

Bolivia:

Recuperating Natural Resources, Rebuilding a Nation

By Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar | November 2003

Over a month before the fall of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada on October 17, 2003 scores of organizations and thousands of people staged work stoppages and strikes, led marches, blocked highways and organized street demonstrations to protest a plan to allow transnational companies to sell Bolivian natural gas abroad (primarily to the U.S. and Mexico) via a Chilean pipeline. The demonstrations were concentrated in two places: the capital city of La Paz and the outlying city of El Alto in the Bolivian high plain, and Cochabamba in the central part of the country.

I. The Demonstrations

Saturday, September 20: the detonator of the violence

On Sept. 20 a military command kills five people in an attempt to “rescue” a group of tourists that had remained stuck behind a roadblock. The roadblock was set up by local inhabitants in Warisata and Sorata, after they learned of the official decision to export natural gas under what they considered unacceptable conditions. The violence of the military response detonates an escalation of violence as the government responds to protests with a wave of repression that in less than a month’s time would leave more than 80 demonstrators dead and hundreds wounded.

From this date onward, a popular uprising begins to grow at a startling pace. From different perspectives and places, the movement says “NO” to the sale of gas under the model proposed, claiming it permits transnational companies to reap enormous profits while leaving practically no benefits to the economy of this Andean nation—the poorest in Latin America.

Sunday, October 12: Military and police repression leaves at least 20 dead this day. The bloodiest confrontations take place in El Alto, a poor urban zone with a majority indigenous Aymara population that lies on the periphery of La Paz. The residents of El Alto resist the attacks of tanks, helicopters and hundreds of well-armed military personnel who carry out an operative for 48 continuous hours.

Monday, October 13: Thousands of residents of El Alto literally drop out of the hills toward La Paz, and join contingents from other parts of the country to demand the immediate resignation of President Sánchez de Lozada. There are intense confrontations, increasing the number of deaths in the first round of disturbances in La Paz.

Tuesday, October 14: A tense calm settles on the city of La Paz. Demonstrators in the thousands have “taken” the city, while contingents from around the country announce their arrival. The army, on maximum alert, surrounds the palace of government while the demonstrators maintain their ultimatum: the president must step down to make way for a provisional government that promises to end the fierce repression unleashed against the people and call for a constituent assembly. In the night, there are huge collective wakes for the dead.

Wednesday, October 15: The nation’s capital is consumed by the “Battle for La Paz.” Groups of men and women mobilized from all the country arrive on all the major highways and there are confrontations in several points. In Patacamaya, some 100 kilometers south of La Paz in the direction of Oruro, organized miners meet up with the army when the military attempts to cut off their passage to La Paz.

In the capital city, people stream into the streets. Indignation over the hard line taken by Sánchez de Lozada and rage at the irresponsible massacre carried out by his government spreads to impoverished mid-



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dle class neighborhoods. The rebellion of La Paz covers most of the city, although the battle is concentrated in the center of the city between the plaza of San Francisco and Plaza Murillo, where the Palace of Government is located.

The call for the president's resignation gains force even within traditional Bolivian politics. Although protestors understand that the eventual departure of the president does not constitute the solution to the conflicts, it opens a door for the gradual change of the Bolivian political system. Four ministers present their resignations and Vice President Carlos Mesa marks his distance from the chief executive. The political parties that make up the coalition government have still not taken clear positions on the demonstrations, which reflects the crisis and fragility of traditional politics in the country.

Thursday, October 16: Three parties join the demand for the resignation of Sánchez de Lozada. Nervous, the government of George W. Bush in the United States issues a declaration in favor of "the constitutional order" and in support of Sánchez de Lozada. Thousands of miners arrive in the city to join the demonstrations.

Friday, October 17: Sánchez de Lozada resigns and Carlos Mesa assumes the presidency. The Bolivian people celebrate their victory where they fought their battles—in the streets.

II: The Demands

The first demand of the popular movement was the suspension of the sale of gas. Protesters asserted that the conditions of the sale and the terms granted transnationals for marketing the hydrocarbons put the nation at a disadvantage. The most concrete demand called for "the social reappropriation of hydrocarbons" for all Bolivians. The discussion on how to implement "the social reappropriation of resources" is still open. Specifically, movement leaders claim it must include the derogation of the Law of Hydrocarbons that delivered the nation's petroleum and gas reserves to transnationals, and the transformation of national companies from below.

The demand for the president's resignation quickly became the principle demand of opposition organizations and individuals alike, as the uprising grew and took form and the government repression intensified and became more brutal.

But these demands are just the tip of a gigantic iceberg that is slowly emerging. Despite their diversity, what the various grassroots organizations are seeking is nothing less than "the re-foundation of Bolivia" under new social, political, and economic terms. It is a movement that goes far beyond a single-issue mobilization.

