

BOLIVIA: The Morales government: neoliberalism in disguise?

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For more than a decade Bolivia has been rocked by mass upsurges and mobilisations that have posed the necessity and possibility of fundamental political and social transformation.^{[1](#)} In 2005 the social movements that led the country's water and gas wars managed to elect a government that since then has presided over a process of change that has brought major advances.

Among these are: the adoption of a plurinational state structure that for the first time recognises the country's indigenous majority; regaining sovereign control over vital natural resources and initial steps towards endogenous industrialisation; an ongoing agrarian reform; and the development of social programmes that have substantially improved the lives of ordinary Bolivians. Democratic rights have been reinforced; forms of self-government by indigenous communities established; and electoral processes expanded to include popular election even of the judiciary. Not least in importance, Bolivia has also become a prime participant in the movement for Latin American anti-imperialist unification and sovereignty and emerged as a major leader in the international fight against capitalist-induced climate change.

In his recent article in this journal, "Revolution against 'Progress'",^{[2](#)} Jeffery Webber offers a harsh critique of the MAS government, illustrating it by reference to recent conflicts between the government and some indigenous groups involving environmental and development issues. His conclusion: the government remains committed to a neoliberal programme based on "fiscal austerity", "low inflationary growth", "inconsequential agrarian reform", "low social spending" and "alliances with transnational capital", among other policies. As such, it shares "more continuity than change with the inherited neoliberal model".

These are sweeping assertions, and many are questionable. Webber criticises the government's supposed "fiscal austerity", yet omits the fact that budget spending has increased almost fourfold between 2004 and 2012. He attacks the government for seeking "low inflation" and "macroeconomic stability", but what is his alternative: high inflation and macroeconomic instability? These were certainly traits of previous neoliberal governments. Furthermore, is it "inconsequential" that in its first five years the Morales government presided over the redistribution or titling of 41 million hectares of land to over 900,000 members of indigenous peasant communities?^{[3](#)} And if the government's policy can be simply defined as one of forming alliances to benefit foreign transnationals, why is the Bolivian state currently facing 12 legal challenges in international courts initiated by these same companies?

Profile of neoliberalism

Simply put, Webber ignores the real progress made by the Morales government in rolling back the neoliberal project in Bolivia. Neoliberalism is best understood as a class project that sought to reassert capital's dominance internationally in the wake of the 1970s economic crisis. Neoliberalism, as Webber himself previously noted, was "set in motion on an international scale largely under the tutelage of the US imperial state" and had as its fundamental strategy not only the "privatisation of formerly state or public resources but their acquisition by transnational capital in the US and other core economies".[4](#)

Furthermore, current Bolivian vice-president Álvaro García Linera has noted that neoliberalism rested on three additional "pillars": "the fragmentation of the labouring sectors and worker organisations...the diminished state, and impediments to people's decision making".[5](#)

The impact of neoliberalism in Bolivia includes:[6](#)

- I The sell-off or dismantling of Bolivia's largest state-owned companies. In the hydrocarbon sector, which accounted for 50 percent of government revenue, privatisation was accompanied by a drop in royalties companies had to pay from 50 percent to 18 percent. The workforce of YPBF (Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Bolivianos) was reduced from more than 9,000 in 1985 to 600 by 2002.

- I The state's dependency on foreign imperialist governments, transnational corporations and their institutions was deepened. International loans and aid covered "roughly half of Bolivia's public investment", with each budget deficit bringing further IMF-imposed structural adjustment programmes.

- I The removal of state subsidies sent Bolivia's small industrial sector into crisis. Some 35,000 jobs disappeared in the manufacturing sector alone.

- I By 1988 the informal sector had ballooned to 70 percent of Bolivia's urban workforce, and the few jobs created in the formal sector were subject to labour flexibilisation practices.

- I The establishment of power-sharing pacts among traditional parties and restrictions on electoral registration for alternative parties consolidated the grip that neoliberal politicians had on political decision making.

