

2009 will be the year of the re-foundation of Bolivia

On Monday 20 December, over 100,000 Bolivians, led by President Evo Morales Ayma, completed the historic 7-day march across the altiplano by descending from El Alto to Plaza Murillo in central La Paz. Thousands more people lined the streets to cheer, applaud and shout slogans of support.

After five days of intensive and extended debate, negotiation, and long parliamentary speeches during which some deputies were unable to stop themselves snoozing, the National Congress finally passed approval for the law convoking a referendum on the proposed new constitution, to take place on 25 January 2009. Given its level of popular support, the result of the referendum is bound to be a resounding “yes” to the new constitution. So, more than two and half years after work started on drafting the new constitution, and more than 25 years after one of the social movements of Bolivia first raised a demand for a new constitution¹, 2009 will be the year of the “re-foundation of Bolivia”.

The new constitution was drafted by a constituent assembly which took nearly two years to produce the draft, a process which was almost successfully sabotaged by filibustering to delay the process until its 2-year cut-off limit. To obtain the two-thirds majority in Congress needed to pass the referendum law, the government agreed modifications to over 100 of the 411 articles contained in the draft. But the modifications are not fundamental, and the way is now clear for the country to make many progressive advances in its political life, as can be understood from the new constitution’s preamble (quoted in full):

En tiempos inmemoriales se erigieron montañas, se desplazaron ríos, se formaron lagos. Nuestra amazonia, nuestro chaco, nuestro altiplano y nuestros llanos valles se cubrieron de verdores y flores. Poblamos esta sagrada Madre Tierra con rostros diferentes, y comprendimos desde entonces la pluralidad vigente de todas las cosas y nuestra diversidad como seres y culturas. Así

conformamos nuestros pueblos, y jamás comprendimos el racismo hasta que lo sufrimos desde los funestos tiempos de la colonia.

El pueblo boliviano, de composición plural, desde la profundidad de la historia, inspirado en las luchas del pasado, en la sublevación indígena anticolonial, en la independencia, en las luchas populares de liberación en las marchas indígenas, sociales y sindicales, en las guerras del agua y de octubre, en las luchas por la tierra y territorio, y con la memoria de nuestros mártires, construimos un nuevo Estado.

Un estado basado en el respeto e igualdad entre todos, con principios de soberanía, dignidad, complementaridad, solidaridad, armonía y equidad en la distribución y redistribución del producto social, donde predomine la búsqueda del vivir bien; con respeto a la pluralidad económica, social, jurídica, política y cultural de los habitantes de esta tierra; en convivencia colectiva con acceso al agua, trabajo, educación, salud y vivienda para todos.

Dejamos en el pasado el Estado colonial, republicano y neoliberal. Asumimos el reto histórico de construir colectivamente el Estado Unitario Social de Derecho Plurinacional Comunitario, que integra y articula los propósitos de avanzar hacia una Bolivia democrática, productiva, portadora e inspiradora de la paz, comprometida con el desarrollo integral y con la libre determinación de los pueblos.

Nosotros, mujeres y hombres, a través de la Asamblea Constituyente y con el poder originario del pueblo, manifestamos nuestro compromiso con la unidad e integridad del país.

Cumpliendo el mandato de nuestros pueblos, con la fortaleza de nuestra Pachamama y gracias a Dios, refundamos Bolivia.

Honor y gloria a los mártires de la gesta constituyente y liberadora, que han hecho posible esta nueva historia.²

[In times immemorial mountains arose, rivers flowed, lakes formed. Our Amazonia, our Chaco, our altiplano and our plains and valleys covered themselves with greenness and flowers. We populated this sacred Motherland with different faces, and we have understood since then the plurality of all things and our diversity as beings and cultures. So our peoples were formed, and we never understood the racism from which we suffered ever since the disastrous times of the colonization.

We Bolivian people, of plural composition, from the depths of history, inspired by the struggles of the past, by the indigenous anticolonial uprising, by our independence, by popular liberation struggles, by the indigenous, social and trade union marches, by the water wars and the war of October {2003}, by the struggles for the land and for our territory, and with the memory of our martyrs, construct a new State.

A State based on the respect and equality between all, with principles of sovereignty, dignity, complementarity, solidarity, harmony and equity in the distribution and re-distribution of the social product, wherein the quest for living in a beneficent way predominates; with respect to the economic, social, juridical, political and cultural plurality of the inhabitants of this land; in collective coexistence with access to water, work, education, health and housing for all.

We leave in the past the colonial, republican and neoliberal State. We assume the historic challenge of collectively constructing the Unitary Social State of Communitarian Plurinational Rights, which integrates and articulates the intention to advance towards a democratic, productive Bolivia, bearer and inspirer of peace, committed to integral development and self-determination of the peoples.

