

Dynamite in the Mines and Bloody Urban Clashes: Contradiction, Conflict and the Limits of Reform in Bolivia's Movement towards Socialism

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Résumé

Le présent article critique la façon dont on décrit communément le gouvernement d'Evo Morales, en Bolivie, comme socialiste révolutionnaire ou réformiste radical. Il introduit le concept de populisme ascendant autochtone pour mieux comprendre le caractère du gouvernement de Morales. Il résume l'importance historique de la victoire électorale du MAS (Mouvement vers le socialisme); il situe la politique bolivienne d'aujourd'hui au sein des débats théoriques plus larges marquant la gauche latino-américaine; et il explique la trajectoire du populisme latino-américain, ainsi que les particularités de l'expérience bolivienne dans cette trajectoire. Sur ce fond théorique et historique, sont examinées deux mobilisations du peuple, en 2006 et 2007 : un conflit dans une mine d'Huanuni, en octobre 2006, et les affrontements de Cochabamba, en décembre 2006 et janvier 2007. Ces deux événements étayent la thèse du populisme ascendant autochtone. L'article avance qu'il faut un renouvellement de l'auto-organisation indépendante et de la mobilisation stratégique des classes populaires et des nations autochtones pour permettre aux mouvements sociaux de dépasser l'horizon politique limité du gouvernement actuel.

Abstract

This paper critiques common depictions of the Evo Morales government in Bolivia as revolutionary socialist or radically reformist. It introduces the concept of indigenous ascendant populism to better understand the character of the Morales administration. It summarizes the historical significance of the electoral victory of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS); situates contemporary Bolivian politics within the broader theoretical debates occurring within the Latin American left; and explains the trajectory of Latin American populism and the particularities of Bolivia's experiences within that trajectory. Against this theoretical and historical backdrop two popular mobilizations occurring in 2006 and 2007 are examined: a conflict in a Huanuni mine in October 2006 and the 'Cochabamba Conflict' of December 2006 and January 2007. Both events are found to substantiate the thesis of indigenous ascendant populism. The contention is made that a renewal of independent self-organization and strategic mobilization of the popular classes and indigenous nations is necessary so that social movements will not be trapped within the limited political horizons of the current government.

Introduction

This essay introduces the concept of *indigenous ascendant populism* as a way to better understand the character of the current Bolivian government, led by president Evo Morales, of the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement Towards Socialism (MAS)).¹ It begins with a brief overview of the historical significance of the electoral victory of the MAS in late December 2005. From here it attempts to situate the processes of social change occurring in Bolivia today within the wider theoretical debates on left strategy in Latin America. This discussion includes a synopsis of the historical and contemporary significance of populism in the region, as well as a description of Bolivia's particular populist experiments. After introducing this theoretical backdrop, the essay proceeds with a fine-grained empirical investigation. It seeks to fill a lacuna in analysis and reportage of the first year (January 2006 to January 2007) of the MAS administration in Bolivia through a detailed examination of two examples of popular revolt to the left of the MAS: the violent confrontations in a Huanuni mine in October 2006 and the 'Cochabamba Conflict' of January 2007.

The example of the mines represents one source of serious potential for the rearticulation of an independent radical politics to the left of the MAS, whereas the Cochabamba Conflict is much more ambiguous in its medium to long term implications. The inspiring struggle for the resignation of a corrupt and right-wing departmental prefect was clearly a positive example of a groundswell of democratic politics from below which refused, if only for a short period of time, to succumb to the dictates of the MAS government. However, the declaration of a 'parallel government' at the close of the conflict is best understood as ultra-left adventurism given that the social bases for such a project were no longer in place when the declaration was made.

Effective struggle to open pathways for a transition to socialism, indeed even for serious structural reform, will require the renewal of self-activity, self-organization and strategic mobilization of popular movements autonomous from the MAS government. The precedent of the 2000 to 2005 indigenous liberationist and anti-capitalist struggles of an eclectic array of indigenous-left movements is a good basis on which to build. The MAS government deserves the support of left-indigenous social movements throughout the country in its confrontations with the organized far right, concentrated in the eastern lowlands, and imperialism, concentrated in the US state. Any reforms initiated by the MAS that improve the lives of the popular classes and indigenous nations also deserve the critical support of social movements as they seek to drive these reforms deeper and direct them into more direct confrontations with the logic of capital. With a clear analysis of the reformist character of the MAS government - here theorized as *indigenous ascendant populist* - popular movements seeking the fundamental overthrow of the combined social relations of capitalism and indigenous oppression in Bolivia will be in a better position to

1 Thanks to Susan Spronk and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an early draft. All the usual disclaimers apply.

wage struggles which escape the limited parameters of the MAS's political agenda.

The Historical Significance of the MAS Government

Evo Morales was elected as the first indigenous president of Bolivia on December 18, 2005, with an unprecedented 53.7 percent of the popular vote. There was also a record turnout of 84.5 percent of eligible voters (Romero Ballivián, 2006). In South America's poorest country, with an official poverty rate of 67 percent (EIU, 2006), the election was a hopeful expression of the popular classes' will for change as well as a clear illustration of their disgust with the pauperizing, polarizing and exploitative characteristics of the neoliberal capitalist model², first introduced in Bolivia in 1985 (Dunkerley, 1992; Dunkerley & Morales, 1986; Kohl & Farthing, 2006). The victory of Morales was also symbolic. It signalled a break with white-*mestizo* (mixed race) elite control of the state apparatus in a republic where 62 percent of the population self-identified as indigenous in the last census of 2001 (INE, 2001), and where the indigenous majority has long struggled for political, social and economic liberation from internally-colonial race relations (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2003). In a country where racial oppression and class exploitation are intimately intertwined, there was a palpable sense of hope that serious and substantive change might arise through the ballot box in December, 2005 (Blanco, 2006; Do Alto, 2006).

Within this context, a number of analysts have described the MAS government as either revolutionary socialist or radically reformist and anti-neoliberal in character³, often linking it to the harder current of Latin America's so-called pink tide: Venezuela and Cuba. However, a growing body of literature argues that the MAS is not a revolutionary socialist government, although there remain disagreements in this literature as to how best to characterize the Morales regime.⁴ Few people disagree that in the opening years of the twenty-first century, Bolivia hosted the most dynamic and wide-scale popular movement resurgence in all of Latin America, while the region as a whole led the offensive against neoliberalism on a world-scale. In Bolivia, between 2000 and 2005 a monumental wave of left-indigenous rebellions in rural and urban contexts led to the ousting of two neoliberal presidents: Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in October 2003 and Carlos Mesa Gisbert in June 2005.⁵

The MAS played no meaningful role in the October 2003 rebellion, and only a peripheral one in the May-June 2005 revolt. The party had already, since 2002, steered away from its radically anti-neoliberal and anti-imperialist origins in an effort to win over the urban

2 Stefanoni & Do Alto (2006).

3 Borón (2005); Dieterich (2005); Lemoine (2005); Sader (2006); Stefanoni & Do Alto (2006).

4 CEDLA (2006c); Lora (2006); Orellana Aillón (2006a; 2006b); Petras (2006); Spronk (2007); Webber (2006b; 2006c; 2006d); Zibechi (2007).

5 Crabtree (2005); García Linera (2002; 2003a; 2003b; 2004a; 2004b; 2005); García Linera et al. (2005); Gómez (2004); Hylton & Thomson (2004; 2005; 2007); Kohl (2006); Mamani Ramírez (2004); Olivera & Lewis (2004); Perreault (2006).

middle class and succeed in national elections. In the MAS's first year in office deep patterns of continuity with the inherited neoliberal economic model have been discernible in terms of the implementation of key economic policies and the class interests they serve (Webber, 2007b). The only deviations in this trend are to be found in moderate reforms to hydrocarbons (oil and gas) policy, foreign relations with the governments of Venezuela and of Cuba, and relations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), especially regarding Morales' decision not to renew the Stand By Agreement with the IMF which expired in March 2006.⁶

The moderately reformist ideology of the dominant current within the party is best encapsulated by vice-president Álvaro García Linera's conceptualization of Andean-Amazonian capitalism, in which the possibility of socialist transformation is seen as impossible in the country for at least 50 to 100 years. For García Linera, the country needs to proceed through a stage of gradual and progressive development of industrial capitalism before an eventual socialist transition can take place. This intermediary stage is necessary for the development of the material basis necessary for socialism (García Linera, 2006a; 2006b). The most important document on economic planning released to date by the government likewise precludes the possibility of a transition to socialism in the foreseeable future (Ministerio de Planificación de Desarrollo, 2006).

Bolivia is divided into nine departments, although the constitution concentrates political power in the central state apparatus. Despite the moderation of the Morales government, right-wing autonomist forces led by the bourgeoisies of the richest departments of the *media luna* (half moon) - Santa Cruz and Tarija - and their bourgeois allies in the poorest *media luna* departments - Pando and Beni - perceive the MAS administration as a serious threat to the neoliberal model from which they derived massive benefits since 1985 (Chávez & García Linera, 2005; Eaton, 2007; Webber, 2005).⁷ Disputes within and outside the institutions of the state have boiled over repeatedly to such an extent that civil war was a real possibility at various junctures in 2006 (Bolpress, 2007b; International Crisis Group, 2007). These disputes turned primarily on the content and procedural rules of a complicated Constituent Assembly process, which is supposed to produce a new Bolivian constitution and which began in August 2006, and the future of the natural gas industry.