Compare this disastrous record with that of the Morales government. While Bolivia's state continues to be capitalist, "and the government functions within the framework of deeply entrenched capitalist culture and social relations", it is equally true that through a combination of successful electoral and insurrectional battles, indigenous-popular forces today are in control of important positions of power within the state.[7](#) From these positions, they have used the increased state revenue, generated through nationalisations undertaken across various strategic sectors, to begin breaking its dependency on foreign governments. This strong economic position has allowed those running the Bolivian state to dictate their own domestic and foreign policy, free from any impositions placed by imperialist governments and international financial institutions in return for loans. Ties of the US military to the Bolivian army have been cut.

A constituent assembly wrote a new constitution that for the first time recognises the

previously excluded indigenous majority and has recuperated state control over natural resources. Since the referendum ratifying the new constitution the process of “decolonising” the state has continued, most recently in October 2010, with the holding of Bolivia’s first popular elections to elect judicial authorities. The result was a record number of women and indigenous people flooding into the judicial branch of the state.

The Morales government also initiated a significant shift in Bolivia’s foreign policy, leaving behind the traditional subservient stance towards the US. Instead Bolivia has spearheaded initiatives in the direction of seeking unity with anti-imperialist forces—both at the level of governments and social movements—within the context of the Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of Our America (Alba), and increasing regional collaboration, through institutions such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). Another key focus has been the construction of an international alliance to fight for real solutions to the climate crisis, as evidenced by the World Peoples’ Summit on Climate Change held in Cochabamba in April 2010.

An alternative model

Webber ignores most of these achievements and instead focuses on the MAS industrial strategy and the social tensions that have been expressed around this. But he misrepresents the strategy. Let us look first, then, at what this strategy comprises, as it is a central component in the government’s economic vision. A succinct presentation may be found in a recent article on Bolivia’s economic model by Luis Alberto Arce Catacora, the minister of economy and public finance.

For Arce, “the New Economic, Social, Communitarian and Productive Model” that the government is implementing “does not pretend to immediately change the capitalist mode of production, but instead to lay the foundations for the transition towards a new socialist mode of production”.⁸

Unlike neoliberalism, in which surplus value and rents are appropriated by transnational capital, this new model, as the introduction to his article notes, has taken steps towards:

stimulating the internal market and reducing dependency on the external markets. Similarly, it has given the state a watching brief, endowing it with functions such as planning the economy, administering public enterprises, investing in the productive sector, taking on the role of a banker and regulator and, among other things, redistributing the surplus, with preference to those sectors that were not beneficiaries under previous governments.

The priority, Arce says, is promoting communitarian, cooperative and family-based enterprises (together with increasing social spending). Such a strategy is vital to rebuilding the strength of the working class and communitarian forces, pulverised by two decades of neoliberalism.

In summary: reassert state sovereignty in the economy and over natural resources; break out of Bolivia’s traditional position of primary materials exporter through industrialisation and promoting other productive sectors such as manufacturing and agriculture; redistribute the nation’s wealth in order to tackle poverty; and strengthen the organisational capacity of proletarian and communitarian forces as the two vital pillars of any possible transition to

socialism in Bolivia today. Such a perspective, which seeks to advance the interest of Bolivia's labouring classes at the expense of transnational capital, may be decried by some as mere reforms, but it is certainly not neoliberalism.

Changes in the economic structure

So how has the Morales government done in terms of turning these ideas into reality? A key component of this "new economic model" was the nationalisation of the crucial hydrocarbon sector in the first year of the Morales government, which led to a complete overhaul of the rules of the game in the sector, and brought about immediate benefits for the Bolivian people. Whereas under neoliberalism transnational capital was allowed to appropriate 82 percent of the wealth generated by gas rent, under the new regime the state retains between 80 and 90 percent. This has meant that the total amount of gas revenue received by the state during the first six years of the Morales government was roughly seven times greater than that obtained during the previous five years of neoliberal privatisation.⁹

While transnationals technically extract the majority of Bolivia's gas, they do so as contractors hired by the state, which determines the quantity and the price of every single drop of Bolivian gas that is produced. When they have failed to comply with their contracts, the government has not been afraid to nationalise them. In the meantime, the MAS government's objective is to rebuild YPBF, starting with the expropriation of those sections of the company that were privatised, and from there progressively granting it greater direct participation in the sector.