We, women and men, through the Constituent Assembly and with the original power of the people, manifest our commitment to the unity and integrity of the country.

Complying with the mandate of our peoples, with the fortitude of our Pachamama and thanks to God, we refound Bolivia.

Honour and glory to the martyrs of {this struggle of liberation}, who have made possible this new history.]³

After the multitude had been patiently waiting, in joyful mood, in Plaza Murillo for about 24 hours, listening to bands and speeches and accompanied for much of that time by Evo Morales, Vice-president Álvaro García Linera emerged from the Congress Palace at about 1pm on 21 October, bringing the referendum law, finally approved by congress, to the President for his signature – the final step in the law’s promulgation. Evo wept as he signed the document in front of tens of thousands of Bolivians.

Siento que este proceso de cambio es sin retorno. Digan lo que digan, hagan lo que hagan, ya no va a volver el neoliberalismo.⁴

[I feel that this process of change is irreversible. Whatever they say, whatever they do, neoliberalism will never return.]

One concession which the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) made in the negotiation process was that Morales renounced the possibility that he would stand for president of the country in the period 2014 – 2019. Both the current and the new draft constitutions state that an individual may only be president for two 5-year terms of office. The “transitorial dispositions” of the new constitution as they had been drafted by the Constituent Assembly stated that mandates previous to the currency of the constitution would not be taken into account – implying that the clock would be reset so that Morales could run for president in 2009 and then again in 2014. This however has been amended to its opposite, so Morales’ current term of office counts towards the two terms. Said Morales:

Renuncié por el bien del país y de este proceso de cambio. Evo no es ambicioso, Evo no tiene intereses.⁵

[I’ll resign for the good of the country and of this process of change. Evo isn’t ambitious, Evo doesn’t have {personal} interests.]

He commented, though, that during the march, many people had asked him “to stay in the government for 30, 40 or even 500 years”. This concession does not have to be a huge restriction, in my view, on the composition of the leadership of the *proceso de cambio*. For example, there is nothing, in my reading of the amended draft, to prevent Morales from being the Vice-president from 2014 until 2024, whilst in the meantime García Linera could be President. They already seem to co-operate well as the executive team.

The *proceso de cambio* has not had a smooth ride up until now, and nor can it expect one in the next few years. The opposition prefects of Santa Cruz, Chuquisaca and Beni have already issued statements rejecting the constitution which has now been agreed in Congress. Mario Cossío, opposition prefect of Tarija, has not so far commented. Ruben

Costas, prefect of Santa Cruz, stated “we have to continue our democratic struggle”. In September, hundreds of thousands of Bolivianos’ worth of damage was done to oil and gas installations, and government and other official buildings, in Santa Cruz, by supporters of Costas, some of whom also assaulted taxi drivers, soldiers, police men and women and indigenous passers-by.⁶ Would this be the “democratic struggle” which Costas is minded to continue?

Probably the biggest crunch issue which we can expect to be troublesome in the future is one which has so far lurked more or less on the sidelines – land reform. According to the UNDP, 25 million hectares of prime farmland in Bolivia are controlled by about 100 families. The remaining 5 million hectares are shared by 2 million *campesinos*.⁷ The new

constitution will require the introduction of laws to forbid the holding of large tracts of land not in productive use, and to limit the size of any holding either to 10,000 hectares or to 5,000 hectares. This limit of 10 or 5 thousand will be determined by the vote in a separate question within the referendum of 25 January 2009.

Land reform has always been an intractable issue in Latin America. Land ownership forms the basis of the oligarchy’s wealth, through its control of an excessive proportion of Bolivia’s resources, which in turns allows it to exploit workers and landless *campesinos*. Perhaps the three-year struggle under Evo’s government, for the new constitution, will turn out to be a mere prelude to a more dramatic encounter.

A Visit to Radio Lachiwana

10 October 2008.

A week ago, I visited Radio Lachiwana, a community radio station in Cochabamba, Bolivia, as a member of a group of seven people from England, Australia and the USA. The radio station is a major project of *Chajra Runa Masis*, a group of community media activists. “Lachiwana” is a quechua word for a type of bee which makes very sweet honey but has a potent sting. Housed on the third floor of a nondescript building in suburban Cochabamba, the station’s modest, compact studio is beautifully decorated with wall hangings, posters depicting heroic indigenous leaders from Bolivia’s history, such as Tupac Katari and Bartolina Sisa⁸, and the flag of the indigenous peoples of the Andes, the *Wiphala*.

