

Reconstructing the Ayllu: toward Renewal of the Bolivian State



Photo: Cristina Marquez

Marching for territory and dignity

By María Eugenia Choque and Carlos Mamani

Last year's elections in Bolivia culminated in August with the victory of wealthy industrialist Gonzalo ("Goni") Sánchez de Lozada and Aymara Indian intellectual Víctor Hugo Cárdenas, leaders of two distinct political traditions: Goni from the leftist-turned-centrist Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (MNR) credited with "modernizing" Bolivia, and Víctor Hugo from the Aymara Tupac Katari Revolutionary Movement of Liberation (MRTKL). Their election triggered celebrations among various sectors of the Bolivian population.

On the night of Aug. 5, the coliseum in La Paz was the scene of a grand, picturesque ceremony organized by the MNR. Indigenous people participated in a ritual of homage and recognition in which representatives of almost all of the native groups in the country presented symbols of power and authority to Gonzalo Sánchez and Víctor Hugo. It symbolized their acceptance as "native authorities." The presentation took place in a colorful atmosphere of *wiphalas* (multi-colored patchwork Aymara flags which have come to represent Indian Unity). The ceremony was a perfect artifice showing Indian integration and ascendance to power—by

way of the vice-president elect. Furthermore, the president appeared (how marvelous!) to be seeking Indigenous recognition before taking power.

Alliance with the Tupac Katari Revolutionary Movement of Liberation (MRTKL) was a great success for the MNR, leading to a decisive electoral victory. The MRTKL, for their part, gained five seats in Congress, a small role in the administration of the state, and the creation of a National Secretariat of Ethnic Affairs. Qualitatively, however, their presence in parliament is more limited than that of the first Indian deputies in parliament (including Cárdenas himself) in the 1980s.

Since the election, political propaganda has tried to show that the Indigenous movement—with Víctor Hugo at its head—is part of the government. Or, at least, that it is willing to wait to be vindicated through reforms proposed by the government in new laws of popular participation, education, and privatization.

The situation in Bolivia can be understood as the continuation of an inter-ethnic relationship in which the *criollo* (people of European descent) groups in power use the art of simulating Indian political participation, to perfection. They accomplish this by putting on shows such as that described above and through their newly acquired ability to integrate

Indigenous individuals into the political elite. These individuals must only pass an exam where sacrifice, higher education, desire for power and prestige, and the denunciation of their ideals appear to be the deciding factors. Within this context, it is not saying too much to point out that Víctor Hugo appeared in electoral propaganda representing the continuation of the state's integrationist policies such as the agrarian reform of 1953.

Given the State's visible security in its control over the Indigenous population, we ask here, what is the state of the Indian Movement?

History of the Movement

Today's Indian movement is neither a recent phenomenon, nor the result of the 1952 revolution. It is the continuation, although in fragmented form, of a movement of *caciques* (traditional chiefs) which was led in the first half of this century by Santos Marka T'ula, Eduardo Nina Qhispi, Gregorio Ventura, Rufino Vilca, Feliciano Aruquipa, Celedonio Luna, Mateo Alfaro, and others. These *caciques* struggled for the survival of the Indigenous people and proposed the "renewal of Bolivia" with the institutionalization of respect for diversity and plurality. In their analysis of domestic and international policies (1920-1936), they

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struggled untiringly for the establishment of a commission to verify boundaries between communal and individual property; between canton, provincial, and departmental jurisdictions; and international borders. This movement had a vast and extensive organization which included the Guarani people in the form of their Captain Casiano Barrientos as well as leaders of the Indigenous people of Tarija and Beni.

The Bolivian state could not tolerate an autonomous Indian Movement with such extensive organizational capacity, especially since Eduardo Nina Qhispi, one of its boldest leaders, favored the "Renewal of Bolivia" and to that end declared himself President of the Republic of Qullasuyu, creating a parallel Indian state (He was imprisoned by President Salamanca from 1932-36). Thus, in 1945, the government of President Villarroel, in which the MNR formed one part, moved to co-opt Indian organizations. The government organized an Indigenous Congress in which the legitimate leaders of the movement were thrown out by security forces. After the triumph of the revolution, the MNR (with the experience of 1945) rapidly engaged in organizing campesinos into a National Federation of Campesinos. Nuflo Chávez Ortiz, a descendent of the founder of Bolivia's second largest city, was placed in charge. This effort ushered in an era of *pongueaje político*, or political patronage, which has endured until today. This system guarantees Indian bondage to the benefit of the Party and the State.

