed in churches across the city, led by Ana María Campero and other intellectuals, demanding Sánchez de Losada's resignation and the constitutional succession of Vice-President Carlos Mesa. In El Alto's District 5—near Río Seco, where the heaviest fighting had occurred on October 12–13th—members of neighbourhood associations attacked the military with dynamite. Peasant blockades went up in much of the sparsely populated department of Oruro, and popular forces controlled the cities of Oruro, Sucre, Potosí and Cochabamba in the south and east. The marches from San Julián and Yapacaní reached Santa Cruz, where the police prevented them from entering the city.

Alteños marched again on October 16, arriving at Plaza San Francisco via the three main routes into the capital. This time there were 300,000 protesters. More Aymaras arrived from the south, while a human chain was formed from San Miguel in the *zona sur* in order to reach hunger strikers 20 km away, in Sopocachi. Hunger strikers now numbered in the hundreds, and were joined by expatriate Bolivians in Switzerland, Argentina, Peru and Ecuador. In the eastern lowlands, the Guaraní

People's Assembly, along with members of the Ayoreo, Guarayu, Chiquitano, Yucaré and the Mojeño indigenous peoples, went on hunger strike in solidarity with the highlanders, while Solares and the cōb called a hunger strike of 'the poor' in La Paz.

In the palace Sánchez de Lozada sat tight, solidly backed by us Ambassador Greenlee, though officials from the Argentine and Brazilian embassies urged him to resign. Vice President Mesa publicly distanced himself from the regime, leaving open the possibility of a constitutional succession. In the early afternoon, news arrived that the military had let the rest of the miners from Huanuni through the checkpoint at Patacamaya, and by evening, the *jilaqatas* and *mama t'allas* from Omasuyos—along with their armed commandos—reached El Alto. The sense that Sánchez de Lozada's days in Bolivia were numbered became ever more palpable. The insurrection gave rise to increasingly radical positions: 'Either us or him, Mr Journalist', as one *alteño* rebel leader put it. 'We were going for his head, to take him from the palace by force.'¹²

Yet in the end, the October insurrectionists did not attempt to seize the state administration. There was no united leadership—indeed, no leadership at all. Neither Morales nor Quispe were able to take the lead in La Paz and El Alto, much less at the national level. In September, Minister of Government Yerko Kukoc had claimed he could not negotiate in Warisata, Sorata or Achacachi because no one was in charge. In the climactic days of October, heterogeneous popular forces organized themselves, deliberated in open assemblies, and took action without waiting for orders from political party, trade-union or other established leaders. The lack of centralized authority stymied government efforts to suppress the uprising, even by the application, in the Bolivian context, of high levels of state violence. But the hundreds of thousands who snaked their way through downtown thoroughfares to take over the Plaza San Francisco in the heart of La Paz on October 17 refrained from marching on the national palace and congress, by now the only few blocks of the capital that remained under state control. The rest of the city had effectively been taken over. Barely a year after he had come to power for a second time, Sánchez de Lozada was spirited out of the presidential palace and onto a flight to Miami by his us backers, and Mesa's succession announced. After the victory rally in the Plaza San Francisco on

¹² Gómez, *El Alto de pie*, p. 137.

October 18, members of FEJUVE-El Alto and the COR packed El Alto's main thoroughfare and the bridges over it, cheering, chanting and passing food and cigarettes to those boarding their trucks for the long journey back to the mining districts and the lowlands.

The Mesa years

At first, Mesa enjoyed high levels of popularity in opinion polls, helped by his status as political outsider and lack of clearly defined elite backers, and the social movements initially demobilized to grant him an interval in which to carry out his mandate. The underlying support for Mesa's administration in Congress came from a tacit alliance with Evo Morales and MAS, who used the bargain to obtain a halt in coca eradication and to organize for the municipal elections in late 2004. MAS clearly suffered from its marriage of convenience with Mesa at the polls. Despite the weakness of its rivals, MAS garnered only 18 per cent of the municipal vote nationwide, and its only significant urban showing was in Cochabamba, which it did not capture. Quispe's MIP was all but absent from the scene, and ad hoc coalitions of 'citizen groups' were the only clear winners. Nevertheless, MAS was only to break with the government in 2005, once popular resentment over Mesa's handling of the hydrocarbons issue had mounted to crisis levels.

