

Latin America: Indigenous Peoples Rising in Bolivia and Ecuador

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Indigenous peoples in Indo-Afro-Latin America, especially Bolivia and Ecuador, are rising up to take control of their own lives and act in solidarity with others to save the planet. They are calling for new, yet ancient, practices of plurinational, participatory, and intercultural democracy.

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Introduction

They champion ecologically sustainable development; community-based autonomies; and solidarity with other peoples locally, regionally, and internationally – what they describe as “unity in diversity.” Their values are often different than those of the United States or Europe. One indigenous leader has stated: “We give what money we have not to banks to collect interest but to others – and their gratitude is the interest we receive.”

Fifty-five million indigenous persons, or 400 indigenous peoples, inhabit Indo-Afro-Latin America. Most reside in Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. They reject the Europe-imposed term “Indians.” They call themselves “the native peoples” (“los pueblos originarios” in Spanish). They constitute 67 percent of Bolivia’s population. In Ecuador they are 40 percent, mainly in the cold highland Sierra and sweltering Amazonian tropics. They often ally with Afro-Ecuadorians along the Pacific coast, who account for 10 percent of the populace.

Spokespersons for the native peoples realize that the differences between their cosmic visions and those of Europe and the United States are part of an ongoing set of class and ideological conflicts that must be resolved if world peace and ecological balance are to be achieved. They recognize too that they must overcome divisions in their own ranks and that their struggles necessitate solidarity with other oppressed peoples around the globe. They link up internationally, as in the case of the worldwide 87-nation “Via Campesina” so important in the World Social Forums of this century. Sensitive to the world ecological crisis, the native peoples’ movements conducted the 2008 First Interregional Summit of the Amazon, the region known as “the lungs of the planet.”

In Bolivia and Ecuador, the native peoples and their supporters are re-founding the State,

“democratizing democracy,” and introducing juridical pluralism. They are playing a prominent role in popular campaigns against neo-liberal capitalist globalization and US-European interventionism. Recognized and honored in UN and ILO declarations on indigenous rights, they emphasize human and planetary rights, including the rights of Nature (“Pachamama,” or “Mother Nature,” literally “Mother Universe”). [1]

The CIA has often characterized the social movements of the native peoples as a major challenge to US hegemony. Territories they occupy contain 80 percent of Latin America’s biodiversity, several important watersheds, and such valuable resources as petroleum.

Bolivia and Ecuador, historically wracked by poverty, military coups, and massacres of native peoples, peasants, students, and workers, exemplify many challenges. Both countries remain two of the poorest in the world and have experienced recent cholera epidemics. The average income of a Bolivian peasant is \$50 a year. That is one reason why peasants, whenever possible, base their lives on the indigenous legacy of terraced irrigation works and the “ayllu,” or commune. Many try to emigrate. One of every four Bolivians works outside the nation. Their remittances account for 10 percent of Bolivia’s GDP (Gross Domestic Product).

Brazilian economic interests account for 20 percent of Bolivia’s GDP. Bolivia’s profitable energy and mining sectors sell gas to fuel 70 percent of the industry of São Paulo, Brazil, South America’s largest city. Control of Bolivia’s principal agricultural export, soybeans, is 35 percent Brazilian. Some of Brazil’s farmers, together with a hundred Bolivian families, control five-sixths of Bolivia’s farmlands.

Ecuador remains the largest banana producer in the world but now gets more money from oil, forestry products, and the remittances of its emigrants (more than 3 million persons, out of a population of 14 million). Ecuador is a significant source of petroleum. It has abundant cedar, ceibo, and mahogany, and several 250-year-old trees. It is the world’s largest producer of Balsa wood. In 2003, forestry interests from Colombia provoked genocide against the already reduced, small, nomadic Tagaeri and Taromenari native peoples.

Bolivia’s President Evo Morales, an Aymara elected in 2005 with a majority of votes in the initial round, an unprecedented event for Bolivia’s multi-party system, has often pointed out that “The fight of our people is an historic struggle against empire.” Native peoples throughout the Americas tend to see empire as an uninterrupted process of 516 years of genocidal subjection in the face of their proud resistance. They understand well the continuity of colonialism/imperialism: the routine use of kidnappings, disappearances, torture, and male violence against women; ecological destruction; and the creation and perpetuation of an un-payable external debt for economic blackmail.