Much of the academic and popular discussion in this context has been centred on the conflict between the Bolivian left and the right. In these discussions, the MAS is often inaccurately portrayed as the singular left protagonist in an epoch struggle for hegemony in the country. The scene on the ground is much more complicated than such a portrait allows. There have been a number of instances where popular social forces to the left

6 The moderate reforms in the hydrocarbons sector are frequently but incorrectly referred to as 'nationalization'.

7 The *media luna* refers to the departments of Pando, Beni, Santa Cruz and Tarija because together their geographical shape resembles a half moon.

of the party have expressed their frustration with the reformism of the government and its unnecessary willingness to negotiate with the far right autonomist movement. This has sometimes led to confrontations between erstwhile allies of Morales and the MAS, such as the case in late September 2006 when, during a conflict in Parque Carrasco, two *cocaleros* (coca growers) were murdered by the state and called 'narco-traffickers' by key ministers in the government. This was especially galling given the fact that Morales and the MAS party grew up out of the milieu of anti-imperialist *cocalero* struggle in the region of Chapare, Cochabamba in the 1980s and 1990s. Many on the Bolivian left saw this as capitulation to US imperial intervention in the country by way of the American-led 'War on Drugs'.⁸ This was only one instance of many where the impulses of the popular classes and oppressed indigenous nations have transcended the compromised politics of the government in power.

David McNally reminds us that:

Most fundamental to Marx's idea of revolution was the insistence that meaningful change can come only through a mass movement from below. Only by winning radical democracy for themselves, by conquering their own freedom, could the oppressed remake themselves as people capable of free self-government.... Revolution thus has two interrelated components: changing of social rules and regulation (ownership, property, forms of government) and self-transformation.... In short, the process of revolution – mass mobilization, participation in new forms of democracy, overturning old forms of domination, taking control of workplaces and communities – transforms the participants themselves (2006: 375-376).

In an equally important passage, McNally teases out a key insight of Rosa Luxemburg's:

[W]hoever wins an election in capitalist society attains political office, not power. After all, power in modern society is embedded in property – ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange – and the authority it confers. This power, represented by money, involves control over others, specifically over the labour and life-activity of those who comprise the working class.... The great flaw of reformism is its belief that society can be radically transformed by changing governments while leaving the basic institutions and property relations of capitalism intact. The reality, however, is that rather than capturing power when they are elected, reformist parties are instead captured by power (2006: 358, 360).

For our purposes the premises of these two passages directs our attention in two directions: upwards, to the current MAS government in Bolivia and the structural limitations of its moderately reformist platform; and downwards, to the ongoing mass struggles from below which are attempting to push the current political and social processes in that

8 *Econoticias* (2006b; 2006c); *La Patria*, (2006); *La Prensa* (2006a; 2006b); *La Razón* (2006g).

country toward a transformative path while their participants transform themselves in the process.

Theoretical Debates on the Latin American Left

Latin America is undergoing a complex and contradictory shift in its politics. Morales' ascension to office occurred within this more general regional trend. The most discussed component of the new political climate since the late 1990s has been the electoral victories of political parties defining themselves as left or centre-left, and running on explicitly anti-neoliberal platforms, whatever their policy decisions once in office. By 2006, such a dynamic, very broadly conceived, was evident in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Nicaragua, and Ecuador, although there are serious discrepancies between the actual class characters and orientations of these new governments.⁹ Less attention has been paid to the militant social movements and popular class struggles which have erupted most forcefully in Bolivia, Venezuela, Argentina, and Ecuador in recent years. The effervescence of anti-neoliberal, and even anti-capitalist, social movements in Latin America and the subsequent rise of these centre-left and left governments, has fuelled a new wave of theoretical debate on left strategy.¹⁰

One of the prominent schools of thought coming out of this conjuncture can be categorized loosely as anarchism, although certainly not all of the movements and thinkers that broadly adhere to this current think of themselves in this way. Perhaps the most widely-celebrated thinker to have expressed the ideas of the new Latin American anarchism is John Holloway, particularly in his book *Change the World without Taking Power* (2005). His thesis, distilled to its barest elements, is as follows: it may or may not be possible to change the world without taking power (we cannot know for sure); within this context of uncertainty, the best way to imagine revolutionary change is to seek the dissolution of power rather than the conquest of power; and it is particularly important to avoid a strategy focused on the conquest of *state* power, which was ruinous for the revolutionary left in the twentieth century.

Many have pointed out important flaws in Holloway's perspective: oversimplification of a very complex history of competing theoretical and strategic debates in the international history of the workers' movement¹¹; too little account taken of a vast critical literature within the Marxist tradition on the state; lack of serious theoretical and analytical treatment of history and the role of the revolutionary left therein¹²; mystification of the

9 Serious discussion of the Latin American Left must also include Cuba, but it is distinct from these electoral shifts for reasons that are straightforward.

10 Ali (2006); Castañeda (2005); Ciccariello-Maher (2007); Ellner (2004); Harnecker (2005; 2007); Hershberg & Rosen (2006); Katz (2007); Lebowitz (2006); Petras & Veltmeyer (2005); Prasad & Ballvé (2006); Wilpert (2006).

11 Bensaid (2005).

12 Bensaid (2005).

Zapatista experience in Mexico through an analysis rooted in discourse rather than the real contradictions of the political situation on the ground; abandonment of the terrain of politics and strategic orientation, a vacuum which will inevitably be filled by capitalist or pro-capitalist forces if left empty¹³; and, finally, a problem Alex Callinicos has pointed out: Holloway's suggestion that we should all try to "cultivate our own autonomous gardens despite the horrors of capitalism. The trouble is that the state won't leave us alone and that is because capitalism itself, the system that different states sustain, won't leave us alone" (Holloway & Callinicos, 2005: 63-64). To sum up, in the words of French theorist Daniel Bensaid (2002):

You can pretend to ignore power, but it will not ignore you. You can act superior by refusing to take it, but from Catalonia 1937 to Chiapas, via Chile, experience shows right up to this very day that it will not hesitate to take you in the most brutal fashion. In a word, a strategy of counter-power only has any meaning in the perspective of dual power and its resolution. Who will come out on top?... which class will be capable of resolving the contradictions which are stifling society, capable of imposing an alternative logic to that of the accumulation of capital, capable of transcending the existing relations of production and opening up a new field of possibilities?

The ideas that Holloway has sought to clarify need to be taken seriously and they continue to resonate in particular settings within the Latin American Left, especially among 'autonomists' and 'horizontalists' in Argentina, and some adherents of Zapatismo in Mexico and elsewhere (Katz, 2005; Sitrin, 2006; Zibechi, 2003).

Yet a second school within the theoretical debates on left strategy in Latin America, left populism, has gained a much higher stature than anarchism since the escalation of interest in the regimes of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia across the globe. There is a vast literature on the history of Latin American populism which I cannot delve into here.¹⁴ Suffice to say that since Chávez and Morales have gained increasing notoriety some theorists on the left have espoused left populism as the way forward in the current contexts of these countries.

I want to set most of this heavily-trodden theoretical terrain aside and address two specific theoretical concepts: *popular sector ascendant* versus *popular sector defensive* populism in the Latin American historical context (Oxhorn, 1998). Out of this discussion I develop a novel concept of *indigenous ascendant populism* to characterize the MAS government in Bolivia. I then show how indigenous ascendant populism is flawed as a strategic orientation for revolutionary socialists interested in building the capacities for socialist emancipation and indigenous liberation through the self-activity and self-organization of the oppressed

13 Hearse (2005).

14 Conniff (1999); de la Torre (1992); Dornbusch & Edwards (1992); Ellner (2004; 2005); Laclau (1977); Mouzelis (1985); Raby (2006).

and exploited.

Philip Oxhorn conceptualizes populism as a mode of interest intermediation characterized by four distinct features. First, populism is based on asymmetrical multi-class coalitions in which lower classes lack autonomous organizational capacity and therefore enjoy less power and reap fewer benefits than the more privileged sectors in the coalitional arrangement. Nonetheless, lower-class subordinate participation in the asymmetrical coalition is fundamentally important for the coalition's successful access to the administrative apparatuses of the state and its resources. The success of populism "rests on its ability to appeal to lower class needs, frustrations and even aspirations" (Oxhorn, 1998: 223-224). Second, populism mobilizes broad popular support, but in a manner that strictly delimits the scope of demands and political horizons that might develop through more autonomous popular mobilization: "At the same time that populist leaders seek to mobilize the lower classes, they seek to restore control over them so as to avoid their radicalization" (Oxhorn, 1998: 225). Populist regimes explicitly seek to forestall autonomous organizational activity through cooptation or repression or some combination of the two (Oxhorn, 1998). Third, leadership under populism is paternalistic and elitist because this mode of interest intermediation is organized hierarchically from the top down. While classical definitions of populism often stressed the necessity of charismatic leadership, for Oxhorn it is not essential: "More important is the feeling that the leader is speaking for the underprivileged whom he directly represents" (1998: 225). Fourth, and finally, populism employs an instrumental use of ideology. Ambiguity is critical in constructing ideological appeals that can resonate across a multi-class coalition. This fourth characteristic, in combination with the other three, crystallizes the distinctiveness of populism when juxtaposed to revolutionary socialism:

Despite the importance of at least some emphasis on distributional issues, there is also a fundamental ambiguity. Populist movements tend to downplay, or even oppose, class conflict. Instead, integration and the non-zero-sum nature of development are emphasized along with the ideal of expanding the economic pie. There is no real social change that is being proposed. Even during [Latin American] populism's first wave [beginning in the 1930s], the economic power of the traditional elites was left intact in order to finance industrialization. Populist leaders sought concessions from upper classes rather than their overthrow (Oxhorn, 1998:226).

