

Disillusionment drives resistance to Morales - “He has ceased to be the champion of environmental rights and Indigenous people”

Thursday 29 November 2018, by [FERNANDEZ RODRIGUEZ Gisela](#) (Date first published: 19 November 2018).

Gisela Rodriguez Fernandez explains the political confrontation taking shape in Bolivia as President Evo Morales, who became the country’s first Indigenous president in the wake of mass social struggles, defies popular outrage to run for a fourth term.

THE DAY after the United Nations Security Council met on September 26, I scrolled through my Facebook page for some news and gossip. I was surprised with the many posts praising President Evo Morales’s fiery UN speech against Trump. Someone commented: “Thank you Bolivia for sharing your wise and courageous leader.”

Not only was Morales critical of Trump’s foreign policy, but he put this criticism within the context of a long U.S. history of supporting — and many times engineering, coups against democratic governments around the world, such as the overthrow of Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973. This criticism has contemporary significance, as Trump recently threatened possible military intervention in Venezuela.

Morales also touched on Trump’s shameful immigration policies at home — the practice of separating families and placing immigrant children in cages.

This speech resonated deeply with my political stance as a Bolivian immigrant living in the U.S. It could even have been inspirational — except for the fact that most people that I spoke with during my recent nine-month stay in Bolivia describe Morales as “*falso conejo*” or fake rabbit — in a witty reference to a Bolivian dish that does not look or taste like rabbit.

MORALES’ FIERY anti-imperialist rhetoric obscures the fact that he has ceased to be the champion of environmental rights and Indigenous people. Under Morales, mining and natural gas extraction, along with their negative social and environmental effects, have expanded more rapidly than under previous neoliberal governments.

Equally concerning are Morales’ dangerous games to stay in power — specifically, undermining democracy by ignoring the Bolivian constitution and a referendum that bars him from running for the presidency for a fourth term.

Meanwhile, as many Bolivians are organizing against Morales’ attempt to continue to hold power, Bolivia’s far right is also mobilizing to take advantage of the popular discontent with this leftist leader.

For many Bolivians who originally supported Morales, the turning point was the 2011 political crisis of the Isiboro Sécuré National Park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS), a protected natural area that is also home to thousands of Indigenous peoples.

In 2011, the Bolivian government started building a 182-mile highway through the heart of TIPNIS without prior and open consultation with the impacted communities, which infringes on Indigenous peoples' right of self-determination and environmental policies regarding protected natural areas.

This resulted in major confrontations between the Bolivian state and TIPNIS Indigenous communities. The government responded to protesters with extreme and often violent repression, but the opposition remained steadfast, and eventually, TIPNIS was granted a protected status (intangibilidad), making it off limits to government-led and private development projects.

Nevertheless, in August 2017, the Morales government approved Law 929 that eliminates protected status for TIPNIS. This not only permitted construction of the highway, but the could might also open TIPNIS to exploration and extraction of its natural resources.

The Morales government's eagerness to open national lands to resource-extraction companies was not an isolated event, but part of a larger pattern.

Morales struck a blow to Indigenous communities again with the 2014 Bolivian Mining Law. Mining operations require intense water usage, and this law extended to the mining industry the rights and privileges to use public water indiscriminately, while at the same time undermining of rural and Indigenous communities' rights to water access.

I spoke with Indigenous women in Oruro, Bolivia, who attested to the impact of the 2014 Mining Law. The nationalized Huanuni mine in Oruro consumes around 7.5 million gallons of water per day.

Meanwhile, downstream communities such as Cuchi Piacala have no access to water, or the water is so contaminated that not even their animals are able to drink it. People from this community must travel two hours by foot to buy clean water in the town of Machacamarca.

DISILLUSIONMENT WITH Morales and his Movement for Socialism (MAS) party isn't just restricted to socio-environmental spheres. Another factor is ongoing corruption scandals, such as a romantic relationship between Morales and Gabriela Zapata, a top executive of a Chinese-owned construction company that received large government contracts.

There is also ongoing and worsening nepotism based on party affiliation, where one has to belong to MAS in order to obtain a government-related job. Skilled professionals continue to work as taxi drivers or in the informal economy, while unskilled and inexperienced professionals affiliated with the MAS obtain lofty governmental positions.

Former Minister of Health Ariana Campero, who has little experience working in the Bolivian public hospitals and therefore doesn't understand the precarious conditions facing Bolivian physicians, is a clear example.

But central to Bolivians' disillusionment, which has led to massive protests in recent years, is the outcome of the February 21 referendum (21F) two years ago.

In 2016, a proposal to remove presidential term limits from the constitution was put to a vote in a national referendum. This would have allowed Morales to run again for a fourth consecutive time in the upcoming 2019 elections. Morales lost the referendum by a small but clear margin — 51 percent against to 49 percent in favor.

Then, shockingly, in 2017, as part of a penal code overhaul, the Constitutional Court removed the stipulation on term limits. Morales declared: "I don't want to [run again], but I can not let the people down."