Bolivian filmmaker Jorge Sanjinés once called Bolivia’s indigenous peasants and miners “the clandestine nation.” Now they and other peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean are changing history. Ecuador’s President Rafael Correa, a US-trained economist elected in a runoff in 2006, has declared: “We are living not in an epoch of changes, but in a change of epochs.”

Recently, Bolivia and Ecuador, like Venezuela, have experienced democratic elections, even popular referenda and, in the cases of Bolivia and Venezuela, recall votes. Their presidents have won these elections by impressive majorities. On behalf of the oppressed they have been implementing policies against neo-liberal capitalism’s practices of “free trade,” deregulation, and privatization. In various ways, they have advocated “a new socialism for the 21st century.” Evo Morales evokes an Aymara-type “communitarian socialism based on reciprocity and solidarity.”

In an address at the United Nations in September 2008, Evo, as he is popularly known, proposed

“Ten Commandments” to save the planet, life and humanity [2] :

1. Put an end to the capitalist system
2. Renounce wars (Evo says “I don’t believe there can be peace under capitalism”)
3. Create a world without imperialism or colonialism
4. Honor the right to water
5. Develop clean energies
6. Respect Nature (Pachamama)
7. Recognize basic services as human rights
8. Combat inequalities
9. Promote diversity of cultures and economies
10. Seek “Vivir bien” — living well (what is known in Ecuador as “sumak kawsay,” living fully), instead of living better at the expense of others

Evo pointed out that Bolivia’s recently drafted constitution “is to support a new pact with all humanity and Pachamama, from the heart of the Andes, from the South, for all the world.”

Revolutionary Processes Rooted in Indigenous and Social Movements

Revolutionary processes in Bolivia and Ecuador are rooted in the social movements of native peoples and others. In Bolivia, mass mobilizations against the privatization of water in 2000 and 2004 succeeded against the powerful US-based transnational corporation Bechtel. Similar mobilizations for nationalizing gas in 2003 toppled the government of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, known as “el gringo” because of his speaking English better than Spanish. Sánchez de Lozada’s regime was responsible for the massacre of more than 60 citizens in El Alto, a new Andean city of more than a million poor people above La Paz, the world’s highest capital.

One of President Evo Morales’ first acts after taking office in 2006 was to nationalize oil and the production of gas. With proceeds from the nationalizations, he created a “dignity pension” for people over 60 years of age and a “family income supplement” to help keep children in school. He extended credit with zero percent interest to farmers of corn, wheat, rice and other basics. Under Morales, Bolivia has eliminated its fiscal debt, repaid half its foreign debt, and quadrupled employment in the mining and metallurgical sectors. Its GDP has almost doubled in three years, while its foreign reserves have almost quintupled to over \$8 billion. Cuban teams of teachers and medical personnel have helped reduce illiteracy by 80 percent and extend free health care to half the populace. Cuba’s “Miracle Mission” has conducted free eye operations to restore the full vision of nearly 300,000 Bolivians.

Bolivian Vice President Álvaro García Linares often reassures foreign capitalists and says Bolivia’s economy will be “Andean/Amazonian capitalism,” featuring strong support for small and medium enterprises, including cooperatives and handicrafts. Despite these reassurances, the US Government

has sought to undermine Bolivian democracy the way it so often has done in the past. It has lifted its restrictions on the CIA's use of assassination against foreign leaders. Both Evo Morales and Ecuador's Correa have denounced assassination plots on their lives.

Upon assuming the presidency, Evo ordered the CIA desk in the presidential palace removed. Later, in the face of US pressures on behalf of Bechtel and other transnational corporations, he pulled Bolivia out of the World Bank's Disputes Resolution Court. During 2008, department-level Bolivian officials expelled various personnel of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which had established an "Office of Transition Initiatives" to fund the rightist opposition. Evo discovered that US Ambassador Philip Goldberg was promoting and financing extreme rightist leaders in the gas-rich eastern breakaway departments who, in the name of departmental autonomy, in effect separatism, were ordering massacres of native peoples and occupying federal offices. This was a thinly veiled attempt at a "civil" coup d'état, a coup in quest of military support.