From the 1930s until the 1970s and 1980s, populism in Latin America tended to pivot around the (unequal and limited) political incorporation of the popular classes. Redistributive measures targeted favoured groups within the populist coalition, including organized labour, while the poorest segments of society were most often still excluded.

Some redistribution was carried out on a particularistic basis through clientelism, but formal collective rights and benefits were also won by the organized working class in many countries (Oxhorn, 1998). This first wave of Latin American populism is therefore termed popular sector ascendant populism in Oxhorn's framework. A second wave of populism began with the onset of neoliberal economic restructuring and is better characterized as popular sector defensive populism (Oxhorn, 1998). The latter variant is based in part on the motivations of the popular sectors to defend the collective rights and benefits won in the first wave of populism in the face of an economic model that is premised on the institutional dismantlement and reduction/elimination of these rights and benefits. Under popular sector defensive populism, regimes have implemented targeted welfare programs at the local level for the poorest segments of society to secure support for neoliberalism; at the same time formal rights and benefits for the popular classes are eroded and the organizational bases for collective action steadily deteriorate. National level collective action is difficult outside of mobilization under the direction of the populist regime itself (Oxhorn, 1998; Roberts, 1995). Both variants of populism, despite their differences, share the key components of asymmetrical multi-class coalitions, the mobilization of popular support, paternalistic and elitist leadership, and instrumental use of ideology.

Bolivia's experience with popular sector ascendant populism began in the late 1930s under the so-called 'military socialism' of David Toro and, subsequently, Germán Busch (Klein, 1969; Zavaleta Mercado, 1998). Toro's reformist regime created Bolivia's first Ministry of Labour, and, most significantly, nationalized the New Jersey-based Standard Oil Company of Bolivia, establishing in its place the state oil company, *Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales de Bolivia* (YPFB) (Klein, 2003). The Busch regime perpetuated military socialism with the introduction of additional moderate labour reforms that in no way threatened the basic sanctity of private property or other pillars of capitalism, but did modestly improve the political and working conditions of Bolivian labour. *Código Busch*, the first modern labour code in Bolivian history, was likely the most important legislation introduced under that regime. The period of military socialism reached its premature ending in August 1937 when Busch committed suicide, garnering in the act a level of popularity and respectability he had never enjoyed in life (Klein, 2003).

Popular sector ascendant populism in Bolivia was then decisively consolidated through the nationalist-populist revolution of 1952. Between 1952 and early 1956, the major advances of the revolution, those associated to this day with the *estado de '52* ('state of 52'), were pushed forward: (i) the nationalization of the three big mining companies and the establishment of the state mining company, COMIBOL; (ii) agrarian reform; and (iii) universal suffrage (Whitehead, 2003; Dunkerley, 1984; Malloy, 1970; Mitchell, 1977). And yet after the initial period in which the MNR was forced to enact major reforms due to pressure from popular movements – led by the revolutionary Marxist tin miners

–, the MNR quickly turned on the workers with the assistance of US imperialism. In alliance with co-opted peasant organizations - placated by the recent land reforms - the MNR began reversing the gains of the revolution and rebuilding the army as a means of repressing the miners. In 1956, an economic stabilization program backed by the IMF was introduced, and by the arrival of the 1964 right-wing military coup the state had developed an elaborate system of divide-and-rule tactics to deal with rural and urban popular sectors, repressing the most radical and integrating those who could be integrated through cooptation and the divvying out of selective benefits from the state's purse.

With the return of electoral democracy in 1982 the country entered into a brief period of centre-left rule under the government of the *Unidad Democrática Popular* (Popular Democratic Union (UDP)). This regime was short-lived, ending before schedule in a context of hyperinflationary crisis. Following on the UDP's heels, and taking advantage of the economic crisis, a new coalition of right-wing parties under the direction of the MNR assumed office and introduced a set of orthodox neoliberal stabilization policies in 1985. Neoliberal restructuring was most intensely pursued between 1985 and 2000¹⁵ until its negative social consequences spurred the largest and most militant cycle of popular mobilization in all of Latin America between 2000 and 2005.

This brings us full circle to the presidential victory of Evo Morales in December 2005. The MAS administration he leads represents a novel phenomenon in Bolivian politics which I call *indigenous ascendant populism*. It is increasingly apparent that the MAS has recreated elements of the legacy of the MNR's nationalist-populism in a new melange fit for the twenty-first century. The government has incorporated some of the language of indigenous liberation developed by radical indigenous movements¹⁶ but has separated its indigenous focus from much of the material reality facing indigenous people (Webber, 2006c; 2006d). In spite of the fact that indigenous people in Bolivia - who also constitute the vast majority of the rural and urban working class - experience racial oppression and class exploitation in a profoundly interpenetrating fashion in their everyday lives, the MAS government has concluded that a transition to socialism is impossible in the country for between 50 to 100 years. Indigenous ascendant populism in this context incorporates a diluted ideology of indigenous liberation while foreclosing the possibility of a transition to socialism. The MAS has also borrowed from the MNR's strategy of the 1950s in terms of seeking to divide the popular movements, control the most important social movement organizations, contain rank-and-file activism that exceeds the strict parameters of moderate reform, and even repress workers and peasants who are unwilling to submit to the limits of populism and subordination to the state.

15 Crabtree et al. (1987); Gamarra (1994); Gill (1997); Grindle (2003); Kohl (2002; 2003; 2004); Kohl & Farthing (2006); Kruse (2002); Malloy (1991); Mann & Pastor Jr. (1989); Sanabria (1999); Veltmeyer & Tellez (2001).

16 Fuentes (2007); Orozco Ramírez (2005); Stefanoni (2003).

The MAS, beginning in 2002, began to shift from a radically anti-neoliberal and anti-imperialist political party to a party based on asymmetrical multi-class coalitions, the mobilization of popular support within strict parameters, paternalistic and elitist leadership (exemplified in the concept of 'evismo'),¹⁷ and instrumental use of ideology. Since coming to power, the MAS has sought to limit the organizational autonomy of social movements and trade unions. Popular-class indigenous participation is subordinate in the party's asymmetrical coalition because the advancement of the fundamental material interests of the popular classes have been seen as less important than maintaining the foundational macroeconomic precepts of neoliberalism - fiscal austerity, low-inflationary growth, flexible labour markets, and central bank independence.

During the first year in government the MAS has sought to mobilize popular support at key junctures, but has also sought to restore control over these popular sectors so as to preclude the possibility of further radicalization. As our subsequent discussion will show, the Cochabamba Conflict is a paradigmatic illustration of this dynamic. While not always successful at restraining its social base, the MAS party leadership has tried to be paternalistic and elitist by attempting to determine independently the parameters of reasonable demands from below and the timing of confrontations with right-wing opposition in the eastern lowlands. While few would characterize Morales as a charismatic leader it is obvious that the government presents him as a leader "speaking for the underprivileged whom he directly represents" (Oxhorn, 1998: 225). The fact that he is the first indigenous president in a republic with an indigenous majority and a long and sordid history of racism is of massive significance in this respect. Popular indigenous movements tend to see in Morales a representative of themselves in office.¹⁸

In terms of the instrumental use of ambiguous ideology, two recent quotations from the party's top leadership are representative of the mixed messages it consistently sends out. Evo Morales recently remarked that, "transnational corporations always provoke conflicts to accumulate capital, and the accumulation of capital in a few hands is no solution for humanity... And so I have arrived at the conclusion that capitalism is the worst enemy of humanity" (Webber, 2007a:19). By contrast, only two months earlier, vice-president García Linera suggested:

We are going to correct the discourse, suspending the unnecessary rhetoric, because on top of everything it does not correspond with our actual practice... in this year [the first year of the MAS administration] there was not a single measure that has affected the middle classes, or even the upper classes of Bolivia....We repeat a thousand times: the government of president Morales respects private property, respects religion, respects

17 García Linera (2006b).

18 Personal interview with Sinclair Thomson (Montreal; September 7, 2007). Sinclair Thomson is a renowned scholar of Bolivian history. See Thomson (2002) and Hylton and Thomson (2007).

healthy business activity, guarantees private participation in education and health (Webber, 2007a:19).

Moreover, to the extent that populist governments tend to downplay or oppose class conflict, and stress the non-zero-sum nature of development, the MAS's actions in the conflict in the Huanuni mine (discussed below) conforms tightly with the model.