The station was born out of a process which began in 2000 during a massive popular struggle which succeeded in reversing the neoliberal privatization of water in

Cochabamba.⁹ Liliana,¹⁰ an indigenous woman, witnessed the arrest of a man during a demonstration, who managed to pass her a piece of paper with his name and other details. She took the information to a radio station run by an evangelical church (targeting indigenous people as an audience), but she was not allowed through the front door because she could not pay the entry fee of 5 Bolivianos. She realized that indigenous people needed their own radio station, under community control. But to begin with, the group had to be content with just recording programs which were broadcast on whichever radio stations would accept them. In 2004, the group was able to obtain its own equipment and so Radio Lachiwana finally came into existence.

The station broadcasts all day, in Quechua, Aymara and Spanish.¹¹ It has an AM frequency to reach out to rural areas in the department of Cochabamba, and an FM frequency which is best for reception in the

city (the city occupies a flat plain which is more or less surrounded by mountains). The station's main target audience is the latest generation of indigenous people to have migrated from the countryside to the city. In adopting urban ways of life, many of these people, says Liliana, have a tendency to reject their heritage of indigenous culture. But life in Cochabamba for these migrants can be very hard, with a dearth of jobs, and they often have to live in neighbourhoods at the edges of the city, without running water or other amenities. Such people desperately need a sense of identity in which they can take pride. Radio Lachiwana tries to promote this form of self-respect.

During "Black January" (2007), a period of intense confrontation in Cochabamba between the popular movements on the one hand, and the prefect¹² Manfred Reyes Villa and his relatively small number of supporters on the other, Radio Lachiwana played an important role in rapidly spreading vital information to the people, in an environment where most of the radio, television and newspapers are controlled by the right. Some members of Chajra Runa Masis work in media other than radio: film and journalism. They frequently attend important events such as popular mobilizations and conferences.

Gillian, the member of our visiting group who lives in Australia, was inspired to try to

facilitate contact between Radio Lachiwana and Australian indigenous peoples' organisations. A significant difference between Bolivia and Australia is that a majority of Bolivians identify themselves as indigenous, whereas a very small number of Australians claim an indigenous heritage. Nevertheless, Gillian feels that it is important that all Australians develop their knowledge and understanding of the real history of their land and their people. As the worldwide movement of indigenous peoples takes shape, transglobal links between different indigenous peoples within this movement can take on a significant role.

Some of the members of Chajra Runa Masis have received death threats or have been beaten up by racists who want to "keep the Indians in their place". This has not, however, deterred them from their mission to promote the positive self-image of indigenous Bolivians and to provide alternative media coverage in an environment where the mainstream media is heavily dominated by the Bolivian oligarchy and its supporters.

I came away from the visit feeling that I had had a very special experience and I was honoured to have met a group of people so dedicated to the hard struggle for progress which is going on across Bolivia today.

Bolivia: 20 October 2008, 9am.

The massive march of the social movements across 200 kilometers of the altiplano from Carracollo to La Paz has been proceeding for one week, and it is due to arrive in Plaza Murillo, where the National Congress is situated, in a few hours' time. The altiplano has an altitude of more or less 4000 meters. In the daytime, burning hot sun beats down fiercely as the thin air cannot soften its rays. At night, even in springtime (as it is now), the temperature can descend to zero. The marchers, determined to demonstrate the

will of the Bolivian peoples for the new constitution, have heroically withstood this harsh environment, and the march moves on, growing every day from around 5000 at its start, to tens of thousands as it arrived at Achica Arriba, near El Alto, yesterday afternoon, with a length of 5 kilometers. A volunteer team of Cuban and Bolivian doctors is providing medical assistance to the marchers. Feeder marches are also due to arrive in La Paz from El Alto, Los Yungas and Rio Abajo.

Meanwhile, Congress has been debating the proposed law to call a referendum to ratify (or not) the new constitution. Laws relating to constitutional matters require a two-thirds majority. The opposition has sufficient numbers in Congress to block such laws, although negotiations this week have resulted in at least 20 members of the opposition parties breaking away and offering to vote 'yes' to the referendum law. But the opposition is holding out, and Congress remained adjourned as yesterday closed. One MAS senator called for Congress to be "shut down" if it does not approve the referendum (However I am not aware of any constitutional basis for such a move). The social movements in El Alto, suspecting that opposition members of Congress might leave the country in order to render Congress inquorate, have decided to blockade the airport in El Alto (La Paz' international airport).

Last night, several hundred opposition supporters occupied Plaza Murillo, sitting in rows of white plastic seats, listening to rancorous speeches about "fighting against dictatorship" and "defending freedom of speech". The private TV station Notivision was busy interviewing opposition leaders, completely ignoring any of the statements or arguments of the government or social movements.