Ambassador Golberg had served earlier in countries undergoing violent breakups, such as the former Yugoslavia. He served as ambassador to Kosovo, where the United States tolerated or supported paramilitary massacres of Serbs and other ethnic minorities. His superior is John Negroponte, Deputy Secretary of State and chief State Department official for Latin America. Negroponte is the former 1980s' ambassador to Honduras who oversaw the "contra" war against the democratically elected Sandinista government. He and the State Department's embassy staffs help coordinate US efforts to undermine or topple today's socialist oriented governments and social movements, like those in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador.

Goldberg's Embassy began enlisting Peace Corps volunteers and Fulbright Scholars to "spy" on Cubans and Venezuelans in Bolivia. It also worked with a special intelligence unit of the Bolivian police. Goldberg was photographed meeting with coup-plotting leaders and a known Colombian paramilitary figure. In September 2008, at the height of the unsuccessful "civil" coup attempt, Evo expelled Goldberg. The United States responded by sending home the Bolivian ambassador.

Meeting in Chile in September, the newly created Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) unanimously condemned the ongoing attempted coup and its massacres. UNASUR unconditionally supported Evo's democratic government and sent observers to government-proposed negotiations in which the opposition finally agreed to participate. When the negotiations later failed because of right-wing intransigence despite major concessions by Evo, the UNASUR observers again condemned the right for its anti-democratic and criminal conduct.

Meanwhile, a UNASUR investigating team of experts confirmed details of a September 11, 2008 massacre of peaceful protesters, mostly native peoples, in Pando Department, when 18 people were gunned down, 60 were wounded, and more than 100 persons "disappeared." The rightist governor said to be responsible for the massacre, Leopoldo Fernández, an ally of the 1970s' dictator Hugo Banzer, fled toward Brazil but was captured by the military and jailed.

On November 1, 2008, Bolivia's government suspended indefinitely the operations of the US Drug Enforcement Agency because of the DEA's financing fascistic opposition forces behind the coup attempt and "criminal groups" plotting to kill government authorities. President Evo Morales offered evidence of this and other DEA crimes, such as its involvement in narco-trafficking and its investigations ordered in 2003 of leftist leaders, including Evo himself. He said that Bolivia would continue to protect small-scale growers of coca to maintain the cultural use of the product by native peoples and would play a key role in a new unified South American effort against narco-trafficking to be backed by regional funding. Washington countered by suspending long-term trade preferences with Bolivia.

In Ecuador, occupations of government buildings and general strikes became an annual affair in the 1990s. Mass movements of the underclasses, students, workers, and native peoples began to link up. The native peoples launched five uprisings. From 1995 to 2005 the popular movements toppled seven presidents. In January 2000, the native peoples took over Ecuador's parliament and actually "governed" the nation for 24 hours! The old State — led by a comprador bourgeoisie in the coastal region of Guayaquil, landed oligarchs there and in the Sierra, military officers and paramilitaries, and an ultra-reactionary Catholic Church — began to totter.

President Rafael Correa of Ecuador initially tried to reassure Washington. He maintained the US dollar as the nation's currency. He simultaneously challenged the US Government by declaring he might not recognize the legality of Ecuador's foreign debt. He expelled the World Bank's permanent representative and said that in 2009 he would not renew the lease for the US military base in Manta.

Then, on March 1, 2008, the United States and Colombia mounted a military bombardment and invasion of Ecuador that used the Manta base and killed at least 24 people, including Raúl Reyes, a guerrilla commander of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), who at the time was meeting with Mexican university students in the northern Ecuadorian jungle. Afterwards, Correa denounced US control of high officials of Ecuador's security and intelligence forces and dismissed leaders in the Armed Forces, Police, and his own Minister of Defense. The Organization of American States (OAS) showed its independence from traditional US control when it voted to denounce the military attack on Ecuador.

In November 2008, President Correa, contrary to economic integration plans already underway in South America, went along with the European Union's call for bilateral trade negotiations. Colombia and Peru, but not Bolivia, already had agreed to accept bilateral negotiations. The Ecuadorian government also announced a partial privatization of the Napo River. It planned to allow state development of mining in Yasuni Park, declared a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 1989. But at the same time, Correa accepted the report of an independent international commission of inquiry into Ecuador's foreign debt from 1976 to 2006. The report found that many loan agreements involved corruption, illegalities, and "looting"; violated national sovereignty; contributed to greater poverty and inequality; and were "odious" because of their often being contracted in years of military dictatorships. Correa announced that the "illegitimate, corrupt, and illegal debt" would likely not be paid.