Further nationalisations have allowed the state to become the biggest player in the telecommunications and electricity sectors and begin redirecting these sectors towards ensuring Bolivians have greater access to basic services. As a result, the number of households with gas connections has increased by 835 percent, the percentage of rural households with access to electricity has jumped to 50 percent from 20 percent, and the number of municipalities with telecommunications coverage has gone from 110 to 324 (out of a total of 339).¹⁰

By shifting wealth generated in these sectors towards social spending, the level of poverty had fallen from 60 percent in 2005 to 49.6 percent in 2010, while the gap between the richest 10 percent and poorest 10 percent shrank from 128 times more wealth to 60 times more wealth.¹¹ Meanwhile, the redirection of wealth towards promoting other productive sectors led to a fall in unemployment from 8.2 percent in 2005 to 5.7 percent in 2010, and the creation of a number of small-scale enterprises whose management is to be handed over to local communities as part of fostering the communitarian sector.¹²

This sector has also received priority in the government's agricultural policies: over 35 million hectares of land has been handed as communitarian property or placed under the direct control of the original indigenous inhabitants.¹³ The newly-established EMAPA (Empresa de Apoyo a la producción de Alimentos) has ensured small producers have preferential access to equipment, supplies, 0 percent interest rate loans, and state-subsided markets.¹⁴

Viewed as a whole, the measures taken to recover sovereignty over Bolivia's economy have seen the state become the largest player in the national economy. Today more of Bolivia's wealth stays in Bolivia and is used to expand the internal market through industrialisation, promote the communitarian sector and attack poverty. This is obviously not a neoliberal

approach—either in conception or execution.

Moreover, it is one that has continually received the overwhelming support of Bolivia's labouring classes, and not just at election time. Morales's election victory, far from shifting "popular politics from the streets and countryside to the electoral arena" as Webber claims, was instead the trigger for an intensification of class struggle, culminating in an all-out battle for power whose result was determined by the decisive intervention of the masses.

Where Webber sees "electoral sclerosis", Bolivia's traditional capitalist elites saw a real threat to their political and economic power. They responded accordingly by launching a counter-revolutionary offensive that peaked with their unsuccessful September 2008 attempted coup. The outcome of this confrontation was determined by the profound nature of the class mobilisations of the period, combined with the ability of the MAS leadership to steadfastly expand and unite its support base among the popular classes, within the military, and internationally. The right wing opposition was sent into a tailspin from which it has not yet recovered. In the subsequent elections the Morales government was re-elected with a record 64 percent vote of approval, winning a majority in both the legislature and the senate. Two years later there is still no viable and coherent political alternative to the MAS either to its left or right.

"Creative tensions"

Webber points to recurrent conflicts between social movements and the government over local development projects, resource distribution, wage disputes, etc, as evidence not only of growing popular disaffection with the MAS but that the MAS is fundamentally an obstacle to further progress. He admits, however, that no "articulated revolutionary and socialist project to the left of the MAS" exists, and that none of these struggles resemble a "revolutionary or socialist break" with the Morales government.[15](#)

The MAS leadership view the current situation and the nature of the conflicts that have arisen in recent times quite differently. Their view is set out in a 74-page pamphlet by García Linera on what he terms the "creative tensions in the revolution".[16](#) He argues that the constellation of social forces since the victory in the 2008 confrontations has opened a new period in Bolivia's current revolutionary epoch "characterised not by the presence of contradictions between antagonistic power blocs, between irreconcilable societal projects", as hitherto, but one that "will be marked by the presence of contradictions within the national-popular bloc, that is, by tensions between the very sectors that are leading the Process of Change". These contradictions, he says, "are not simply secondary but are *creative* because they have the potential to help drive forward the course of the revolution itself".[17](#)

These creative tensions take various forms. One has to do with the relationship between the state's tendency to concentrate decision making and the social movements' affinity for "full and ongoing socialisation of deliberations and decisions around matters of common concern". This is "a creative, dialectical, productive and necessary tension", he adds.