During these events, the opposition prefects of the *media luna* have remained silent. Another arrest has been made, of Jorge Melgar in Riberalta, a city in the far north of the department of Beni. Prior to his arrest, Melgar had a regular space as a "reporter" on a TV channel owned by MNR member Sandro Giordano, despite lacking any journalists' credentials. Melgar's "reporting" consists of rants containing such phrases as "(those) Indian shits, Kolla shits, shouldn't come any more to Riberalta", "damned race... you have 24 hours to leave Riberalta", "Evo Morales, Álvaro García, Alfredo Rada, Juan Ramón Quintana should be shot" and "we have foreign forces which are waiting for the

opportune moment to help us and come to our aid".

An order for the detention of Branco Marinkovic's sister Tatiana has also been issued. She is accused of defrauding the government of 20 million Bolivianos (approx. £1.3 million) in tax credits by falsely declaring a series of non-existent exports by her business. Branco is also implicated in this crime, but he had already fled to Miami to evade judicial proceedings around his alleged leadership of violent actions in Santa Cruz during September. These actions by the government are being portrayed by the right-wing media as "persecutions".

The government announced that it will probably lift the state of emergency in the department of Pando soon. Ignoring this statement, the private TV station PAT was this morning conducting a telephone poll asking "Do you think it is right that the government is trying to pass a referendum law during a state of emergency?"

In Cochabamba, the site for the new parliament of Unasur (the grouping of all 12 nations of South America) has been finalised as the town of San Benito, in the rural province of Punata. The area is renowned for its production of delicious peaches. The first session of the Unasur parliament was inaugurated on 17 October in the Palácio Portales (originally built as a residence of Simón Patiño, "tin baron" of the first half of the twentieth century) by Chilean president Michelle Bachelet. The parliament was set to declare the creation of the South American Defence Council, a military alliance against external threats to the region. This morning, Michelle Bachelet, accompanied by Evo Morales, laid the foundation stone for the new parliament building in San Benito.

The department of Cochabamba will be declared free of illiteracy (by UNESCO standards) on 15 November, as part of the advances of the National Literacy Programme which is using the Cuban literacy method "Yo sí puedo". 160,699 people, out of a total of 161,210 previously identified as illiterate in

the department, have graduated from the programme. Oruro was the first department to be declared free of illiteracy, on 13 March, Santa Cruz was second, and Pando third. The entire country is set to become the third Latin American nation to be declared “free of illiteracy” (after Cuba and Venezuela), by the end of 2008.

This morning, hundreds of parents of pupils at a Cochabamba college demonstrated outside the offices of a private TV station, Unitel. Unitel had broadcast suggestions that the pupils were drug-addicts and prostitutes. The demonstrators called for the station to be shut down, claiming that it consistently broadcasts lies.

President Bush of the United States has declared that after 6 months Bolivia will lose tariff concessions on exports to the United States, in retaliation for its “lack of co-operation” in the struggle against narco-trafficking. This is despite recent major successes by Bolivian anti-drugs authorities, such as the discovery on 12 October of 630 kilos of cocaine in a truck heading for Brazil. The Special Force for Struggle against Narco-trafficking (FELCN by its initials in Spanish), a police department, has beaten its previous annual record of apprehending 24.5 tonnes of drugs.

At 9.45am, the main march has reached Senkata in El Alto, and Boliviana de Televisión estimates the number of marchers at 100,000 (as a proportion of total population, this would be 700,000 in the United Kingdom). The other Bolivian TV channels are not currently covering the march.

¹ In 1990, the indigenous peoples of the lowland parts of Bolivia held a March for Territory and Dignity. More than 3,000 marchers arrived at the seat of government. This indigenous movement of the East was the first to raise the demand for a Constituent Assembly, charged with developing a new constitution in accordance with the multiethnic and pluricultural reality of the country. Manuel Vargas, *Historia de Bolivia*, (3rd edition), La Paz: Luciernaga, 2007, 101-102.

² Newspaper *Opinión*, Special Supplement, Cochabamba, 22 October 2008.

³ Translations are mine.

⁴ Op. cit.

⁵ Op. cit.

⁶ See my previous report of 11 September 2008.

⁷ Quoted in

<http://www.greenleft.org.au/2008/771/39748>. Viewed 17 Oct 2008.

⁸ Tupac Katari and his wife Bartolina Sisa led an uprising against Spanish colonial rule in 1781, laying siege to La Paz for 109 days. Eventually the Spanish overcame the rebellion and brutally executed both Katari and Sisa.

⁹ Olivera, Oscar. *Cochabamba: Water War in Bolivia*, trans. Tom Lewis. Cambridge: South End Press, 2004.

¹⁰ Not her real name. I have changed the names of all private individuals mentioned in this article.

¹¹ Or “Castellano”, which in Bolivia is the word most commonly used to refer to the Spanish language.

¹² In Bolivia, a “prefect” is the leading departmental executive. The nine departments are the largest territorial sub-divisions of the territory of the whole country.