Meanwhile, Latin America's indigenous and social movements called for "the recognition of the historical, social and environmental debt" that most of the "creditor" nations had incurred "during five centuries of the colonization of Abya Yala." ("Abya Yala" means "Continent of Life" in the language of the Kuna peoples of Panama and Colombia.)

Re-founding the State, New Constitutions

Throughout Indo-Afro-Latin America vigorous movements to "democratize democracy" have taken root. The social movements that put an end to the worse period of US-supported "dirty wars" and toppled the military dictatorships of the 1964-1984 period did not settle for the limited democracies that replaced them. People had fought and died for human rights and not the amnesties that were granted the dictators and their henchmen as a condition for allowing the new "democracies." To walk down the street and suddenly see one's torturer coming out of the corner store was one more form of torture. Moreover, the newly introduced "representative democracies" typically served the interests of big money and economic neo-liberalism rather than those of the general populace.

As poverty spread, movements sparked by native peoples and other groups, especially women and

youth, mobilized against the IMF and its defenders in the newly elected parliaments and presidencies. For many, to “democratize democracy” meant to introduce economic democracy and not just limited political democracy. People began demanding constituent assemblies. The elections of Morales and Correa paved the way for a re-founding of the State and an official rejection of neo-liberalism.

In elections for Bolivia’s constituent assembly the only requirement was that 30 percent of the delegates had to be women. Candidates from Evo Morales’ MAS (Movement to Socialism) won 137 of the 255 seats; 64 of the MAS delegates were women. Delegates finalized the new constitution of 411 articles in December 2007, only after being forced to move the location of the assembly’s meetings because of right-wing violence and sabotage of the process. This violence was part of the “civil” coup attempt that actually commenced the day Evo was elected president.

Ecuador’s voters elected their constituent assembly in September 2007. It included 80 members of Congress from Correa’s heterogeneous political coalition “Alianza País,” 40 from the conservative opposition, 10 from small leftist parties, and 5 from the CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, founded in 1986). Other organizations, such as the CONFENIAE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon) and the FENOCIN (National Federation of Peasants, Native Peoples, and Blacks), pressured the assembly to make constitutional changes in defense of their interests. On September 28, 2008, voters approved the 444-article Constitution by a 65 percent “Yes” vote. Concluded President Correa: “Neo-liberalism has been crushed and put in the dustbin of history.”

Both nations’ new constitutions distinguish between the old representative democracy and a new participatory and communitarian one. They call for plural nationhood; genuine interculturalism (instead of cosmetic multiculturalism); recognition of differences among cultures; and “unity in diversity.” As a result, the native peoples’ communities have constitutional rights to local self-governance and their own juridical procedures based on indigenous customs and traditions. Bolivia’s Constitution calls for juridical pluralism within a proposed “Plurinational Constitutional Court of Justice.”

Only when there is plural nationhood can there be real interculturalism. Plural nationhood entails re-founding the State. In the eyes of the native peoples, the old State was a colonial one, formed of select individuals. It championed individual freedoms solely for the elites. In no way did it represent collective societies like those of the Quechua, Aymara, Guaraní, Shuar, Siona and other native peoples. The new State is to be an independent, unitary, plurinational one that celebrates human diversity and true democracy. In indigenous terms, exit colonialism and enter all humanity.

Bolivia’s proposed new constitution contains the following provisions, presented here in a synthesized form and in no particular order:

1. A unitary, plurinational, communitarian and democratic State.
2. All 36 peoples to have equal rights and regional autonomies, that is, a democratic decentralization of power.
3. Nationalization of natural resources and State control over forests and biodiversity.
4. Three forms of economic ownership: public, private, and communitarian — in effect, a mixed economy compatible with the Vice President’s vision of an Andean/Amazonian capitalism.
5. State involvement in strategic sectors of the economy, and foreign private investment to be

subordinated to national development plans.

6. Agrarian reform with expropriation of huge landed estates (latifundia).

7. Re-election and removal of any elected official by popular mandate — already implemented on August 10, 2008, when the opposition's demand for a referendum was granted and 67 percent of the votes favored keeping Evo Morales as president; Evo's supporters also won several governorships while increasing their vote percentage in the few departments they lost to the rightist opposition.