A second creative tension is between the revolution's need to incorporate broader sectors and "the need to guarantee indigenous, *campesino*, worker and popular leadership" in this process.[18](#) A third involves the tension "between the general interest of the society as a whole and the particular interest of an individual segment...between the common,

communitarian, communist struggle and the search for individual, sectoral, particular and private interest”.[19](#)

And finally, García Linera points to a fourth tension, between the need to develop and industrialise Bolivia’s economy and the need to respect the rights of Mother Earth.[20](#) The starting point for resolving this tension, argues García Linera, must be ensuring people’s access to basic services while protecting the environment.

TIPNIS highway conflict

This brings us to the conflict that developed in 2011 over the government’s plan to build a highway connecting Villa Tunari (in Cochabamba department) with San Ignacio de Moxos (in Beni department) through the indigenous territory and national park known as TIPNIS (Territorio Indígena del Parque Nacional Isiboro-Sécure). Webber sees this conflict as confirmation of his thesis that the “neoliberal” MAS government is now being undermined by the “class contradictions” underlying its development model.

In Webber’s scenario, the struggle over the highway route pitted poor indigenous communities against a cabal of rich peasants and *cocaleros* allied with “agro-industrial soy producers”, Bolivian financial capital, “Brazilian sub-imperialism”, and petroleum multinationals, all under the aegis of the MAS government—and all determined to dispossess “uppy, partially non-capitalist indigenous social formations” still in control of the park. These poor peasants and their supporters managed to force the Morales government to stop the road, dealing it a crushing blow. The MAS’s social base, “an eclectic coalition of various urban and rural social movements and trade unions” that had supported the government, “has imploded”.

However, it is important to understand the sequence of events, including those subsequent to the march (and Webber’s article). As a result of Bolivia’s parliament approving a law banning a highway through TIPNIS and declaring the park “untouchable”—a term included at the insistence of NGO advisers working with march leaders—a debate opened up in Bolivia over the highway and TIPNIS’s “untouchable” status. Evidence emerged of contracts that TIPNIS communities had signed with various commercial operations, including timber and tourist enterprises. Important indigenous and popular sectors began organising against the new law, stating their intent to mobilise in support of the highway.

By December a counter-march was initiated by CONISUR (Consejo de Indígenas del Sur), which groups a number of indigenous and peasant communities within TIPNIS. The CONISUR march received support from a variety of sectors, in particular Bolivia’s three largest nationwide indigenous *campesino* organisations. These forces argued that the highway is essential to integrating Bolivia’s Amazonian region with the rest of the country, as well as providing local communities with access to basic services and markets to sell their agricultural produce.

When the CONISUR march arrived in La Paz 39 days later, the government asked leaders of the earlier march to meet with CONISUR representatives to try and resolve the dispute. Leaders from CIDOB (Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas de Bolivia), which unites 34 lowland indigenous peoples, and the TIPNIS Subcentral rejected this request. Parliamentarians then began meeting with CONISUR representatives to elaborate a new law that would allow TIPNIS communities to decide the fate of the project. The result was a new law facilitating a consultation process which gives the three indigenous peoples within

TIPNIS—the Yuracare, Chiman and Moxe—the right to decide, in accordance with their own norms and procedures, whether or not the highway is to be built through TIPNIS and if the park is to maintain its “untouchable” status.

At the time of writing it remains to be seen just how this will work out. Whatever the errors of the MAS government with regard to consulting the indigenous communities involved, steps have been taken to respond to the concerns expressed by the marchers, and to open up the question of the highway for further debate, with the ultimate decision now being handed to the very indigenous communities that Webber argues were being steamrollered by the supposedly neoliberal government.

Politics of the TIPNIS protest

Other aspects of this struggle merit examination for what they reveal of the contending forces. They also reinforce the argument stated in my article “Bolivia: NGOs wrong on Morales and Amazon”, which Webber falsely characterises as accusing the protesters of being agents of imperialism.²¹ The TIPNIS protesters should not be condemned because of the unsavoury character of their friends and backers, but such sinister involvement deserves scrutiny. Despite Webber’s general stance against “imperialist meddling”, his article fails to confront my evidence that behind the international TIPNIS campaign run by foreign-based NGOs lie the very real interests of “rich nations and conservative environmental groups to promote policies that represent a new form of ‘green imperialism’.”

