

Bolivia and The Protection of the Amazon

The highway through the Isiboro Secure National Park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS).

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Statements, articles, letters and petitions have been circulating on the internet for the past month calling for an end to the “destruction of the Amazon”.

The target of these initiatives has not been transnational corporations or the powerful governments that back them, but the government of Bolivia’s first indigenous president, Evo Morales.

At the centre of the debate is the Bolivian government’s controversial proposal to build a highway through the Isiboro Secure National Park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS).

TIPNIS, which covers more than 1 million hectares of forest, was granted indigenous territory status by the Morales government in 2009. About 12,000 people from three different indigenous groups live in 64 communities within TIPNIS.

On August 15, representatives from the TIPNIS Subcentral that unites these communities, as well as other indigenous groups, began a march to the capital city, La Paz to protest against the highway plan.

International petitions have been initiated declaring support for this march, and condemning the Morales government for undermining indigenous rights.

The people of TIPNIS have legitimate concerns about the highway’s impact. There is also no doubt the government has made errors in its handling of the issue.

Unfortunately, petitions such as the one initiated by international lobby group Avaaz and a September 21 letter to Morales signed by over 60 environmental groups mostly outside Bolivia misrepresent the facts and misdirect their fire.

They could inadvertently aid the opponents of the global struggle for climate justice.

Avaaz warns that the highway “could enable foreign companies to pillage the world’s most important forest”. But it fails to mention the destruction that is already happening in the area, in some cases with the complicity of local indigenous communities.

On the other hand, the Morales government has promised to introduce a new law, in consultation with communities within TIPNIS, to add new protections for the national park.

The proposed law would set jail terms of between 10 to 20 years for illegal settlements, growing coca or logging in the national park.

Also, Avaaz claims that “huge economic interests” are motivating Morales’ support for the highway. But Avaaz omits the benefits that such a highway (whether it ultimately goes through TIPNIS or not) will bring Bolivia and its peoples.

For example, this 306 kilometre highway linking the departments of Beni and Cochabamba (with only a part of it going through TIPNIS) would expand access to health care and other basic services to isolated local communities that now travel for days to receive medical care.

The highway would also give local agricultural producers greater access to markets to sell their goods. At the moment, these must go via Santa Cruz to the east before being able to be transported westward.

Given Beni’s status as the largest meat producing department (state), this would break the hold that Santa Cruz-based slaughterhouses have on imposing meat prices.

The highway would also allow the state to assert sovereignty over remote areas, including some where illegal logging takes place.

It is facts such as these that have convinced more than 350 Bolivian organisations, including many of the social organisations that have led the country’s inspiring struggles against neoliberalism, to support the proposed highway.

Many indigenous organisations and communities (including within TIPNIS) support the highway. It is therefore false to describe this as a dispute between the government and indigenous people.

Nor is it a simple conflict between supporters of development and defenders of the environment.

All sides in the dispute want greater development and improved access to basic services. The issue at stake is how the second poorest country in the Americas, facing intense pressure from more powerful governments and corporate forces, can meet the needs of its people while protecting the environment.

Given this, surely it makes more sense for those who wish to defend Bolivia’s process of change to support steps towards dialogue, rather than deepening the divisions.

Legitimate criticism can be made of the government’s handling of the consultation process. But the Avaaz petition and the letter from environmental groups simply ignore the government’s repeated attempts to open discussions with the protesters.

Half the members of Morales’ ministerial cabinet, along with many more vice-ministers and heads of state institutions, have traveled to the march route to talk with protesters.

The petitioners don’t mention the Morales government’s public commitment to carry out a consultation process within the framework of the Bolivian constitution, popularly approved in 2009. Neither do they mention its offer to have the consultation process overseen by international observers selected by protesters themselves.

The government has also remained open to discussing the economic and environmental

feasibility of any alternative route that could bypass TIPNIS. No such alternative has been presented yet.

As a result of these initiatives, a number of the TIPNIS communities that had joined the march, as well as representatives from the Assembly of the Guarani People, have since decided to return home. They will continue discussions with the government.

Sadly, the key opponents of the proposed consultation process are among the march leaders, which includes organisations based outside TIPNIS.