Indigenous populism in contemporary Bolivia is best described as *ascendant*, rather than *defensive*, because the popular classes and indigenous movements are being mobilized on the premise that the government represents a challenge to neoliberalism; the movements are not being mobilized on the simple basis of defending the further erosion of collective rights and benefits previously acquired before the onslaught of neoliberal restructuring. The indigenous populism of the MAS is also ascendant in the sense that there have been authentic gains in terms of the sheer increase in the public expression of indigenous pride since the MAS came to power (Farthing, 2007). At the same time, this is still indigenous *populism* because the MAS regime has retained residual elements of what Charles R. Hale (2004) describes as the *indio permitido* (authorized Indian) of neoliberal multiculturalism in Latin America. Hale shows how Latin American states in the 1990s and 2000s have, in constructing an "authorized Indian," set the parameters of acceptable cultural recognition of indigenous peoples: "certain rights are to be enjoyed on the implicit condition that others will not be raised" (2004:18). In the case of the MAS, the implicit condition has evidently proven to be that very few inroads will be made on neoliberalism under its watch, provided, that is, that the popular classes and indigenous nations cannot rebuild autonomous organizational capacities outside of the governing party to force it to implement substantial reforms.

Given the increasing revenue from the booming natural gas sector of the economy, the considerable plans of wealth redistribution under the MAS administration are commonly emphasized by scholars (Rochlin, 2007). Less frequently explored are the actual patterns of social spending of the government in its first year in office. Thus far, Morales has stuck to a program of tight austerity, despite major revenue gains. Gross domestic product (GDP) grew at 4.6 percent in 2006, with hydrocarbon revenues increasing from 5 percent of GDP in 2004 to 13.3 percent in 2006. Figures available for 2007 through the month of May show hydrocarbon revenue has increased a further 26 percent relative to the same period in 2006. The country closed 2006 with a fiscal surplus of 4.6 percent of GDP¹⁹, "an unnecessarily high level of savings for a country with immense investment needs," according to the conservative Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU, 2007b). In 2006, according to *Unidad de Análisis de Políticas Sociales y Económicas* (UDAPE), there was a year-on-year rise in infrastructure investments, but social investment actually fell by 6 percent (EIU, 2007a). Another report indicates that total government expenditures (combined public sector) increased by a mere 2.6 percent of GDP between 2004 and

19 Weisbrot & Sandoval (2007).

2006, from 33 to 35.6 percent. These low levels of spending are accompanied by soaring hydrocarbons revenues, high prices for other Bolivian commodities on the international market, and a relatively low total foreign debt amounting to 16 percent of GDP after recent debt cancellations by the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank. In this context, Bolivia recorded a current account surplus of 11.9 percent of GDP and amassed \$3.9 billion in international reserves, equivalent to 32 percent of GDP. Official poverty levels, meanwhile, have decreased at an underwhelming rate, from 63.1 percent in 2003 to approximately 59.9 percent in 2006 (Weisbrot & Sandoval, 2007).

Having introduced the theoretical concept of indigenous ascendant populism it makes sense to turn now to a detailed examination of two major incidents of popular mobilization in 2006 and 2007. This focus will help to clarify the limits of demands from below deemed to be acceptable by the current government, as well as highlight the MAS's relationship to autonomous self-organization and mobilization on the part of radical Bolivian social movements. We find that both the case of the conflict in a Huanuni mine in October 2006 and that of the Cochabamba Conflict in late 2006 and early 2007 bolster the argument for characterizing the Morales government as indigenous ascendant populist.

Class Struggle in the Mines

The policy and class dynamics in mining for the first several months of the new government indicated dramatic limits to the depth of reforms the MAS was willing to contemplate. In its electoral platform for the December 2005 elections, the party proposed the rehabilitation of the *Corporación Minera de Bolivia* (Bolivian Mining Corporation, COMIBOL) and the nationalization of the mines (CEDLA, 2006b). However, upon entering office, the MAS began immediately to promote new 'shared risk' contracts between transnational mining corporations and the privileged sectors of the cooperative mining sector. This is set against a backdrop of rising commodity prices driven to a large extent by China's rapid economic growth. Nickel and tin prices increased more than 18 percent in 2006, for example, while Chinese officials estimate 8 percent GDP growth in 2007 on the back of 10.7 percent in 2006, the highest rate registered since 1995 (Nguyen & Rong, 2007).

The case of the largest iron deposit in the world, Mutún, located in the department of Santa Cruz, is an important example of the early position taken by the MAS (*Los Tiempos*, 2007d). For decades Mutún lay dormant. Recently, however, spurred by the explosion of demand for iron in China, transnational corporations made clear their interest in exploiting the giant iron deposit. MAS eventually granted Jindal Steel & Power, an Indian multinational, the prized exploiting license and mining is scheduled to begin on 24 September 2007. The government argues that the deal will result in \$US200 million annually in tax revenue. However, some economists have pointed out that of the 50 million tons of iron which Jindal will likely extract each year, 95 percent will leave the country in

raw form, with only 5 percent being industrialized in Bolivia. Mutún is thought to contain 40 billion tons of ore, valued at approximately \$US30 billion at today's prices (CEDLA, 2006a). A number of critical economists have pointed out that Mutún represents a failed opportunity of historic proportions. The MAS government was in a position to have used this window of opportunity to help reconstruct COMIBOL such that the state company could once again play a protagonistic role in the country's mines. Not only would this have assisted in wresting control from transnational corporate influence in Bolivia, it would have provided more revenue for meeting the needs of the impoverished population.

Since the mass privatizations and lay-offs in the mid-1980s, the Bolivian mining industry has been essentially divided into two sets of workers. The first, organized through the *Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia* (Mine Workers Union Federation, FSTMB), are employed by the state mining company COMIBOL. The FSTMB was the heart of arguably the most militant and revolutionary trade union movement in Latin America for much of the twentieth century (Dunkerley, 1984; Nash, 1993; Sanabria, 1999). The second set consists of self-employed cooperative miners, *cooperativistas*, organized through the *Federación Nacional de Cooperativas de Bolivia* (National Federation of Cooperative Miners of Bolivia (FENCOMIN)). Many of the cooperative miners barely subsist and engage in intense self-exploitation in order to survive, while a privileged sector does much better. Much of cooperative mining functions on the same principles as private enterprises, whereby some coop members are in a position to exploit others. Wealthier cooperative miners contract work out to their 'business associates' (poorer cooperative members) who are made to labour in the most horrendous working conditions. The workers in these relationships are not paid a salary, but instead receive a small portion of whatever they are able to extract from the mines. Increasingly, these workers are women and children. The workers in these settings, unlike COMIBOL workers, have no security, no fixed salaries, no benefits, and are not provided protection from existing labour laws (Guachalla, 2006). In the recent past, the national leadership of FENCOMIN formed alliances with neoliberal political actors, including mining magnate and reviled ex-President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (Bolpress, 2006c).

It is the privileged layer of cooperative miners that was initially represented in the MAS government through the Ministry of Mining and Metallurgy. Walter Villarroel, a former leader of the FENCOMIN and a registered member of the cooperative 'La Salvadora' of Huanuni, was made Minister of Mining and Metallurgy in the first MAS cabinet of January 2006. With the elevation in commodity prices, class struggle has intensified in the mines of the western *altiplano* (high plateau). The privileged cooperative miners have accelerated their attempts to press the government into facilitating shared risk contracts between cooperative miners and transnational mining companies. They also have stepped up efforts to take over mines currently operated by COMIBOL, such as Huanuni, Caracollo,

Barrosquira, Telamayu, and Colquiri. These takeovers and the politics of the cooperative miners have been resisted by the FSTMB which has demanded that COMIBOL be restored to its former, formidable status as an important state enterprise (*La Prensa*, 2006c; *La Razón*, 2006a). Battle lines were drawn early for a bloody confrontation which would play itself out in October, the outcome of which led to apparent shifts in the government's position on mining. The depth of these shifts are still unclear.

At a general assembly of the miners' federation, FSTMB, on July 4, 2006, miners agreed to mount pressure on the MAS government to nationalize the mines without compensation to transnational companies, to rebuild the state mining company, COMIBOL, and, finally, to establish collective workers' control of COMIBOL and the mines (*Econoticias*, 2006d). At the end of September, the miners initiated the concrete battle for these resolutions in a bold fashion. Over 200 miners and 1,000 indigenous peasant allies blocked the highways connecting Oruro to Cochabamba and Potosí, cutting off traffic flow to much of western Bolivia. Immediate demands included the creation of 1,500 new jobs and investment commitments for the reconstruction of COMIBOL into a functional enterprise. These transitional reforms were meant to prefigure full nationalization and workers' control in the future. President Morales himself had at various junctures called for the nationalization of the mining industry, although in practice the government had in fact put its emphasis on safeguarding a secure investment climate for foreign capital. The government responded to the miners and peasants in September by publicly denouncing them as 'provocateurs' and 'Trotskyists.' Minister Villarroel told the press that the protesters were impeding the government's search for foreign investment to reactivate the mining sector. A frustrated Villarroel reminded the miners: "The government guaranteed legal security for foreign companies to invest in mining" (*La Razón*, 2006e).

