

A Neoliberal State of Siege

On April 18, 1995, a series of strikes organized by Indigenous peasants and urban teachers forced the central government to declare a state of siege that has lasted three months. The international press has marginally covered this event. A state of siege is a serious menace to the concept of democracy and reminiscent of authoritarian rule. It is the first state of siege that neoliberalism could not avoid. In what follows, sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui interprets the reasons behind such measures and underlines the double moral standard of current politics in Bolivia.

by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui

Democracy and violence are not incompatible terms or exclusionary in and of themselves. In Mexico, a solid clientelistic state structure serves as the base of the oldest electoral farce in America, while hundreds of thousands of rural Mexicans and Indigenous peoples die or flee from their country. In Colombia, democratic regimes elected according to various conventional norms have co-existed during more than a century with the most repressive and brutal military and paramilitary violence, and with the most varied forms of popular armed resistance. In the Bolivian Constitution, the "state of exception" permits a wide margin of arbitrary state power that remains partially within the legal bases of a legitimate republic. These are the "democratic fictions" that, historically, enabled the oscillation between democracy and dictatorship, and that in the present,

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lead to the consolidation of the "double moral standard" which is at the very heart of Bolivian democracy.



Bolivia is a country where there is democracy for the few and dictatorship for the many. Vast rural regions of Bolivia are subject to the law of "survival of the fittest," where open and concealed violence is a structural feature of modern daily life, exemplified by underdevelopment, displaced populations, extreme poverty, and a total loss of popular will. For more than a decade, untried killings and repression of Indigenous peoples in the Chapare region (the center

of coca cultivation) abound, and no one has been able to enforce the constitutional laws of the state. For centuries, thousands of Indigenous peoples, *mestizos*, *cholas*, and *bircholas* [urbanized peasants] have filled the Bolivian prisons. They are always the unyielding enemies, the silent threats to this "pigmentocratic" system in which whites or *q'aras* rule through a mandate that seems inherited from the depths of history.

Teachers and Cocaleros

Forty years ago, who would have thought that teachers and *cocaleros* (coca growers) would be the last remnants of the classic confrontation of Bolivian politics: a unionized sector—and here we know that unionization covers a wide range of sectors entrenched in a diverse Bolivian culture—and the formal country represented by political parties and the state. The gap between these sectors continues to grow, fed by constant violence. Here is why this last national strike and the call for the state of siege hides a vaster unease: the frustration of a people who voted hoping for

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The Quechua and Aymara, who have been cultivating coca for thousands of years, are caught between the state and drug traffickers.

change, and who now see more of the same misery and repression that has not changed in centuries of *q'ara* domination of the Bolivian state. The ingenious conception of the "blank slate" inherent in all reformism blinded the government to this phenomenon of collective frustration over the design of a "New Bolivia," a project that, as in other times, runs the risk of remaining a propagandistic slogan.

Fundamentally, none of what was promised in the elections was accomplished, beginning with the promise of 250,000 jobs. Furthermore, Bolivia lacks even the minimal maneuvering power necessary to defend its once buoyant "illegal" economy (not only narco-trafficking, but also contraband and industrial pirating) that enjoys a flourishing stability in the North. How useful, then, is educational reform and popular participation if the pillar of the model promised (and discerned) by the ruling coalition is crumbling to pieces? Was it merely a calculation error? Or are we, as in other conjunctures, again witnessing the sad spectacle of an oligarchic blindness or myopia of the powerful, who lack the historic sense necessary to impose, among other things, a long-lasting legitimate rule because their language (and particularly their reformist language) has decayed into a parade of lies and linguistic run-arounds?

Nevertheless, the problem of

the double moral standard, and the fragile legitimacy it supports, is not only a ballast of the state and its leaders. I would say that it is a key feature of Bolivian political culture, and in this sense, constitutes us as actors and shapes our perceptions, behavior, and expectations. In this case, the lack of coherence in the actions and explicit demands of the COB (Bolivian Workers Union) and the teachers is evident. The teachers' resistance to yielding union-acquired privileges speaks more to corporate entrenchment than to authentic revolutionary unionism. What's more, the teachers are the main actors and principle obstacles involved in the renovation of our antiquated educational system. But who are the teachers? They are a product of the 1956 educational reform and, in this sense, also reflect the government of 1952—the same clientelistic methods, spheres of influence, and corruption. And who is the MNR (the ruling governmental party) to clean up the corruption of the educational sector? Who can really do it?

In the end, even the strike is inscribed in the double moral standard. While public schooling grinds to a halt, the same teachers who are striking continue to work diligently and profitably in the private educational institutions. So, are the Capitalists not the enemies of the Workers? Why doesn't the whole educational sector come

to a stop? Tragically, the most affected are the children of the very workers—rural and urban—who are the only ones left who depend on the devastated public education services. The rest—including a strained blue-collar and popular sector—support the private schools. They live as though in a different country, going to classes and dutifully following their curriculum, while the rest of us are striking. Among other factors, the professional and union conduct of the education sector has contributed to this insurmountable gulf that separates the rural from the urban, the upper and middle from the lower classes, and schools of the first, second, and last category.

Popular malaise and profound and legitimate collective frustration on one side, union members and politicians increasingly distant from the collective identity on the other—this all has contributed to the consolidation of a deeply conservative authoritarian political culture apparently totally resistant to change. The state of siege summarizes, therefore, the primary failure in the scheme of government reforms being carried out by the government, and at the least will leave it with the comfort of learning that no change is possible without the participation of the protagonist and affected majority. ☺

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