The Oct. 12 document of the National Coalition in Defense of our Gas (*Coordinadora Nacional De Defensa del Gas*) sums up the demands as follows:

1. The immediate resignation of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada for being a sell-out and a murderer.
2. Establishment of a new government within the constitutional framework. This government must promise to:
 - Derogate Decree #24806 of August 4, 1997 that allows transnational control of Bolivian gas
 - Immediately modify the Law of Hydrocarbons to allow the Bolivian people to recuperate control of this resource
 - Immediately suspend any negotiation on gas, and of the Free Trade Agreement with Chile
 - Organize a constituent assembly as a way to restore participative democracy for the people

The resignation of Sánchez de Lozada was unanimously considered by the various movements, and increasingly by the general public, to be a prerequisite for initiating a process of renovation and not as an end in itself. Up to now, the discussion of the political scope of the movement remains open. The common proposal is that without "breaking the constitutional framework" a new government should be established that would be "provisional" while the constituent assembly is organized in a period of six months.

Many other demands have been articulated in addition to these; in fact, the list of demands incorporates long lists of grievances from each of the organizations depending on their particular focus and concerns. But they share a common goal—to change the neoliberal project that, under different masks, has been responsible for sinking the country into poverty.

III. The Organizations and the Actors

The real protagonists of the Bolivian uprising have been the Aymara communal members of the Altiplano, the

residents of El Alto, the coca producers of Chapare and the poor population of Cochabamba. All mobilized in different moments and different rhythms. The heaviest responsibility in the conflict fell on the western part of the country, and the Aymara region suffered the highest death toll. Grassroots organizations played an important role in developing strategies, but were overtaken and pushed along by the upsurge in popular discontent. Nonetheless, several key figures from the social movements demonstrated their capacity for leadership and received the confidence of the population: Felipe Quispe, Oscar Olivera, Evo Morales, and Jaime Solares.

The popular uprising has several sources, but the center of action can be found in the Aymara peasants organized around the Union Confederation of Peasant Workers of Bolivia (*Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia—CSUTBC*). The Confederation is a nationwide organization, with strength concentrated in the western high plains. Felipe Quispe is the most recognized leader of the organization. The CSUTBC is known for its radical positions, and is responsible for organizing the strongest protests in the “War of the Gas.”

The peasant coca producers, organized in the six Federations of Coca Producers of El Chapare (*Federaciones Cocaleras de El Chapare*), have their social base in the valleys interspersed among the Andean mountains, especially around Cochabamba. This organization has links with the Movement toward Socialism (*Movimiento Al Socialismo—MAS*) that ran Evo Morales for president of Bolivia in the past elections, ending up only 1% below Sánchez de Lozada. However, a distinction must be made between the movement of coca producers and peasants, and the political activity of MAS: up to now they have acted together but they do not always concur in everything. Evo Morales has endorsed the main demands set forth by the Coalition in Defense of Gas (*Coordinadora en Defensa del Gas*.)

These two movements make up “la indiada,” the Indian contingent—one of the essential motors of the demonstrations.

The Bolivian Workers Council (*Central Obrera Boliviana—COB*) has been a major force in the history of social protests in Bolivia, although recently its strength has waned. In the current uprising it has played an important role through the Regional Workers Councils (COR). And its leader, Jaime Solares, is making every effort to reinforce unity and give coherence to the initiatives. Miners, teachers, health workers, and blue-collar workers make up the rank and file of the COB.

The organization capable of generating the widest consensus in what will happen in the future is the National Coalition in Defense of Gas. This coalition, although only recently formed, is actually the heir of the Coalition in Defense of Water (*Coordinadora en Defensa del Agua*) The coalition organized to prevent the privatization of water services led demonstrations two years ago that defeated the transnational giant Bechtel. The action of the Coalition in Defense of Gas is based mainly in the city of Cochabamba, where it groups practically all workers and popular organizations and some contingents of the middle class. The spokesperson for the Gas Coalition is Oscar Olivera, who enjoys very broad recognition among the Bolivian population.

IV. The Political Situation

The resignation of President Sánchez de Lozada on October 17 shows the perseverance and unity of the Bolivian people. Following the resignation of Sánchez de Lozada “without breaking the constitutional line,” Carlos Mesa has assumed office. This does not mean that the many movements and organizations responsible for carrying him into office are particularly sympathetic to the vice president. Mesa’s promotion was for them a way to halt the bloodbath occurring under Sánchez de Lozada, and now they consider him, at most, a bridge in the transition while they discuss a joint program to build toward a constituent assembly. The people in the streets have sent a message to Carlos Mesa: we will respect you to the degree that you comply with the simple points that will enable us to recover our country.

This is also understood by sectors linked to the government and much of the middle class. These groups were reluctant at first to call for the resignation of the president but later joined the demand.

Finally, the position of the United States and the OAS—not a surprise to anyone—was interpreted as a flat-out endorsement of the Sánchez de Lozada government. Consequently, they have lost credibility among the Bolivian people and find themselves in an ambiguous position within the new phase of social change under the new government.

The events of October show that the Bolivian people know where they are going; in the first place, to block the imposition of projects that deplete resources at the hands of transnational companies. Second, to recuperate natural resources, that should never have been sold off and that belong to all Bolivians, and third, to move

toward a re-foundation of the country through a constituent assembly.

Raquel Gutierrez Aguilar is a Mexican mathematician and analyst for the Americas Program www.americaspolicy.org who lived many years in Bolivia and participated in the indigenous movement there.

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Production information:

Author: Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar

Editor: Laura Carlsen

Production: Tonya Cannariato