8. Election of the judiciary; recognition of communitarian and ancestral forms of conflict resolution.

9. A plurinational Parliament with only one chamber (in effect, the elimination of the structurally elitist Senate).

10. Free and equal health care and education; end of illiteracy.

11. Sucre to replace La Paz as the capital (a concession to the rightist opposition).

12. A ban on discrimination based on sex, color, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, culture, nationality, religion, ideology, disability, pregnancy.

13. Prohibition of foreign military bases.

14. Potable drinking water as a human right.

Most observers expect that Bolivian voters will approve the constitution in the referendum scheduled for January 25, 2009. The articles on land ownership will be submitted separately at the same time.

Ecuador's Constitution contains the following provisions, also presented in a synthesized form and in no particular order:

1. State to tighten control of strategic industries, such as oil, mining, and telecommunications, and to protect biodiversity.

2. State to reduce monopolies.

3. Some of foreign debt to be declared illegitimate.

4. Agrarian reform; end of latifundia; prohibition of genetically modified seeds.

5. Free health care; free education for all through college; State-assisted housing programs.

6. A lay State; civil marriage for gay partners (measures opposed by one of the continent's most reactionary Catholic Churches)

7. Women's rights, including valuation for work in the home.

8. Free responsibility over one's own sexuality and life; recognition of diverse types of family; yet, the right to life from the moment of conception (feminist activists generally welcomed their gains and said the clause on life at conception could be eliminated through future popular mobilizations).

9. Equal rights for the disabled.
10. Universal social security; pensions for stay-at-home mothers and informal sector workers.
11. Presidential control over Central Bank; less autonomy for the Armed Forces.
12. Consecration of Nature's collective rights.
13. Potable drinking water as a human right; prohibition of privatization of water.
14. Food sovereignty and the right to have secure food sources.
15. Right to have access to the mass media and to establish community media.
16. Prohibition of foreign military bases.
17. A solidarity-based and sustainable economic system; a "private, social and solidarity" economy, in effect a mixed economy.
18. Integration into the rest of Latin America, especially via UNASUR
19. Prohibition of State taking over private debts, in effect no bank bailouts
20. Balanced living (sumak kawsay)

There are, to be sure, ambiguities and contradictions in both nations' new constitutions. Ecuador's, for example, includes loopholes for big capital and latifundistas, such as Article 323, a prohibition against all forms of confiscation. In Bolivia, some have criticized an overemphasis on local indigenous autonomies with inadequate attention given to the 70 percent of the population that is urban or to the important role women play in the creation and defense of "informal" economies key to human survival and advancement.

Also, one area of great concern to native peoples in Ecuador is the clause calling for their "previous informed consultation" on mining, oil, or other economic rights granted outsiders in territories where they reside. Consultation with native peoples does not mean their "consent." There have already occurred killings and repression of protests against foreign petroleum firms. President Correa has gone so far as to characterize some of the protesters as "terrorists." The UN and ILO declarations on indigenous peoples' rights are generally interpreted as calling for "previous consent." "Petroleum is the blood of the Earth," goes a saying of the U'wa people resisting foreign oil interests in Colombia, "if you suck the blood you kill us."

Clearly, new laws do not necessarily translate into new realities. The movements that gave birth to the new constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador will have to be maintained and strengthened if the articles on environment, plurinationalism, and social rights are to be fulfilled or expanded in practice.

Right-wing Opposition in Historical Context

A long time ago, a Mayan said [3]:

They destroyed our crops

They cut our branches

They burned our tree trunks

But they could not kill our roots.

In 1781, Tupak Katari, the leader of a widespread and nearly successful revolt by South America's native peoples against Spanish colonialism, was captured and tortured. His body was torn apart, literally "quartered." Before his death, he proudly announced to his captors: "I will return and I will be millions."

Evo Morales, a strong advocate for world peace and non-violence, has said the right-wing opposition is attempting to "quarter" Bolivia but will not succeed. In a sense, Tupak Katari has returned and is millions. The Bolivian rightists, relatively strong in four departments rich in commerce, narco-trafficking, agriculture, gas, and other natural resources but unable to win national elections, seek to create a secessionist State centered around the economically powerful city of Santa Cruz. This would leave the rest of Bolivia impoverished.