Nevertheless, the political control which the MNR and the Bolivian State exercised over Indian groups could not last forever. In the mid-1960s Indigenous groups arose, seeking to reclaim their traditional forms of organization and to develop their own ideology. The traditional system of control founded in 1952 was also battered by other pressure groups. Among these, the military with its own attempt at peasant co-optation through a military-campesino pact, and the Leftist Revolutionary Movement (MIR) with its call for independent labor organizations figured largely.

Thus, an energetic Indian Movement re-

emerged in the 1970s. This movement exposed the nature of colonial domination and sought to develop an alliance between the different Indigenous nationalities in the country. All of the mainstream parties immediately labeled this emerging Indian Movement "racist." The Katarista parties, supported as they were by the church and the MIR, also condemned the Indianist position, the recognition of ethnic differences, and the use of native languages, and were obliged to testify for a "Bolivian" national identity.

The 1980s witnessed the Indian movement's premature collapse, weighed down by *caudillismo* (strong individual leaders who manipulated organizations for their own benefit), corruption, and internal divisions. The movement's ideological consistency and institutions could not resist the power (and violence), financial resources, and the privileges (congressional seats, government jobs, or cash) of the traditional parties which, for the sake of capturing Indigenous votes, incorporated Indian cadres into their circles.

By the 1990s, Indigenous political institutions were practically destroyed, barely leaving behind acronyms and their corresponding *caudillos*. Finally, the 1993 elections resulted in an auctioning off of Indian parties.

At the level of the national unions, the influential Aymara Genaro Flores was ousted as leader of the nation's largest rural union, the Single Confederate Syndicate of Peasant Workers of Bolivia (CSUTCB), and his MRTKL party divided. Thus, the *criollo* political parties fought to gain control over what remained of the Indigenous-campesino organization—viewing it as war booty.

This situation, although gloomy in its outlook, has given way to the strengthening of grassroots organizations in the Andes. In the Oriente (the upper Amazon Basin), however, the situation is very different and more closely resembles the organizational process of CONAIE in Ecuador. There, Indigenous organizing has always been closely tied to identity, and the Indian organizations have not taken up the *campesino* banner, as often occurred in the highlands.

Reconstructing Traditional Forms of Organization

In response to the traditions of political manipulation and Western "civilizing" syndicalism, Indigenous communities in the highlands are reconstructing Ayllu federations which maintain traditional structures although in segmentary fashion. Thus communities have begun reconstructing ancient identities which the Toledian reforms had destroyed centuries earlier. This movement grounds itself in the rights to territory—understood as physical space, the soil, subsoil; the place where families are rooted. According to Indigenous organizations, what lies within the boundaries of demarcated territories belongs to the community and not to the State. Their demands for rights to territory and the exploitation and administration of the resources contained within it, are based on titles granted by the Spanish Crown. The government's new laws, such as that for "popular participation" fail to recognize this concept, and therefore remain null.

In contrast to the rural unions, the Ayllu federations have reestablished traditional authorities as well as an autonomous administration of economic and social resources and of justice. Examples of this are organizations such as FASOR (the Federation of Ayllus to the South of Oruro) with respect to the Quillacas-Asanaques chiefdom, FAONP (the Federation of Ayllus to the North of Potosí) Jach'a Karangas which reconstituted the large Karangas in La Paz where FACOPI (the Federation of Ayllus and First Communities of the Province of Ingavi) revindicated their Pakaje origin, and more recently the formation of the Supreme Council of Bolivian Ayllus in the departments of La Paz, Oruro, and Potosí. FACOPI's Organic Statue is instructive, in the way it emphasizes the value of culture, history, and Indigenous language which constitute the basis for identity and self-determination.

The re-establishment of Indigenous language, culture, identity, territory, and sovereignty is the goal of the Indian movement, represented by a variety of grassroots organizations working for the rights and dignity of Indigenous peoples. 🐾