In early October, the conflict intensified dramatically. The epicentre of events was a tin mine in the mountain of Posokoni in the community of Huanuni, but the wider repercussions of the situation quickly resonated throughout the country. The mine contains the largest deposit of tin in South America, and the tin's purity and accessibility make it a hot commodity. This is particularly so given current trends in the world market. On February 22, 2007, for the first time in over 20 years, one ton of tin surpassed \$US14,000 on the London Metal Exchange (*The Economist*, 2007b). Huanuni is a town of 19,428 mostly indigenous inhabitants, located roughly 45 kilometres outside of the city of Oruro, in the province of Pantaleón Dalence, in the department of Oruro. The Huanuni tin mine is primarily worked by employees of COMIBOL who are organized in the *Sindicato Mixto de Trabajadores de Mineros de Huanuni* (SMTMH), which, in turn, is affiliated with the FSTMB at the national level. Cooperative miners also work sections of the Huanuni mine, but in far fewer numbers.

Dynamite in the Mines and Bloody Urban Clashes: Contradiction, Conflict and the Limits of Reform in Bolivia's Movement towards Socialism

On the afternoon of October 5, 2006, organized cooperative miners led an assault on the Huanuni mine in an effort to take it over. COMIBOL miners fought back and a running battle with exploding dynamite and street fighting spread from the mines into the town centre over two days. Houses were burnt to the ground, tires packed with explosives rolled down the mountainside into the town erupting in huge explosions, and the number of dead and injured escalated. The FSTMB and the *Central Obrera Boliviana* (Bolivian Workers' Central (COB)) called on the government to send in troops to protect the state miners and the community from the violence initiated by the cooperative miners, but to no avail. Seven hundred police were sent in on October 5, but were apparently unable to stop the fighting which persisted through October 6. The military was put in a 'state of alert' but the executive order to intervene was not forthcoming. Morales, in the meantime, conspicuously refrained from making a public statement. Human rights ombudsman, Waldo Albarraçín, and the Minister of the Presidency, Juan Ramón Quintana, were eventually able to broker a truce which ended the violence, but not before at least 17 people were killed and numerous others injured.²⁰

Table I: Clashes in the Mines, Huanuni – October 5-6, 2006

Participants	Demands	Govt Response
FSTMB FENCOMIN Townsppeople Indigenous Peasant Movements	FSTMB: Nationalization; Rebuild COMIBOL; Worker's Control. FENCOMIN: Expansion of cooperative mines in the <i>altiplano</i> ; alliances with transnational mining corporations; reduction of COMIBOL activities in mining industry	Initial support for FENCOMIN; Opposed FSTMB demands; Refusal to militarily protect FSTMB miners and families; in the aftermath, facilitated resignation of Minister of Mining and Metallurgy; promise to nationalize mining sector at undisclosed date in the future

On the surface, the state-employed miners of COMIBOL achieved some gains from their mobilizations and road blockades in September and their defence of the Huanuni mine in October. Villarroel was forced to resign from the Ministry of Mines and Metallurgy. He was replaced by José Guillermo Dalence, an ex-leader of the FSTMB. Additionally, Hugo Miranda Rendón was granted the position of interim President of COMIBOL. Until this appointment, Miranda Rendón had been the workers' representative on the directorship of COMIBOL. Moreover, Morales publicly admitted that, "Until now in the issue of mining we have not complied with the Bolivian people" (*La Razón*, 2006h). Morales then reasserted the intention of the MAS to nationalize the mining industry (Keane, 2006a).

However, the underlying conflicts hardly disappeared. In early February 2007, 20,000 members of the cooperative miners' federation, FENCOMIN, launched a large protest in La Paz against the nationalization of the mines. The MAS government subsequently

20 Bolpress (2006a; 2006b; 2006c; 2006d; 2006e); *Econoticias* (2006a; 2006e); Keane (2006b); *Associated Press* (2006); *La Razón* (2006b; 2006c; 2006d; 2006f).

shifted its plan of “nationalization” to a watered-down proposal to increase taxes on private mining companies (*The Economist*, 2007a). Nonetheless, on February 9, Morales repeated the theatrical tactics he employed during the 2006 May Day presidential decree on natural gas²¹, this time announcing the nationalization of the Empresa Metalúrgica Vinto tin smelter, the fourth-largest in the world, as military troops stood by his side (*The Economist*, 2007b). While the details of this nationalization are not yet clear, it would appear that the measure remains isolated from general mining policy. The Bolivian government claims, for example, that in this specific instance the sale in 2005 of the Vinto smelter to Glencore, a Swiss multinational, was based on fraud. Dalence, the new Minister of Mining and Metallurgy, claims that, “The plant was taken from the Bolivian people fraudulently and we are reclaiming it” (*The Economist*, 2007a). At the same time, Dalence’s message to transnational mining capital more generally is as follows: “All foreign companies that operate within the legal framework have our guarantee that they won’t be touched” (*The Economist*, 2007a). As *The Economist* (2007a) editorializes: “In October he said it was the turn of mining [to be nationalized]. Yet with Mr. Morales, whose rallying cry is ‘Bolivian resources for the Bolivian people’, sometimes the symbolism and the rhetoric is more ambitious than the reality” (*The Economist*, 2007a).

In summary, the conduct of the MAS administration in general mining policy and specifically in the case of the Huanuni crisis confirms the thesis of indigenous ascendant populism. The independent revolutionary socialist demands and strategies of the FSTMB miners were denounced as provocative and ‘Trotskyist’ by MAS officials. The MAS has sought to avoid open class conflict in the mines and characterizes the relationship between workers and transnational mining corporations in non-zero-sum terms. The interests of the two distinct groups are not seen as conflicting. FENCOMIN has been favoured as a counterweight against the radical demands of the FSTMB because the latter’s politics will necessarily clash with the interests of transnationals. Morales, at various junctures, has employed a radical rhetoric of ‘nationalization’ but its meaning in the mining industry has been highly ambiguous thus far, accompanied as it is by assurances to transnational companies that they will not be touched if they play by the rules.

Cochabamba de pie, nunca de rodillas! Cochabamba on its Feet, Never on its Knees!

A second challenge to the MAS administration from the left occurred during what I refer to here as the Cochabamba Conflict, beginning in late December 2006 and coming to a gradual close by the end of January 2007 (see Table I). The conflict illustrates the extent to which the MAS is willing to facilitate mobilization of generally loyal social sectors within strict parameters to achieve or sustain a favourable balance of forces at particular conjunctures vis-à-vis the autonomist right. On the other hand, it also exemplifies the ways in which popular movements are sometimes capable of transcending these set parameters and forging an autonomous path to the left of the government, even if only

21 Webber (2006a).

temporarily. Further, the Cochabamba Conflict highlights the manner in which the MAS will opportunistically withdraw its most loyal bases – the *cocaleros*, for example – from mobilizing tactics that threaten to transcend moderate, legalistic reformism. It also seems clear from the events in Cochabamba that, thus far, the social bases closest to the MAS will still, by and large, comply with the line of the party issued from La Paz at the end of the day. The Cochabamba Conflict suggests that while there is a limited presence of political currents to the left of the MAS in some of the major social movements, their influence has been ephemeral so far. Finally, in the case of the Cochabamba Conflict the far left's call for the formation of a parallel revolutionary departmental government was ultimately reckless adventurism because the social forces necessary to realize such a government were no longer mobilized.

Table II: Chronology of the Cochabamba Conflict

December 15, 2006 – Cochabamba Prefect, Manfred Reyes Villa, proposes a new referendum on departmental autonomy for Cochabamba despite the fact that 63 percent of the department's electorate voted "No" in the last nation-wide departmental autonomies referendum held only months earlier, on July 2, 2006.

December 20 – A popular assembly of *cocaleros*, factory workers, teachers, university students, and others, is held in the Plaza 14 de Septiembre, the central plaza in downtown Cochabamba. The assembly rejects the Prefect's call for a new referendum. A tear gas grenade is tossed into the crowd, and the social movements accuse functionaries of the Prefect of culpability in the incident. Indigenous peasants, *cocaleros*, and urban popular sectors in Cochabamba initiate a vigil outside of the offices of Reyes Villa demanding his resignation.

December 21 – The *Central Obrera Departamental* (Departmental Workers Central, COD) hosts another popular assembly of social movements and trade unionists in which it is decided that protests against Reyes Villa be postponed until after Christmas and the New Year to ensure greater participation.

January 4, 2007 – Rural and urban popular movements mobilize in Cochabamba city and re-open vigil outside of the offices of the Prefect, and occupy Plaza 14 de Septiembre.

January 8 – Social movements reinforce their occupation of the Plaza 14 de Septiembre and set fire to the entrance of the Prefect's office building. Reyes Villa escapes in a bullet proof car and flees to La Paz. Protesters demanding Reyes Villa's resignation are tear gassed by police.

January 9 – Negotiations to pacify the region are convened, first by Vice Minister Fabián Yacsik, and then by Minister of the Presidency, Juan Ramón Quintana. Negotiations are a failure.

January 10 – A ‘civic march’ is organized by supporters of Reyes Villa, demanding that ‘campesinos’ (peasants), respect the city. The civic march declares the attempted burning of the offices of the prefect a ‘humiliation.’ The Civic Committee of Cochabamba, which is aligned with Reyes Villa, announces an indefinite civic strike. The presence of a proto-fascist youth group is reported for the first time in Cochabamba. The group calls itself, *Juventud por la Democracia* (Youth for Democracy, JD), and is modelled on the *Unión Juvenil Cruceñista* (Cruceño Youth Union, UJC) of Santa Cruz.