These organisations were also the main proponents of a further 15 demands being placed on the government the day the march began.

Many of these demands are legitimate. But it is alarming that some of the more dangerously backwards demands have been ignored or dismissed by international environment groups.

For example, the letter to Morales raises concerns regarding the Bolivian president's statement that "oil drilling in Aguarague National Park 'will not be negotiated'".

Those gas fields represent 90% of Bolivia's gas exports and are a vital source of funds that the Morales government has been using to tackle poverty and develop Bolivia's economy.

The fact that the bulk of gas revenue is controlled by the Bolivian state rather than transnational corporation is the result of years of struggles by the Bolivian masses, who rightfully believe this resource should be used to develop their country.

The concerns of local communities should be, and have been, taken into consideration. But for Bolivia to cut off this source of revenue would have dire consequences for the people of one of the poorest nations in the Americas.

It would, without exaggeration, be economic suicide.

Initially, protesters also demanded a halt to gas extraction in Aguarague. They have retreated on this and are now focused on the question of plugging up unused oil wells due to the contamination this could cause to local water supplies.

Similarly, neither of the Internet statements mentions the protesters' support for the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) program.

REDD is a grossly anti-environmental United Nations program that aims to privatise forests by converting them into "carbon offsets" that allow rich, developed countries to continue polluting.

Some of the biggest proponents of this measure can be found among the NGOs promoting the march. Many of these have received direct funding from the US government, whose ambassador in Bolivia was expelled in September 2008 for supporting a right-wing coup attempt against the elected Morales government.

Rather than defend Bolivia's sovereignty against US interference, the letter denounces the Bolivian government for exposing connections between the protesters and "obscure interests".

These “obscure interests” include the League for the Defence of the Environment (LIDEMA), which was set up with US government funds. Its backers include the US government aid agency, USAID, and the German-based Konrad Adenauer Foundation, which frequently funds actions against governments opposed by the United States and European governments such as Cuba.

Secret US diplomatic cables recently released by WikiLeaks and declassified US government files have conclusively shown that USAID directly targets indigenous communities in a bid to win them away from support for Morales and towards supporting US interests.

Behind these very real interests lies a campaign by rich nations and conservative environmental groups to promote policies that represent a new form of “green imperialism”.

After centuries of plundering the resources of other countries, wiping out indigenous populations, and creating a dire global environmental crisis, the governments of rich nations now use environmental concerns to promote policies that deny underdeveloped nations the right to control and manage their own resources.

If they have their ways, these groups will reduce indigenous people to mere “park rangers”, paid by rich countries to protect limited areas, while multinational corporations destroy the environment elsewhere.

Bolivia’s indigenous majority has chosen a very different road. They aim to create a new state in which they are no longer marginalised or treated as minority groups that require special protection.

In alliance with other oppressed sectors, they aim to run their country for the collective benefit of the majority.

The Bolivian masses have successfully wrested government power from the traditional elites, won control over gas and other resources, and adopted a new constitution.

Mistakes have been made, and are likely in future. But they are the mistakes of a people of a small, landlocked and underdeveloped country fighting constant imperialist assaults.

Key to the Bolivian peoples’ fight is the world-wide front for climate justice, in which Bolivia is playing a vital leadership role.

One example was the 35,000-strong Peoples Summit on Climate Change organised by the Morales government in Cochabamba in April 2010.

The summit’s final declaration named developed countries as “the main cause of climate change”. It insisted that those countries must “recognise and honor their climate debt”, redirecting funds from war to aiding poorer nations to develop their economies “to produce goods and services necessary to satisfy the fundamental needs of their population”.

To achieve this, the international climate justice movement must focus its efforts on forcing rich nations to accept their responsibilities.

The global movement must explicitly reject imperialist intervention in all its forms, including the “green imperialist” policies of US-funded NGOs.

Only through such a campaign can we support the efforts of poorer countries to chart a development path that respects the environment.

Unfortunately, Avaaz and the organisations that have signed the letter against Morales let the real culprits off the hook.

Their campaign should be rejected by all environmentalists and anti-imperialists fighting for a better a world.

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