Just as in Bolivia, there are anti-democracy rightists in Ecuador and Venezuela with links to US governmental agencies and paramilitary elements in Colombia. They too seek to topple the new democratically elected revolutionary governments by splitting off the richest areas into separate, new States: the industrial, oil, agricultural, and commercial region of Guayaquil in southwestern Ecuador and the oil-rich Zulia in northeastern Venezuela.

Bolivians have a long history of popular resistance to right-wing elements that have governed the nation on behalf of domestic and foreign elites. They have learned from their earlier struggles. In 1952 they achieved the continent's first revolution since the Mexican Revolution of 1917. They introduced a short-lived agrarian reform and nationalization of tin mines, the main industry at the time. Many miners were Marxists. In 1946 the Miners' Congress passed the "Pulacayo Thesis," a program echoing the ideas of Bolshevik revolutionary thinker and military commander Leon Trotsky. This program called for workers' control of the means of production, a genuine democracy, and internationalization of the revolutionary struggle. Armed miners turned the tide in 1952 just when it looked like the rightist military might crush the democratic revolutionary forces in a bloodbath.

However, the United States gradually reversed Bolivia's 1952 Revolution by training the Armed Forces and sending in economic advisers favorable to free-market capitalism and foreign capital. By 1964, the Revolution was not only reversed. It was being replaced by a series of military dictatorships and occasional civilian governments that carried out several massacres of workers, peasants, and students, in a "dirty war." Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie, later extradited to France and convicted in 1987 of mass murder, helped set up Bolivian concentration camps. Poverty increased. Because of silicosis, overwork, and the decline of the mining sector, the lifespan of the average miner today is just 35 years.

A guerrilla struggle led by Ernesto "Che" Guevara in southeastern Bolivia failed when US-trained Bolivian Army forces captured Che on October 8, 1967, and, on US orders, killed him the next day. Crosses labeled "Saint Che" began appearing in several rural locations.

In 1971 a Peoples' Assembly backed by the military government of General Juan José Torres approved a worker-peasant alliance and a program for socialism. Torres was overthrown by General Banzer, leading to a savage seven-year wave of repression known as "the Banzerato," a prosperous

period for Bolivia's elites and foreign capital. The boom city of Santa Cruz began concentrating most of the nation's wealth.

Popular protests by the poor majority and by the small economically squeezed middle classes continued. By 1980, strikes, revolts, and massacres reached another severe stage. The so-called "Cocaine Coup" of that year established a particularly brutal and corrupt dictatorship that lasted more than two years. In 1985, Harvard-educated economist Jeffrey Sachs introduced a "shock therapy" neo-liberal treatment of the economy that laid off thousands of miners, who had to migrate with their families to the countryside or cities to try to find work to survive. In the early 1990s, Sachs introduced the same economic approach in the former Soviet Union. In both cases the results were disastrous for the majority of the peoples.

During and after Sachs' "shock therapy," Bolivia's resistance movements reached new levels of community-based organization. People perfected roadblocks and other acts of civil disobedience. Women's committees, a traditional institution among miners, began running urban slums. A street vendors' union grew each year to its present size of 800,000 members. Bolivia's citizens conducted huge marches "For Life and Peace," "For Life and Bread," and for "People before Profits."

Native peoples completed an historic 33-day "March for Territory and Dignity" (1990). A movement by coca growers led by Evo Morales gained strength and called itself the Movement to Socialism. Workers, street vendors, ex-miners, desperate peasants, and heads of households in El Alto and other urban slums organized neighborhood defense-and-struggle committees. Women and youth played pivotal roles. Most of the time Bolivia was under a state of siege, with all opposition repressed. Nonetheless, the social movements kept reappearing and gaining strength, toppling government after government until Evo's election in 2005.

Prefect Ruben Costas in Santa Cruz and several ex-Nazis and large landholders began to organize their "civil" coup. They referred to Evo with racist epitaphs and claimed no "Indian monkey" could possibly govern the nation. They sent fascist goon squads to attack, beat up, and kill native peoples. They took over national offices, including airports, making it impossible for the nation's president to fly to important areas.

Several of the fascistic right-wing leaders of the opposition movement are anti-communist fanatics whose pro-Nazi families came to Bolivia from Eastern Europe after World War II, often protected or encouraged by the US government, as in the case of Klaus Barbie. One current leader, Branco Marinkovic, a Croatian-Bolivian, is widely believed to be in the pay of the man in the government of "el gringo" who ordered the El Alto massacre of 2003 and later fled to the United States with "el gringo" and other top government officials.