In July 2004 Mesa held the referendum on hydrocarbons promised at the time of the October insurrection in July 2004. But the questions were framed in such a way as to conjure away the option of nationalization. Many key organizations—COB, CSUTCB, COR-EL Alto, FEJUVE, the Coordinadora for the Defence and Recuperation of Gas—that had called for abrogation of gas contracts signed under Sánchez de Lozada therefore boycotted the referendum. The Mesa government obtained the response that it had carefully prepared: Sánchez de Lozada's hydrocarbon law would be repealed, but a balance would be struck between popular demands and the property rights and profit rates of multinational capital.

During 2005, political polarization intensified dramatically along racial-ethnic, class and regional lines over the hydrocarbons issue. Entrepreneurial layers in Santa Cruz threatened secession if the interests of private and domestic capital were attacked. Meanwhile in February 2005, FEJUVE mobilized against Aguas de Illimani, the multinational running the local water and sewage services, and succeeded in abrogating

the company's contract for El Alto and La Paz. At this point, Mesa dropped what remained of his progressive veneer and came out strongly in defence of oil, gas and water multinationals, while attacking the social movements and their leaders. However, he did not send tanks into the streets—the action that had drawn the middle class into the protests in 2003. On March 2, FEJUVE announced another strike against Aguas de Illimani, and three days later, Olivera and Morales—finally breaking with the government—announced marches and blockades in solidarity with the *alteño* movement for national sovereignty over natural resources. As blockades spread to the Yungas, Potosí, Chuquisaca and Oruro, and intensified in El Alto and the Chapare, the traditional parties rallied to the defence of Mesa, who tendered his resignation on March 6.

The coalescence of the right around Mesa, and the loss of middle-class support for a new national-popular project, were offset by a tendency, however fragile and incipient, toward greater programmatic unity among the normally divided movement leaders. At a meeting on March 9 at COB headquarters in La Paz, the COB, both wings of the divided CSUTCB, the revived Coordinadora, the landless peasants' union (MST) and Morales and Quispe themselves came together for the first time to establish a 'Pact for Unity'. Only FEJUVE, suspicious of parties and *caudillos*, abstained from the Pact. The popular bloc whose outlines first appeared in October 2003 had again taken centre stage, shutting down seven of nine departments and sealing off most cities. On March 15, however, the passage through Congress of new hydrocarbons legislation—increasing gas taxes somewhat, while protecting multinationals' contracts—was enough to pull Morales and MAS back into the parliamentary fold, thereby bringing blockades to an abrupt halt on March 16, 2005.

With lowland-based right-wing elites gaining greater purchase over the Mesa government, and mass forces in the highlands seeking more progressive hydrocarbons legislation, executive power came under further strain and polarization as insurgency burst forth again in May and June of 2005. The latest uprising appeared to be a sequel to the insurrection of October 2003, with the mobilization of similar sectors, and similar scenes in the streets of the capital; yet the balance of forces within the insurgent coalition had changed.

The rising started in mid-May as FEJUVE and the COB declared an indefinite general strike in El Alto, and the CSUTCB, under the leadership of

Román Loayza of MAS, mobilized communities in the provinces to pressure the Senate over hydrocarbons legislation. Within two weeks, the marches and strikes that paralysed the capital and El Alto had spread to Sucre, Potosí and Cochabamba. By June 6, road blockades had shut down eight of Bolivia's nine departments. Protestors' demands were various and shifting: many insisted on a constitutional assembly and trial of Sánchez de Lozada; some called for Mesa's resignation, others for the closure of parliament. The most vigorous demand, however, was for nationalization of hydrocarbons.

On June 6, between 400,000 and 500,000 protestors, largely of Aymara descent, poured down from El Alto into the heart of the capital. Some twenty truckloads of community peasants from Aroma arrived with clubs, stones and slings. They were accompanied by tens of thousands of *paceños*, calling for hydrocarbon nationalization. Miners announced their presence by setting off dynamite charges. This was the largest wave of mobilization since October 2003 and it kept La Paz shut down for the second week running. Crowds overflowed the Plaza San Francisco, and then headed off to the Plaza Murillo vowing to take over parliament and occupy the presidential palace.