January 11 – The most violent confrontations of the Cochabamba conflict take place. Right-wing ‘civic groups’ and the JD clash with rural and urban popular movements in the Plaza de Las Banderas, Plaza 14 de Septiembre, and Plaza Colón. Two people are killed – one on each side – and more than 200 are injured, the majority of whom are of the popular movements according to press reports released by journalists upon visiting the hospitals. Many of the injured are gravely injured by bullets, beatings, and other outcomes of the fierce street fighting.

January 12 – Social movements insist on the resignation of the Prefect in a massive concentration of tens of thousands in the Plaza 14 de Septiembre. Reyes Villa retreats from his call for a new referendum for departmental autonomy in Cochabamba. Leaders of the *cocaleros* and other indigenous peasant sectors announce the lifting of road blockades of the interdepartmental highways in response to Reyes Villa’s partial concession and pleas from the MAS government to end the blockades and guarantee free transit of people, goods, and vehicles. In reality, some of the rank-and-file of the peasant unions refuse to lift the blockades and mainstream media reports indicate the persistence of intermittent and/or permanent blockades in various parts of the department contributing to ongoing traffic congestion or paralysis.

January 13 – Ramón Quintana meets with social movements closely aligned with the MAS, seeking to define a basis upon which dialogue with Reyes Villa might be initiated. Reyes Villa accepts dialogue with the government in theory, but demands that negotiations take place in Santa Cruz, where he now is located after having travelled from La Paz. The rank-and-file of the *cocaleros* and other indigenous peasant movements return to the streets demanding the resignation of Reyes Villa. The MAS refuses to negotiate with Reyes Villa in Santa Cruz and accuses the Prefect of Cochabamba of renegeing on his duties as Prefect by abandoning the department in a moment of crisis.

January 16 – Reyes Villa refuses to resign in a televised message from Santa Cruz addressing the entire country. Reyes Villa assigns Johnny Ferrel, secretary general of the Prefecture, the duties of the Prefect for the duration of Reyes Villa's exile in Santa Cruz. A Popular Assembly of tens of thousands of *cocaleros*, indigenous peasants, peasant irrigators, the COD, university students, informal proletarians, formal workers, neighbourhood organizations of the poorer zones of Cochabamba, teachers, and many others, hold a popular assembly in the Plaza 14 de Septiembre. A 'legal exit' to the crisis through a proposed law that might make possible the forced resignation of Reyes Villa through a referendum is suggested to the assembly by leaders, affiliated with the MAS, of the peasant irrigators, the COD, and the *cocaleros*, among others. This is not coincidentally the position of the MAS government from La Paz. A large part of the rank-and-file reject this position of the leadership, denounce the social movement and trade union leadership in loud voices, and demand the resignation of Reyes Villa immediately. While there are divisions in the rank-and-file, currents of the radical Left are able to hold significant sway in this moment. A Revolutionary Prefecture Government is declared, consisting of 15 members of an executive committee who represent various social movement and trade union sectors. Tiburcio Herradas Lamas is elected president of the executive. A successful occupation and take over of the offices of the COD is staged by the new parallel government. The MAS immediately denounces the popular departmental government as illegal and undemocratic and asserts that Reyes Villa remains the principal, legitimate political authority of Cochabamba who cannot be removed through street demonstrations or popular assemblies.

January 17-20 – The Revolutionary Prefecture Government is unable to translate its declarations into actions and the exercise of power. The MAS successfully draws away from the parallel government the rank-and-file of the *cocaleros*, indigenous peasants, and parts of the COD. Meanwhile, attempts at mass mobilizations and a civic strike by radical social movements in El Alto and the *altiplano* do not receive mass support in the last instance. The latter movements were demanding the resignation of the right-wing Prefect of La Paz, José Paredes, in an act of solidarity with the Cochabamba popular movements against the destabilizing tactics of right-wing autonomist forces throughout the country.

January 22 – Highly-attended festivities take over the streets of La Paz as the MAS government sponsors celebrations of its first year in office. The Cochabamba conflict all but disappears from the national political scene and has yet to reignite, despite the fact that the underlying causes have not been resolved.

This table was compiled through a qualitative analysis of the following media sources between December 15, 2006 and January 22, 2007: *Los Tiempos, La Prensa, La Razón, Bolpress, El Deber* and *Econoticias*

Cochabamba entered the international media spotlight briefly during the Cochabamba Water War of 2000, when a popular rural and urban movement rose up against a World Bank-driven privatization of the city's water.²² This rebellion became a powerful referent in the global justice movement internationally. On the domestic scene it sparked the insurrectionary left-indigenous cycle of revolt which lasted for the next five years. The narrative of the Cochabamba Conflict under investigation here begins on December 15, 2006 when right-wing Cochabamba Prefect, Manfred Reyes Villa, proposed a new referendum on autonomy for the department. This proposal was issued during an open-air town hall meeting²³, even though roughly six months earlier, on July 2, 2006, 63 percent of the department's electorate rejected autonomy in a nation-wide referendum. Hence, while Reyes Villa was elected with 47.6 percent of the vote in the prefecture elections of December 2005 (the MAS came second with 43.1), by no stretch of the imagination did he enjoy a mandate for establishing departmental autonomy. His actions on December 15, therefore, were perceived by the Bolivian left generally, and in particular by the popular movements in Cochabamba, as a bold unilateral shift of Cochabamba's official departmental politics toward an alliance with the autonomist right of the *media luna*.

It would require wilful blindness to miss the connections between Reyes Villa and the autonomist movement of the *media luna*. Most obviously, it was Reyes Villa's announcement on 15 December that he was planning on holding a new referendum on autonomy which provoked the Cochabamba Conflict in the first place. When he fled Cochabamba in a bullet proof car at the outset of the worst clashes he headed toward La Paz where he met with the prefects of the *media luna*. From there he subsequently took refuge in Santa Cruz for the duration of the Cochabamba crisis. From Santa Cruz, the leading umbrella organization of the autonomist movement, the *Comité Pro Santa Cruz* (Pro Santa Cruz Committee (CPSC)), organized repeated demonstrations in the eastern part of the country in defence of Reyes Villa and against the alleged authoritarianism of the MAS government and the popular uprisings opposed to Reyes Villa in the streets of Cochabamba city. Finally, personnel from the offices of the Cochabamba Prefecture have been accused by many popular movement actors of having been part of the formation of the *Juventud por la Democracia* (Youth for Democracy (JD)), a violent, proto-fascist youth group in Cochabamba modeled on the *Unión Juvenil Cruceñista* (Cruceño Youth Union, UJC) of Santa Cruz (Arcadio, 2007; *La Prensa*, 2007b; 2007d; *La Razón*, 2007e; *Los Tiempos*, 2007a; 2007e).

It was in the interests of the MAS government, therefore, to prevent an extension of the *media luna*'s influence into Cochabamba through the person of Reyes Villa, without at the same time undermining their negotiations with the bourgeois autonomist forces over the Constituent Assembly's content and procedural rules. This was a delicate balance to manufacture, indeed. The MAS government, through its bases in the *regantes* (peasant

22 Albro (2005); Assies (2003); Olivera & Lewis (2004); Spronk & Webber (2007).

23 *Los Tiempos* (2007m).

irrigators) and *cocaleros* of Cochabamba, as well as through the *masista* leadership of Cochabamba's *Central Obrera Departamental* (Departmental Workers Central (COD)), appears to have attempted to mobilize demonstrations and road blockades with the aim of simply constraining the capacity of the Prefect of Cochabamba and the Cochabamba Civic Committee to align themselves more fully with the autonomist movement of the *media luna* (*Econoticias*, 2006a). It was on this basis that *cocaleros*, indigenous peasant sectors, the COD, and popular urban movements began their vigil in front of the offices of the Prefecture on January 4, 2007. However, the demands emanating from the grassroots of the rural and urban social movements that gathered in Cochabamba radicalized substantially as protesters were first repressed by police on January 8 and then were led into vicious battles by violent counter-demonstrators in the street fights of January 11, leaving two dead and over 200 injured, many seriously. This context of concentrated struggle, confrontation, repression, and violence – in addition to influence exercised in the demonstrations and assemblies by organized, Trotskyist university students – led the mobilized popular forces on the ground to escape temporarily the limits of the MAS party line and forcefully call for the immediate resignation of Reyes Villa (*Bolpress*, 2007b; 2007c; *Econoticias*, 2007a; 2007c; Lora Ortuño, 2007).

The first escalation of social movement tactics and demands can be traced to January 8. Social movements reinforced the numbers of protesters who were already occupying the central plaza of the city, the Plaza 14 de Septiembre, and continued the vigil in front of the offices of the Prefect. As the day progressed, however, crowds attempted to gain access to the building of the prefecture. While prevented from taking over the prefecture by volleys of tear gas canisters fired by the police, protesters were able to set fire to the door of the building and two cars in the streets. One witness reported:

Dumpsters were knocked over, piles of garbage were on fire, two cars were burning, and the door to the government office was completely burned and in flames. Not a single police officer was on the plaza any longer because they all had taken cover inside the government headquarters. Every few minutes a window would open and tear gas canisters would be fired into the plaza. If we were lucky a valiant person would rush to the canister, pick it up, and throw it back at the police.... At the end of the day the conflict had resulted in 33 injured, destroyed vehicles, and an entire part of the center plaza burned down (Tarlau, 2007).

