

Bolivia:

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## A Crossroads for the Future of Latin America

By Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar | November 5, 2003

In Latin America, all eyes are focused on Bolivia.

Men and women committed to the causes of the indigenous and popular movements look on the recent events there as a difficult and prolonged birthing. From all over—from Argentina, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Mexico—they have expressed their overwhelming sympathy for the courage with which the Bolivian people have defended their natural resources and made inroads for building a future different from the neoliberal present of misery and death.

The governments of Latin America are watching too. Especially wary are the ones that signed the knee-jerk interventionist declaration of support for the government of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, promoted by the Organization of American States under pressure from the U.S. government. Undoubtedly, the governments that continue to implement plans to loot their own countries fear suffering the same fate as “El Goni.”

The United States government considers the situation critical. The Bush administration tried to the end to prop up Sánchez de Lozada and defend the \$6 billion gas project that the Bolivian people are fighting. But before his fall, Sánchez de Lozada had almost no support in his country: the church, the College of Professionals, groups of artists and intellectuals, and even politicians from his own coalition government had denounced the beleaguered president. A deluge of communiqués and declarations from citizen and social organizations of all kinds demanded his resignation.

The ex-president finally presented his resignation and opted for a calculated retreat to Florida. For many Bolivians his resignation is not enough; leaders of social movements call for a full investigation of and trial for the over 80 people killed in the streets, and retraction of the laws of privatization imposed under the two Sánchez de Lozada terms.

Sánchez de Lozada was president of an overwhelmingly indigenous country, yet his native tongue was English and he was raised and educated in the U.S. On the night of October 15, just two days before his fall, he repeated

his refusal to resign and pretended to accede to popular demands. He promised “to consult with the people in relation to the sale of gas.”

For the people, this concession was an act of disdain and racism, when at least 84 people lay dead and 500 wounded, and when all the major cities in the country were in the throes of massive demonstrations with a single cry: “Out with Sánchez de Lozada and No to the sale of Bolivian gas by transnationals!”

But in reality, Sánchez de Lozada wasn't talking to the Bolivian people. He was talking to the U.S. government and the governments that signed the OAS declaration, to convince them that a last-ditch attempt at conciliation could still save his presidency. Sánchez de Lozada and his U.S. advisers had developed arguments to justify the repression and try to fool world public opinion. Both the Bush and Bolivian governments warned of outside influences and the threat to the constitutional order... From whom? Terrorists and drug dealers? Criminals at large? As reports and images of the uprising travelled around the world, it became impossible to qualify the Aymara old women that faced down the tanks with sticks, or the multitude of over 100,000 unarmed people united in the Plaza San Francisco as outsiders.

With little choice, the George W. Bush administration has recognized the new government of former vice president Carlos Mesa. In a declaration on October 18, the State Department praised the ex-president in exile for his “commitment to democracy and the welfare of his country” and stressed its support for “the essential task of repairing national institutions.” However, Washington's support is clearly conditioned on two aspects: one, the continuation of their anti-narcotics policies that severely limit coca production and promote the militarization of the country, and two, respect for “the rule of law.”

Bolivia faces a crossroads that represents a choice between two futures, not only for the hemisphere's poorest nation but also for all of Latin America. The political system itself has been cracked open by a public that



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challenges the continued pillaging of its shared resources. The demonstrators have declared that the wealth of the nation should be used to their benefit and no longer to enrich the huge transnational consortiums that have proclaimed themselves the owners of the world. They have stood up to say: we are the poorest country in the continent and we can't take it any more.

With the demand for the Constituent Assembly, they have also challenged a form of democracy that at least in the Andean region has become a strait jacket. In Bolivia, the "rule of law" has been questioned, but it is the rule of law that gags and murders the poor people who challenge it.

The Bolivian uprising is not the beginning of chaos; it is the beginning of a new future. Chaos is what the people have experienced up to now—the dictatorship of transnationals that make life impossible.

The Constituent Assembly promised as a result of the efforts of thousands and thousands of Bolivians could lead to a possibility to rebuild society on a new basis. This is why so many eyes are on Bolivia now, and this is why it is so urgent to restrain the empire.

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