With his authority buckling, Mesa was now prepared to bow out gracefully. But his proposal for early elections, though supported by Morales, met resistance from the right. Senate President Hormando Vaca Díez—a leading figure in the landowner bloc centred in Santa Cruz—refused to renounce his constitutional right to succeed to the presidency in the event of Mesa's resignation. His intransigence was one factor in the subsequent surge in mobilizations; protesters from a range of classes were galvanized by the possibility of a Vaca Díez presidency. Protests continued to spread further over the next few days: on June 7–8, road blockades nearly doubled from 61 to 119, and in the lowlands, frontier settlers and Guaraní communities occupied seven gas fields owned by BP-Amoco and Repsol YPF. Three hydroelectric plants were also taken over, while in Tapacará, Cochabamba, peasants shut down pipeline valves that carried 20,000 barrels of gas per day to Chile. Led by mayors of the capital cities, nearly 100 hunger strikes took place in seven of nine departments, with more than 700 mostly middle-class people demanding nationalization, the rejection of Vaca Díez and the convening of elections.

In October 2003, after peasants in La Paz initiated the process, FEJUVE and the COR came to spearhead the insurrection, with miners playing a secondary role. In June 2005, FEJUVE and the COR kicked things off, but miners and the CSUTCB carried the process to its national culmination. Culturally and politically, however, miners and peasants had few possibilities of building bridges to the urban middle class. In fact, without the unifying element of state repression—Mesa refrained from sending in tanks, as Sánchez de Lozada had—relations between progressive middle-class groups and other popular forces were tenser in June than they had been two years earlier. A progressive fraction of the middle class did join the movement, but only belatedly, against the prospect of a hard-right government under Vaca Díez.

On June 9, this limited goal was secured. Vaca Díez had transferred the session of Congress to the conservative city of Sucre, fleeing the siege in La Paz. On June 9, tens of thousands of miners and community peasants from the western departments of Chuquisaca, Potosí, and Oruro quickly converged on Sucre's Plaza 25 de Mayo in order to prevent Vaca Díez from succeeding Mesa. Stranded in Sucre by the airport workers' strike and now under military protection, Vaca Díez finally yielded, as did Cossío, the head of the Lower House, opening the way for Eduardo Rodríguez Veltzé, President of the Supreme Court, to be sworn in as President. His first act was to call general elections for December, and national-popular forces demobilized on June 12. The accumulated political energies would now, at least temporarily, be dispersed. In the interim, the formal electoral process would allow the political elite time to regroup.

Prospects

The current cycle has entered a temporary stalemate. With the political focus now on elections in December this year, longer-term questions on constitutional restructuring of the country and control over national resources have temporarily been postponed. At present, confusion surrounds the project for a constitutional assembly: there is no agreement on when it would be held, nor on how delegates would be selected, and the social movements have yet to produce explicitly formulated programmes. Hydrocarbons, meanwhile, will remain a crucial point of contention. The new Hydrocarbons Law passed by Congress in May 2005 satisfies no one—adding a 32 per cent tax to the 18 per cent royalties previously owed by oil and gas firms, but applicable to only 2 of

Bolivia's 29 gas fields. Recent polls show 75 per cent of the population in favour of nationalization, and it is likely that any incoming government will have to address the demand. For many, Bolivia's gas is the sole basis for hopes of a project of national development, begun under the MNR in the 1950s but abandoned in favour of submission to the Washington Consensus in the 1980s.

With the political winds blowing in new directions, what are the outlooks, aims and fears of the different actors on the left? On the one hand, the MAS leadership and middle class, fearful of the risks of chaos, coup attempts or right-wing resurgence, are nervous of what they see as maximalism. On the other, attraction to the prospect of self-determination or even seizing state power is growing within the COB, the CSUTCB, FEJUVE and COR-El Alto. In El Alto, where indigenous and proletarian traditions of struggle and historical memory clash, interpenetrate and fuel each other, two poles have arisen in strategic debates since October 2003. The first, reflected more in the views of Aymara migrants from the La Paz countryside or their sons and daughters, insists on the need to take power swiftly and capitalize on moments of government weakness or fragmentation. Radical groups in El Alto have felt frustrated by what they see as limited results so far, and the inability to finish what was started during that October. Some youth, now the veterans of recurrent popular insurgency, may opt for forms of armed struggle in the future. The second pole, seen in the stance of relocated miners, argues that in order to take power a clear programme for administering resources and state institutions is required. The younger generation does not recall the adversities of the early 1980s, but the older generations have only recently begun to recover from them. The vision of more radical Aymara sectors is bolstered by their understandings of 1781, while former miners are influenced by memories of 1952 and the collapse of the UDP in 1985.