It was during these events that Reyes Villa escaped in a bullet-proof vehicle headed toward La Paz (*Los Tiempos*, 2007m). The following day, the central government sent Vice Minister, Fabián Yacsik, and Minister of the Presidency, Juan Ramón Quintana, to Cochabamba to initiate negotiations with the social movements and representatives of the Prefect and his allies in the Cochabamba Civic Committee. None of the stakeholders

were willing to entertain negotiations, however, their positions having been substantially hardened after the incidents on January 8. Two days later, on January 10, a 'civic march' was staged by right-wing middle and upper class supporters of Reyes Villa. During the march, racist and patronizing epithets were shouted about the largely indigenous rural and urban popular movements present in the city. The Civic Committee declared an indefinite civic strike (*Los Tiempos*, 2007m). By this time, the official position of the MAS government with regard to the social movements was for them to respect the legitimacy of Reyes Villa. Government officials said he could not be overthrown through popular assemblies and street demonstrations because he was democratically elected, despite the obvious unpopularity of his position on departmental autonomy.

Elsewhere in the country the events in Cochabamba were beginning to have an impact. In La Paz, the Prefects of the *media luna* departments met with Reyes Villa, while in Santa Cruz a gathering of the right-wing civic committees of these departments was scheduled for the following day during which tactics were to be defined as to how best to defend three goals: support for Reyes Villa, the 'defence of democracy,' and the push for the two-thirds procedural rule in the Constituent Assembly which would favour the *media luna's* political allies (*La Razón*, 2007b). The rising tensions between January 8 and 10 in Cochabamba and elsewhere set the stage for the most concentrated day of violence in the Cochabamba Conflict, January 11.

Violent street battles erupted in the late afternoon. On the one side, primarily middle- and upper-class supporters of the Cochabamba Civic Committee and Reyes Villa – organized in "civic groups," the JD, and neighbourhood associations from the wealthy *zona norte* (Northern Zone) of the city – were pitted against the other side – *cocaleros*, trade unionists, indigenous peasants, factory workers, municipal workers, popular neighbourhood associations, teachers, construction workers, and the urban poor. Supporters of Reyes Villa were armed with wooden clubs (some with knives attached to their ends), baseball bats, metal pipes, golf clubs, tennis rackets, and some fire arms. The popular movements were armed with many similar makeshift weapons, with the addition of dynamite sticks and the absence of fire arms (*La Razón*, 2007g; Shultz, 2007). Detonations of dynamite and gun shots echoed throughout the city streets. Most of the fighting was restricted to battles with wooden clubs and hand-to-hand combat; however, the mobilized right-wing also fired into the crowds. Barricades were erected in the *zona norte* to prevent incursions by the popular movements, while the latter erected their own barricades in the city centre, paralyzing most of the city. Police were instructed by the central government not to repress anyone, and therefore restricted their interventions to minimal tear-gassing of spaces separating the two sides in the conflict in attempts to keep them apart from one another. Military troops did not arrive in the city until the early hours of January 12 (*Los Tiempos*, 2007c; 2007f; 2007i; 2007l).

Forty-two-year-old *cocalero*, Nicómedes Gutiérrez, was fatally shot in the chest, while 20-year-old Cristian Urrestia was attacked and killed by social movement sectors when he was separated from the rest of his allies in the pro-Reyes Villa bloc. In addition to the two fatalities, over 200 injuries were reported, many of them serious, including gun shot wounds to the chest and life-threatening head injuries (*La Prensa*, 2007a; *Los Tiempos*, 2007g; 2007p; 2007r). Solidarity demonstrations by popular sectors in rebellious city of El Alto were organized by FEJUVE-El Alto (the United Neighbourhood Associations of El Alto) and *Central Obrera Regional - El Alto* (Regional Workers' Central of El Alto, COR-El Alto) in which hundreds of demonstrators tried to block access to the main airport in the western part of the country, located in that city. In Santa Cruz, meanwhile, the right-wing civic committee declared a 24 hour strike in defence of the rule of law and Reyes Villa, and resolved to convoke a *cruceño* assembly on January 12 (*La Razón*, 2007a).

During this time, Morales was in Nicaragua attending the inauguration of newly-elected President Daniel Ortega, and did not return to Bolivia until the early morning of January 12 (*La Razón*, 2007c). García Linera was therefore acting-president of the country in Morales' absence and he expressed the government's official distance from the radicalizing social movements on the ground in Cochabamba: "The government reaffirms the search for solutions to the tensions and political conflicts through dialogue and respect for the constitution" (*Los Tiempos*, 2007h). Both García Linera and Ramón Quintana stressed the fact that they respected the constitution and recognized the legitimacy of Reyes Villa as prefect of Cochabamba. At the same time, García Linera blamed Reyes Villa's intransigence for the violence. Reyes Villa, for his part, fixed the onus on the MAS government which he accused of manufacturing the entire crisis through the mobilization of its social bases in Cochabamba. Reyes Villa reiterated that he would not resign (*La Prensa*, 2007c; *La Razón*, 2007f; *Los Tiempos*, 2007e). On the ground in Cochabamba, numerous sources reported the discord between the radicalizing position of the social movements and the calming words of reconciliation, compromise, and negotiation on offer from the MAS government. For example, Julio Salazar, leader of the *Federación de Trabajadores del Trópico de Cochabamba*, a central peasant union federation of the *cocalero* movement, told the press that because of the violence on January 11, the peasants no longer considered Reyes Villa the Prefect of Cochabamba, demanded a new prefect to take his place, and announced that they would not cease pressure tactics, including mass mobilization and road blockades, until the prefect resigned (*Los Tiempos*, 2007g).

The following day, on January 12, violence was circumvented by the presence of over 1,500 military troops in the city which had arrived overnight. A tense calm saturated the city, with only sporadic confrontations between anti-riot police and university students (*La Razón*, 2007j). Popular social movements continued to occupy the city centre and persisted in demanding the resignation of Reyes Villa. Meanwhile, Morales had returned

from Nicaragua and addressed the country with two televised speeches. In the morning he asked the social movements in Cochabamba to avoid vengeance and cease all violence. In the second presentation in the evening he suggested that the MAS government was drafting a proposed law for consideration in Congress which would allow for the revoking of political authorities from their positions - including Prefects - by popular referendum, rather than through mobilization in the streets. The executive also offered to mediate dialogue between social movements in Cochabamba and Reyes Villa, but Reyes Villa insisted that any negotiations had to take place in Santa Cruz, where he had now based himself after travelling from La Paz. At the same time, Reyes Villa retreated from his earlier position regarding the new referendum on departmental autonomy that he had called for on December 15 (Arcadio, 2007; *La Razón*, 2007d; 2007e).

Again, the sentiments of the rank-and-file of the social movements still occupying the city did not closely parallel the position of the MAS government. Reyes Villa's ostensible concession was too little, too late in their eyes. A popular assembly organized by the COD in the Plaza 14 de Septiembre, for example, closed the day by passing three resolutions: that Reyes Villa must resign immediately; that measures of mobilization and pressure tactics be intensified to accelerate his forced resignation; and that in order to best compel the resignation social movements ought to take over and occupy the properties owned by the prefect in Cochabamba (*La Razón*, 2007j). At the same time, the government registered some success in having various *cocalero* and other peasant sectors in the department lift road blockades in rural areas, even if some blockades continued to impede the flow of interdepartmental traffic (*La Razón*, 2007h; Stefanoni, 2007; *Los Tiempos*, 2007q).

Between January 13 and 15, a general stalemate persisted, with Reyes Villa continuing to refuse to return to Cochabamba, the social movements maintaining their contention that he must resign, and the MAS attempting to mediate between the two sides through negotiation and dialogue (*Los Tiempos*, 2007j; 2007k; 2007o). On January 16, an unsuccessful attempt was made by Trotskyist currents, mostly rooted in the public university of Cochabamba, to build on the discontent of the rank-and-file and push the contradictions of the Cochabamba Conflict toward a revolutionary, parallel departmental government. At a popular assembly convened by the COD that day, between 10,000 and 30,000 (*La Jornada*, 2007; Sánchez, 2007) people - *cocaleros*, *regantes*, rural and urban teachers, poor neighbourhood activists, highschool and university students, transport workers, unorganized sectors of the urban poor, and others - gathered in the Plaza 14 de Septiembre. The majority of the speakers vehemently spoke against the legal exit to the crisis proposed by the MAS government. Rather, they called for such things as the strengthening of the struggle against Reyes Villa, his immediate replacement by a new prefect, and revolutionary struggle against the Bolivian oligarchy. The crowd chanted 'Possession! Possession!' which was a call for the take over of the Prefecture by the popular assembly.