A useful starting point is the politics of the first TIPNIS march. Among the 16 demands of the protest were calls to support converting Bolivia’s forests into carbon credits (in line with the imperialist-sponsored Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation [REDD] scheme) and shutting down 90 percent of Bolivia’s gas industry. The consequences of these demands would have been to auction off Bolivia’s forests to capitalist interests while closing off the major resource in Bolivia’s efforts to industrialise. Far from representing an anti-capitalist programme, these demands could only pave the way for transnational capital to reassert its power over Bolivia. Of course, the international campaign against the Morales government made no mention or criticism of these issues. Webber, on the other hand, admits these demands were “problematic”

but nevertheless maintains that the overall agenda of the marchers was “essentially just”. In fact, these demands, along with the subsequent demand by NGO advisers to declare TIPNIS “untouchable”, indicated significant influence of foreign-bankrolled NGOs, most of which promote their own agendas in Bolivia.

The TIPNIS marchers were openly supported by right wing Santa Cruz agrobusiness interests and their main political representatives, the Santa Cruz governorship and Santa Cruz Civic Committee.²² The reason for their opposition to the road was elaborated by García Linera:

In order to reach the rest of the country, Amazonians must rely on processing and financing by firms under the control of oligarchs based in Santa Cruz. A road that directly links the Amazon with the valleys and highlands would radically reconfigure the structure of regional economic power, breaking down the last material base of the separatists and leading to a new geo-economic axis for the state.²³

Moreover, efforts on the part of the Santa Cruz oligarchy to win influence among CIDOB’s leadership both pre-date the march and have continued in recent months. This includes the

alliance forged in June 2011 between indigenous deputies and right wing parties in the Santa Cruz departmental council against the MAS, a favour repaid in the form of US\$3.5 million granted by the governorship for development projects in CIDOB communities.[24](#) In January 2012 CIDOB president Adolfo Chávez praised the right wing Santa Cruz governor for signing an agreement that provides the indigenous organisation with a post in the Santa Cruz governorship.[25](#)

Washington's role

Webber is right to state that “we do not yet know the extent of US involvement” in the mobilisation. But there is already much information to demonstrate the links between imperialism and some indigenous protest leaders. These date back to before Morales's election and have continued since, as demonstrated in US embassy cables made public by Wikileaks.[26](#)

Further evidence of ongoing meetings and communication can be found by simply visiting the websites of USAID and CIDOB. While Morales was denouncing capitalism as the root cause of the climate crisis at the Copenhagen Climate Change Summit in 2009, CIDOB leaders were participating there in a USAID-promoted workshop to talk up the imperialist-sponsored REDD project they were pursuing together with USAID-funded NGOs.[27](#) Referring to a USAID training programme run for CIDOB leaders, Chávez thanks the “information and training acquired via different programmes financed by external collaborators, in this case USAID”.[28](#) The government also revealed how US embassy officials had been in phone contact with march leaders the day their mobilisation began.[29](#)

Rather than take up the role of US imperialism, Webber concocts a scenario in which the highway is an “expressway for Brazilian capital” and indicative of the Morales government's subordination to “Brazilian sub-imperialism”. His argument is that behind the dispute is Brazil's need to access the Pacific. This fanciful notion has been refuted by García Linera who notes that such critics have “never seen a map of Bolivia”. [30](#) Not only does the proposed highway go nowhere near the Brazilian border, but its trajectory runs north-south, while Brazil lies to the east and the Pacific to the west. That it is part of the Brazilian-promoted Initiative for the Integration of the Regional Infrastructure of South America (IIRSA) is also a questionable argument, given that Webber raised no such concerns when reporting on the 2010 Potosi “rebellion against neoliberalism” which demanded the completion of a highway that is part of the same project.[31](#)

If we were to accept Webber's argument, we would not only have to question the interests behind the Potosi protests but even those of the TIPNIS communities themselves, who have consistently stated their support for the highway while opposing its current trajectory through the middle of their territory. Like many other communities in Bolivia, TIPNIS residents unserved by roads lack access to basic services and are unable to transport their produce to market. Overcoming this, and the stranglehold that the Santa Cruz oligarchy maintains over the Amazonian economy, is not only a central priority for the Morales government; it has been a key demand of Bolivia's impoverished majority.