Over the years, the fascist leaders of the four breakaway departments routinely have hired Brazilian gunmen, some of whom joined Bolivian and Peruvian gunmen in the Pando massacre of September 11, 2008. Pando is the department that gave refuge to the murderers of Chico Mendes, the world-renowned trade-union and environmentalist leader of Brazilian rubber tappers assassinated in 1988. Ever since then, these assassins and their henchmen have been operating on behalf of Pando's elites to help maintain labor discipline and political loyalty, but with decreasing success.

Even though momentarily defeated in their attempt to topple Bolivian democracy, right-wingers of all varieties have not stopped their pressures on Evo. The social movements and native peoples continue to mobilize in defense of Evo's government.

In the middle of October 2008, some 50,000 to 200,000 people conducted an 8-day, 150-kilometer march that was joined on its last day by Evo himself. The marchers surrounded the national

Congress in La Paz to demand approval of a future referendum on the new constitution. They succeeded in winning the required two-thirds majority of votes and then celebrated in the streets.

However, prior to the successful vote, centrist and rightist political parties in Congress modified more than 100 articles. Details of the changes are rather complex, but it is clear that greater though not complete autonomy is to be granted the breakaway departments. Also, Evo will not be allowed to run for re-election after the December 6, 2009 presidential and congressional elections. His potential years in the presidency thus would have to end in 2014.

In both Bolivia and Ecuador, as in Venezuela, the rightist opposition is increasingly divided. For example, Bolivia's PODEMOS (Social Democratic Power in Spanish), the largest opposition group, now has at least four squabbling factions.

But the opposition is not just from the right. While leftists generally support Evo and Correa, even if critically at times, there are a few who feel that both nations' presidents are moving too slowly and with too many compromises. Some even see the emergence of "a new neo-liberalism with a human face." Also, there are people inside the governments of both nations who act as cliques that tend to undermine democratic processes and thus serve the rightist opposition's claims that the presidents are "dictators."

Cooptation and clientelism are occurring, more so in Ecuador than in Bolivia, but the social movements continue demanding genuine democracy and a new type of socialism that meets all human needs in harmony with "Pachamama." The chances of either a civilian or a military coup seem slimmer each day but can never be ruled out. Both nations' Armed Forces have sworn to uphold the constitutional processes underway. The Bolivian and Ecuadorian peoples are on the alert against possible traitorous officers or soldiers.

Decline of US Hegemony

Events in Bolivia and Ecuador reflect a growing defiance of the "big brother to the North." Latin American nations are integrating into a larger "gran patria" independent of the United States, an idea originally advocated by "the Liberator" Simón Bolívar in the Wars of Independence against Spain when he attempted to unify the region against future US hegemony. Bolívar was unsuccessful, in part because of US opposition. He concluded in 1829: "The United States appear to be destined by Providence to plague America with misery in the name of liberty."

In addition to UNASUR, several new institutions have been created in this recent integrative process. Among them are the following:

- * Rio Group (created in 1986 by members of the Contadora Group active in seeking peace in Central America, today an organization of almost all Latin American and Caribbean states whose most recent new member is Cuba)

- * TeleSUR (a continent-wide television news and entertainment channel countering the slant and distortions of CNN and most US mass media)

- * RadioSUR

- * PetroSUR and PetroCARIBE (for energy integration with discount prices on Venezuelan oil, gas, and know-how)

- * Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas — ALBA, a socially responsible instead of profit-guided alternative to the now defeated US initiative Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA)
- * MERCOSUR – Common Market of the South, an earlier alternative to the FTAA
- * Community of Andean Nations and Caricom (two more regional trade blocs)
- * Latin American Court of Justice
- * Banco del Sur (Bank of the South, a response to US-dominated, neo-liberal financial institutions like the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank).
- * Parliamentary Confederation of the Americas (a South American Parliament is to be built in San Benito, Bolivia)
- * Security Council of South America (a military alliance of 12 nations excluding the United States)

There are also plans for a single unified currency possibly to be called “pacha” and a Monetary Fund of the South (Fondo Monetario del Sur) as an alternative to the US dollar and the IMF (International Monetary Fund). There is talk of an economic Stabilization Fund as well.