There were but a few speakers at the assembly who adopted the MAS line being issued from La Paz. Omar Velasco, secretary general of the COD, representing this line, said he realized emotions were heated but that the social movements nonetheless had to stay within the boundaries of legality. Omar Fernández, leader of the *regantes* and a MAS senator, also called for a legal exit, while Víctor Mitma of the COD echoed Morales in calling for calm and an end to violence. Fernández argued: “The assembly is sovereign and its resolutions must be obeyed, but within legal parameters” (*Los Tiempos*, 2007b).²⁴ Likewise, Severo Huanca, secretary of the *Seis Federaciones del Trópico Cochabambino*, the peak organization of the *cocaleros*, supported a legal exit and respect for constitutional rules (Bolpress, 2007a). These speakers were pilloried with insults from university students, transport workers, and other sectors of the crowd. The moderate leadership of the *cocaleros* and the COD were attempting to pass resolutions in the assembly completely at odds with the sentiments of the crowd (*Red Erbol*, 2007b). The moderates ended their speeches with a call for a legal path to Reyes Villa’s resignation as well as a trial of responsibilities for the Cochabamba Prefect regarding his role in precipitating the violent deaths of January 11. One reporter with the conservative Santa Cruz newspaper *El Deber* noted: “The discontent [with the position of the moderate leadership] was almost unanimous [*casi general*]” (Sánchez, 2007).

Pressure from below at the popular assembly grew to a level where the departmental councillors of Cochabamba who were present in the Plaza felt compelled to convene an emergency meeting in the offices of the COD. The social movements in the Plaza demanded that the departmental councillors censure Reyes Villa and name a new prefect. Over dissenting voices of moderate social movement and trade union leaders affiliated with the MAS, the councillors present did in fact resolve to censure Reyes Villa and to ask the social movements in the Plaza to elect a new Prefect. However, by this stage divisions in the rank-and-file had become more visible, as the leadership of the social movements and unions closely aligned with the MAS pressured the bases to disband from the assembly. Meanwhile, Marco Ríos, leader of the most vocal sector of the radical Left, the *Federación Universitaria Local* (Local University Federation (FUL)), spoke in favour of the creation of armed antifascist groups to defend transformative change against the reactionary political tactics of the *media luna* autonomist forces. At this point, according to various accounts, the *cocaleros*, the COD, the *regantes*, and the *Federación Bartolina Sisa* retreated with their memberships, leaving in the Plaza only a minority of the 10,000 to 30,000 initially gathered, with the FUL playing a predominant leadership role in the remaining group (*La Razón*, 2007i; Sánchez, 2007). The reduced group declared the formation of a parallel Revolutionary Departmental Government and elected 15 representatives - primarily

24 Fernández’s position at this time is especially noteworthy because earlier in the conflict he made more radical statements in favour of continued mobilization against Reyes Villa. These distanced himself from the leadership of the MAS at the national level. As the conflict wore on, however, it appears party discipline effectively reigned him in to the official line. Thanks to Susan Spronk for reminding me of the trajectory of the senator’s position in this regard.

university students, transport workers, and representatives of neighbourhood associations - to the parallel government's *comité popular*, or popular committee. Tiburcio Herradas Lamas became the president of the new 'revolutionary' formation (*Los Tiempos*, 2007n).²⁵ After unsuccessfully attempting to enter the offices of the Prefecture which was protected by police forces, the new 'parallel government' convened a press conference at the COD offices and invited the media to another press conference scheduled for the following morning. Meanwhile, Reyes Villa had taken advantage of the confusion and returned to Cochabamba under the protection of the police (Sánchez, 2007).

The inability of the parallel government to carry through with their declarations became obvious almost immediately. The MAS government produced a barrage of public statements, press conferences, and televised addresses denouncing the formation of a parallel government as illegal. Herradas Lamas was a former comrade of García Linera's in the short-lived guerrilla organization, the *Ejército Guerrillero Tupaj Katari* (Tupaj Katari Guerrilla Army (EGTK)) of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Both men, along with other comrades of theirs, were incarcerated for five years for their activities in the EGTK although neither was formally charged, nor did they receive a trial, and reiterated forcefully their defence of Reyes Villa as the legitimate Prefect of Cochabamba. Morales pledged his support for the legality of Reyes Villa's control over Cochabamba. Alex Contreras, the official spokesperson for the Presidential Palace, said that, for the Executive, Reyes Villa continued to be the first political authority of Cochabamba and that the government would not recognize any popular departmental government comprised of radical groups of the extreme Left: "We do not recognize the popular departmental government. We respect legality and the Political Constitution of the state" (*Red Erbol*, 2007a). Alfredo Rada, Vice Minister of Coordination with Social Movements, echoed Contreras: "We consider these radicalized groups of the ultra-Left" (*La Razón*, 2007i). García Linera said that while protests are legitimate, the measures adopted by social movements in relation to the revolutionary parallel government are illegal, and that it is imperative to respect democratic norms and rules (Sánchez, 2007).

On the afternoon of January 17, Morales met with leaders of the indigenous peasant unions of Cochabamba, the *cocaleros'* federations, and the COD and was able to persuade them to opt for the, still ambiguous, legal strategy of seeking Reyes Villa's resignation by way of an uncertain proposed law for revoking the mandates of political authorities. In the absence of support from these key sectors, in conjunction with the inertia, immaturity, and limited political organizational capacity of the radical left, the Revolutionary Departmental Government had completely dissolved by January 18 2007, only two days after its bold declarations. It proved entirely incapable of exercising power, even while Reyes Villa remained spectacularly unpopular in the department. Herrada Lamas declared

²⁵ Herradas Lamas was a former comrade of García Linera's in the short-lived guerrilla organization, the *Ejército Guerrillero Tupaj Katari* (Tupaj Katari Guerrilla Army, EGTK) of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Both men, along with other comrades of theirs, were incarcerated for five years for their activities in the EGTK although neither was formally charged, nor did they receive a trial.

that the parallel government had been betrayed. He questioned the rural and urban union leadership's loyalty to the MAS, and asked why the radical resolutions of multiple popular assemblies were abandoned (*Econoticias*, 2007b). By January 22, the Cochabamba Conflict had faded from the national political scene as massive festivities celebrating the first year of the MAS administration were kicked off in La Paz. So long as the underlying contradictions that spurred the conflict remain, however, it is only a matter of time before they rise to the surface once again.

In summary, the Cochabamba Conflict, like the conflict in Huanuni, provides further substantiation for the thesis of indigenous ascendant populism. Most importantly, the MAS sought to mobilize its social bases so as to circumvent advances by the far-right in Cochabamba while retaining explicit control over the protests. The demands of the mobilization were to be strictly defined by the MAS itself rather than the grassroots assemblies on the scene. When they transcended the acceptable limits the social movement participants were quickly denounced by the government.

Conclusion

This essay has developed the concept of *indigenous ascendant populism* to better conceptualize the character of the Evo Morales administration in Bolivia. It examined the roles of popular sector ascendant and popular sector defensive populism in Latin America and situated the Bolivian experience within this broader context. The MAS has reformulated components of the MNR's populist strategy from the 1950s, although it has added to it the language of indigenous liberation. The class exploitation and material conditions of the indigenous majority is not effectively addressed in this schema of indigenous liberation, however, because the MAS's political strategy has not included a confrontation with many of the basic economic foundations of neoliberalism. Indigenous ascendant populism, in this sense, dilutes the ideology of indigenous liberation developed by radical indigenous movements since the 1970s, and the left-indigenous demands of the insurrectionary mobilizations between 2000 and 2005. The possibility of a transition to socialism in the near- to- medium term is explicitly denied in vice-president García Linera's concept of Andean-Amazonian capitalism as well as in the most important development plan published by the government thus far. Popular-class indigenous interests are subordinated to the interests of capital in the party's asymmetrical coalition because of the government's commitment to the foundational macroeconomic pillars of neoliberalism - fiscal austerity, low-inflationary growth, flexible labour markets, and central bank independence.

This article has illustrated that during the first year of the MAS administration the government has mobilized its social bases at various junctures but within strict parameters defined by the government itself. This was apparent both in the case of the Cochabamba Conflict when the demands of social movements eventually transcended the goals of the

MAS, and in the MAS's response to the FSTMB's protests leading up to and during the October 2006 crisis in the Huanuni mine. Evo Morales is not a charismatic leader in the sense of classical populism, but as the first indigenous president of the republic he is seen to be a direct representative of the historically excluded and oppressed indigenous majority. Ideologically the MAS often employs radical rhetoric, particularly with regard to 'nationalization' in various sectors of the economy. In reality, however, 'nationalization' has a remarkably restricted scope and assurances are constantly made to important sectors of foreign and domestic capital alike that their fundamental interests will not be jeopardized. Furthermore, despite large increases in state revenue from soaring natural gas prices it was demonstrated that social spending has been notably austere. All of this suggests that we need to pay diligent attention to the practice of the MAS rather than parroting its rhetoric. The negligence of some analysts in this regard has led them to exaggerate the radical nature of the current administration.

This essay has attempted to draw out some of the complexities of the Bolivian process and the character of the MAS government. The mining confrontations of October 2006 and the urban street battles in January 2007 are but two windows into a whole series of dynamic and unpredictable class struggles being played out in the wider political setting. The traditions and initiative of the popular classes and oppressed indigenous nations, displayed so powerfully in the early years of this century, will need once again to express their social power independently of the MAS if their aims and objectives are not to be defeated or tamed beyond all recognition under the current government. With this kind of renewal of self-activity a deepening of social reforms can be forced along, and even the foundations for social transformation constructed. At the same time, the strategic, autonomous mobilization of the popular sectors is also the best barrier to the advance of the counterrevolutionary autonomist movement in the *media luna* departments.

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