One of the most questionable aspects of Webber's piece is his effort to divide indigenous movements between “good” ones, which he says are “non-capitalist” communities waging class war against “the dull advance of bourgeois industrialisation”, and “bad” ones allied with the MAS. The truth, however, is that “the coca-growers [supporting the highway] were neither saints before nor are they narcos now; those in TIPNIS are neither agents of

imperialism nor are they the vanguard force in the fight for an alternative civilisation".^{[32](#)} While peasant populations have always, everywhere, been stratified along class and income lines, Webber offers no evidence that the vast majority of indigenous peasants and their organisations are not still in alliance with the MAS government, whatever their criticisms and occasional conflicts with it.

Webber's animosity to the MAS and its programme has led him to ignore these realities and challenges. He romanticises the road opponents, while overlooking the real role of the Santa Cruz oligarchy and US imperialism. As such, Webber's approach undermines the defence of Bolivia's process of social change. In imposing his schema of revolutionary masses versus neoliberal government on each and every protest that erupts in Bolivia, Webber comes up short on the tasks that we share as solidarity activists have in imperialist countries.

We need to do more than oppose "imperialist meddling" in principle. The TIPNIS struggle bears the signs of intervention by imperialist agencies and their clients in Bolivia and abroad. This ongoing involvement infringes on the rights of all Bolivians, including the TIPNIS protesters. It is part of a longstanding pattern of diplomatic, military and economic intrusion that is strongly resented by the Bolivian people. Whether we, like García Linera, regard the TIPNIS controversy as a conflict within the people, or like Webber take sides against the Bolivian government in this matter, we must not fail to use the occasion to oppose the intrusion of imperialist governments and agencies into the internal affairs of the Bolivian people.

Notes

^{[1:](#)} Thanks to John Riddell and Richard Fidler for their suggestions while writing this article.

^{[2:](#)} Webber, 2012. Except as indicated, all quotations attributed to Webber are taken from this article.

^{[3:](#)} Rojas Calizaya, 2011.

^{[4:](#)} Spronk and Webber, 2003.

^{[5:](#)} García Linera, 2007a.

^{[6:](#)} The following data is taken from Kohl and Farthing, 2006.

^{[7:](#)} Riddell, 2011. The term indigenous-popular is used to refer to the diverse and complex conglomerate of labouring classes in Bolivia today.

^{[8:](#)} Arce, 2011, pp1-7.

^{[9:](#)} García Linera, 2011c, p61.

^{[10:](#)} Telesur, 2012; García Linera, 2011b, p20; García Linera, 2011c, p38.

^{[11:](#)} García Linera, 2011b, pp15, 19.

^{[12:](#)} Cambio, 2011b; Cambio, 2011c.

^{[13:](#)} Rojas Calizaya, 2011.

- [14:](#) Cambio, 2011a.
- [15:](#) Webber, 2011.
- [16:](#) García Linera, 2011a.
- [17:](#) García Linera, 2011a, p24.Emphasis in original.
- [18:](#) García Linera, 2011a, p38.
- [19:](#) García Linera, 2011a, p47.
- [20:](#) García Linera, 2011a, p63.
- [21:](#) Fuentes, 2011.
- [22:](#) See, for example, Opinion, 2011.
- [23:](#) Hernández Navarro, 2012.
- [24:](#) Mendez, 2011.
- [25:](#) CIDOB, 2012.
- [26:](#) Fuentes, 2011. For links prior to 2005 see Lindsay, 2005.
- [27:](#) USAID, 2009.
- [28:](#) CIDOB-USAID, 2010.
- [29:](#) Opinion, 2011a.
- [30:](#) García Linera, 2011b, p152.
- [31:](#) Webber, 2010.
- [32:](#) Stefanoni, 2012

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