In the past, the US Government and Latin American oligarchies would not have tolerated this for a second. They would have mounted bloody military coups and new dictatorships in the name of defending democracy. But those days of US hegemony are long gone. Spain’s capitalists now have more investments in the region than those of their US counterparts. The United States and the OAS have been largely absent from all major decisions about conflicts; new coalitions like UNASUR and the Rio Group make those decisions, without a single dissenting vote so far. Even the influential US policy-creating Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), in its May 2008 report, says the Monroe Doctrine is dead and should not be resurrected. Significantly, Washington has accepted the 12-nation Security Council of South America.

US military and diplomatic failures in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, together with the global financial crisis triggered by US bank failures in 2007-2008, have extended the United States’ loss of hegemony worldwide. The Euro and other currencies have long since weakened the dominance of the US dollar. The gigantic US economy has become dependent on investments and loans from China, Japan, the European Union, and sundry oil kingdoms. According to CNN reports, the two-trillion-dollar US bank rescue plan may cost each US citizen \$40,000 by 2010. The three-decade economic reign of neo-liberalism is spiraling rapidly downward into the abyss of human suffering it has helped generate. Multiple Poles of Power and the rise of new economic and geopolitical alliances are replacing the 18-year-long dominance of a sole Super Power.

Conclusion

It is evident that Bolivia and Ecuador, like so many Latin American countries, are undergoing historic changes in the correlation of social and class forces and in relations with the United States. Only the rightists and the US Government oppose these two new popular and vigorous democracies. Others are trying to learn from them.

In July 2008, the 8,000-mile “Longest Walk 2 All Life is Sacred – Save Mother Earth” reached Washington, D.C. One of its leaders, Dennis Banks, cofounder of the American Indian Movement

(AIM), summed up its goal as one of “environmental protection, an end to global warming, the protection of Indigenous cultural survival, and the empowerment of Native youth.” Most of the marchers expressed solidarity with Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela.

US policy on Latin America in 2008, however, continued down the anti-democratic path. The Pentagon sent the modernized Fourth Fleet to police the oceans and waterways of the region. More military bases were constructed in Colombia, bordering Ecuador and Venezuela. US support for the mega-project IIRSA (South American Regional Integration of the Infrastructure in Spanish) increased. It is a multi-billion dollar transcontinental transport and commercial development plan that will violate several indigenous territories. Despite widespread bank failures and skyrocketing unemployment rates at home and abroad, US aid programs continued to give short shrift to meeting human needs and instead contributed to the military repression of social and indigenous movements or renewed attempts at “civil” coups.

The world faces a profound ecological crisis. World hunger is rapidly increasing. In a relatively short time there will not be sufficient potable drinking water, food, or petroleum to maintain current standards of living even in the most industrialized nations. Neo-liberal capitalism faces both deepening economic crisis and loss of credibility on a world scale. The indigenous and popular movements of Bolivia and Ecuador, on the other hand, have achieved significant advances and now have a chance to push for even greater gains in the re-founding of their States and the introduction of new programs in defense of the environment and the peoples of the world.

In November 2008, some 400 academics of the prestigious Latin American Studies Association sent a letter to president-elect Barack Obama in which they expressed their hope that his presidency would convert the United States into “an ally instead of an adversary of the positive changes taking place in the Hemisphere.” It remains to be seen if Obama will maintain old policies; make mere cosmetic changes; or create new policies in the interests of all the peoples of Latin America – and the United States.

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] In 2007, the UN passed its Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples, with only four “No” votes (United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand). It echoed and expanded the International Labor Organization's Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples that entered into force in 1991. Award-winning Canadian novelist Thomas King, son of a Cherokee father and Greek mother, has pointed out that “Mother Earth” is a potent concept for native peoples, but it has been abused to the point where it sometimes has no more power or import “than the word freedom tumbling out of George W. Bush's mouth.” King then cites Mohawk writer Beth Brant: “We do not worship nature. We are part of it.” See Thomas King, *The Truth about Stories* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press Inc., 2003), p. 114.

[2] See in full: [Climate Change: Save the Planet from Capitalism](#)

[3] From books of *Chilam Balam* (The book of books), documents written in Yucatec Maya with Spanish characters during the 17th and 18th centuries.