In Aymara-dominated rural areas of La Paz, such as Omasuyos, currents pushing for armed separatism and direct confrontation with the state have the tacit, if not practical, support of elements within the CSUTCB. While there is no clear-cut agenda, optimism about future possibilities for seizing power is stronger than in El Alto, where such hopes are tempered, though by no means absent. The CSUTCB had been deeply divided between followers of Felipe Quispe and Evo Morales, although this year Quispe's star has waned. Román Loayza of MAS has consolidated control over the confederation, giving it greater coherence at the national level.

The Túpaj Katari federation in La Paz, now headed by Genaro Flores, son of the peasant leader who founded the organization in the late 1970s, retains its militant aspirations. Other currents within the indigenous movement, like those in Oruro, Sucre, and Potosí, advocate greater municipal and regional autonomy, pointing back to the indigenous federalist projects of the late nineteenth century.

The traditional, sov-oriented Bolivian left has largely disappeared, dislodged by new subaltern movements of Indians and *cocaleros*. What remains of it can be seen in and around parliament operating under MAS banners, though within MAS as a whole, Indian influence has grown. Morales has pursued a minimal programme, his sights set on the upcoming general elections, but he has support from indigenous rank-and-file throughout much of the country, and MAS does adopt a national revolutionary voice in parliament.

If El Alto and La Paz were the epicentre of all three waves of recent insurgency, the irradiation of struggle throughout the country was, in the end, decisive. Having been the seats of colonial and later republican political and economic power, the impoverished southern departments of Chuquisaca, Potosí and Oruro testify to the devastating impact of reliance on the export of raw materials for 'development'. MAS is strong in peasant trade unions in Sucre and Oruro, and has forged alliances with the federations of *ayllus* in Potosí, but nationalization has become a rank-and-file demand for the Quechua–Aymara movement as a whole, independently of ties to MAS. As in areas where rightwing dominance is contested (Santa Cruz, Tarija), rank-and-file initiative in Sucre, Potosí and Oruro has gone well beyond what MAS leaders envisioned. The lowland Guaraní, who are not affiliated with political parties or *caudillos*, took over major foreign-controlled gas fields in May 2004 and again in May–June 2005, and pronounced in favour of nationalization, which would seem to indicate the possibility of lowland linkages within a national-popular bloc. The *cocaleros* in the Chapare and Yungas, who have played key roles in insurgency since 2000, have seen their sectoral demands diminish in MAS's programme as the party has sought to develop a national profile, and concern at the pragmatism of the party leadership is spreading among the rank-and-file. *Cocaleros* may have difficulty re-asserting the importance of coca as an issue of national sovereignty on a par with gas, although their own strength as a social movement will continue to force any Bolivian government to approach the issue with caution.

The outlines of a new national-popular project, with indigenous issues and leaders for the first time in a prominent position, are now imaginable. Nonetheless, real difficulties remain in transforming recent convergences into a durable political front. There is still widely felt mistrust—at times amounting to an abyss—between its various potential components, shaped in part by ethnic and class differences. *Caudillismo* and personalism continue to plague the Indian and *cocalero* movements, in tension with a political culture of rank-and-file initiative inherited from communal and trade union democracy. Obstacles in the way of alliance with progressive middle-class intellectuals and professionals also remain formidable. The initial sense of political hope and meaningful agency generated among the latter by the events of October 2003 has dwindled; fractions that have the Popular Assembly of 1971 and the UDP as historical referents are wary of unruly radicalism and concerned that crisis will facilitate right-wing reaction. The twin volcanoes of 2003/2005 have shifted Bolivia's political landscape; yet their outcomes remain highly uncertain.