This response sparked ongoing rallies and protests that have polarized Bolivia into two camps: Morales supporters and Morales critics.

The slim margin on the 21F referendum shows that there are thousands of Bolivians who still support Morales and are ready to confront anyone opposed to his government. This segment of the population consists mostly, although not exclusively, of constituents who benefited the most under Morales: coca farmers (particularly from the Chapare region), cooperative miners and commercial traders from the indigenous city of El Alto.

Those opposed to a fourth Morales presidency are becoming angrier and more suspicious about his aspirations to remain in power for another term, or perhaps indefinitely. These opponents include a wide array of groups and peoples, including Indigenous communities from the low and highlands and Alteños, or people from El Alto (the city that became a key point of action during the massive protests in 2000 and 2003).

These latter particular groups once supported Morales, but now want him out. But Morales is also opposed by the wealthy and the right wing, which always disliked him and tried to sabotage his presidency from the start.

Morales' reaction to the opposition has been very strategic. He portrays any criticism as racist, pro-imperialist or right wing. And this is where the 21F referendum gets extremely complicated.

THE BOLIVIAN right is one of the groups opposing a potential Morales campaign for a fourth term, and they therefore also support the referendum result. In this respect, Morales is correct in at least one respect: The toxic rhetoric of the Bolivian right is built on racist and unfounded arguments against Morales, such as calling his government "a dictatorship like Venezuela and Cuba."

Take the statement by a deputy from the right-wing Christian Democratic Party: "I prefer a dictatorship of boots, rather than one of *ojotas* [the shoes worn by Indigenous people]."

This ugly rhetoric, however, pales in comparison to recent revelations of the Bolivian right's connections with Brazil's Social Liberal Party (SLP), the party of Brazil's far-right President-elect Jair Bolsonaro.

The leader of "Las calles Bolivia," a right-wing collective that supports the results of 21F, has confirmed connections to the SLP, and there is video evidence to support the claim [\[1\]](#).

The Bolivian right clearly identifies with Bolsonaro's praise for Brazil's past military dictatorships and his homophobic, racist and misogynists ideology, which includes having called a female politician "to ugly to be raped."

The fear of Trump and the election of Bolsonaro in Brazil has created a scenario where many argue for supporting Morales in the election controversy, and setting aside criticism of him in order to focus instead on the economic growth that Bolivia experienced under Morales.

Beyond this, in a country like Bolivia with entrenched racist and colonial ideologies, an Indigenous president is still a source of ethnic pride for many Indigenous peoples.

Another response to the crisis is to propose Caudillismo, an elitist system based on the leadership of a strongman (caudillo) to counter the threat of the right. Here the question becomes: If not Evo Morales, then who?

Amid the rise of far-right demagogues, these ideas might seem reasonable. Yet it is precisely the

contradictions of the so-called progressive parties and governments that paved the road for far-right candidates.

Besides, caudillismo and the lesser of two evils logic are both based on a short-sighted belief in electoral politics as the only viable form of political action. Both arguments fail to recognize the historical and radical mobilizations that Bolivia has experienced outside the electoral process.

A RECENT conversation with my friend Osmar reminded me that the Bolivian society carries the seeds of revolution.

As a member of the Bolivian *juntas vecinales* — self-organized neighborhood councils that promote participation in politics — he took part in the massive protests and water wars between 2000 and 2003 that marked a victory against neoliberalism across Latin America.

As Osmar explained, although radical social movements were co-opted into the Bolivian state apparatus, “la rebellion” is still present and evident on the streets. He and his neighbors, among many thousands in the major cities of Bolivia, are self-organizing once again, this time to protest Morales’s intentions of a presidential re-run.

Neighborhood councils hold extended meetings and discussions about political views, strategies and the organization of rallies and blockades. As Osmar explains, although many of them do not have the extra means for organizing materials, they all share the deep conviction that it is the people who will decide the future of Bolivia.

This upheaval is also present in the countryside, where rural and Indigenous communities are also organizing against Morales — and this time demanding genuine Indigenous liberation. Rural-urban connections are solidifying once again, and the class struggle is taking shape.

What the future holds is uncertain. The outcome will depend on whether the Bolivian Electoral Tribunal will allow a fourth presidential run for Morales. It will also depend on the recognition by these neighborhood councils and rural communities that they have no common interests with the Bolivian right. In fact, the Bolivian right is antagonistic to the aspirations of Bolivian workers and Indigenous people.

What is certain is that the Bolivian masses will play a central role in determining that future — as they always have.

Gisela Rodriguez Fernandez

P.S.

• Socialist Worker, November 19, 2018:
<https://socialistworker.org/2018/11/19/disillusionment-drives-resistance-to-morales>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.eldeber.com.bo/bolivia/Bolsonaro-tiene-conexiones-con-plataforma-de-Bolivia-20181008-0002.html>