

From Marginal to Vital: The Rise of Indigenous People and the Consolidation of Democratic Stability in Bolivia

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Indigenous people are a clear majority in Bolivia. For centuries, however, they played a marginal role in public life and politics. In the last two decades, an indigenous movement began to emerge, and using a variety of advocacy tactics it advanced an indigenist agenda. In the last five years, indigenous people have staged hundreds (if not thousands) of protests, made themselves visible in peaceful and sometimes violent ways, and taken up the streets in defense of a variety of issues. Their tactics have been criticized for endangering democratic stability, and their leaders have been characterized as irresponsible. But what most do not realize is that they seek to redefine the democratic system as it is known today. Instability may just be the price to pay to do away with exclusive and discriminatory practices. This paper examines the emergence and political positioning of the indigenous movements. It explores the tensions between the fragility of the political system, the goals of the indigenous movements and the new system that might emerge from this tension.

Introduction

Although indigenous people are a clear majority in Bolivia, they have traditionally played a marginal role in the political sphere. Over the last decade, indigenous people have emerged to the forefront of national politics, redefining the political system, influencing the policy agenda and gaining important representation in congress and local governments. Since the resignation of Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada in 2003, the last democratically elected president of Bolivia, indigenous parties have increasingly become powerbrokers between a government without legislative or popular support and increasingly organized and impatient masses, most of whom are indigenous and poor. This paper examines the role of indigenous peoples in redefining democratic and political institutions, and the tactics they used to consolidate their sphere of influence. Furthermore, it explores the tensions between the use of violent tactics and the stability of the democratic system. Ultimately, this paper argues that the indigenous movements and Bolivian democracy can only be consolidated through an honest and insightful assessment of their practices and goals.

The motivation behind this paper is to understand how the indigenous movements transitioned from a marginal player to a key actor in the Bolivian political scene. In the last five years, indigenous people have staged hundreds (if not thousands) of protests, made themselves visible in peaceful and sometimes violent ways, and taken up the streets in defense of a variety of issues. Their tactics have been criticized for endangering democratic stability, and their leaders have been characterized as irresponsible. But despite this criticism, their approach has proven largely effective as they have gained more political leverage than ever before. The goal of this paper is to consider the effects of this influence in the (re)definition of democracy, as well as to identify alternative tactics to ensure long-term political stability.

Social Inclusion and Democratic Systems

From Francis Fukuyama's *End of History and the Last Man* to the Inter-American Democratic Charter, democracy has been identified as the best system of government and representation. While there is wide consensus on the desirability of democracy, views differ in the definition and minimal conditions for democracy. In countries throughout Latin America, and much of the developing world, where the rule of law is nonexistent, elections are fraudulent, and large portions of the population are socially excluded, democracy may be defined as incomplete or unconsolidated. In this paper, I will focus on the effects of social exclusion in the consolidation and transformation of Bolivia's democratic system.

In 1992, Robert Dahl published a list of 'procedural minimal conditions,' which "must be present for a modern political democracy to exist" (Diamond & Plattner, 1996, p. 55). While Dahl identifies conditions such as broad access to voting and elective office, he does not address the idea of social and ethnic inclusion specifically. Some may argue that the concept of equality (and therefore inclusion) is inherent to democracy, and that as countries consolidate their democratic systems, these deficiencies are addressed and eventually eliminated. Social and ethnic exclusion, however, can lead to systems that are democratic in name only, and that in practice are not truly participative, representative or accountable. Yashar argues that scholars have usually associated the consolidation of democracy with strong governmental institutions and the "absence of regime breakdown following two consecutive and democratically held elections" (1999, p. 97). But political and democratic consolidation is about more than the survival of weak governmental institutions. "Indeed, many ostensibly consolidated democracies now find themselves being challenged by movements rallying against the failure of states to universalize democratic practices and secure political autonomy" (Yashar, 1999, p. 77).

Bolivia is an illustrative example. Since the return to democracy in 1982, it has held regular and competitive

elections, has transferred power peacefully, and has begun to consolidate and modernize governmental institutions. In spite of this progress, Bolivia remains a largely segregated country, along regional, class and ethnic lines, with indigenous people traditionally outside the political, economic and social structures. In the two last decades, indigenous people have emerged to the forefront of Bolivian politics and have challenged the very structures that hold the democratic system together. This challenge, however, must be understood not as a call to become part of the system, but rather as an attempt to redefine it and incorporate indigenous customs and traditions. When Bolivian political and social institutions were first designed in the late 1800s and early 1900s, indigenous people were not even considered citizens. The institutions and processes that are still in place today were designed to cater to mestizo needs, and to follow Western trends. Indigenous traditions and customs were never taken into account, and some indigenous people fear that these will over time disappear if the existing institutions do not recognize them and incorporate them. When indigenous people say they want to 'redefine' the system, they often imply a redesign of institutions, a move away from liberal traditions and the incorporation of century-old customs. But many challenges remain, including wide diversity among indigenous peoples and their political goals, a threatened and self-protective elite, and increasing instability and uncertainty.

Bolivia has one of the largest proportions of indigenous people in South America, representing roughly two thirds of the general population.¹ There is wide diversity among them. Some 32 languages are spoken, and they are dispersed across the national territory. The Andean Aymara and Quechua are the dominant cultures, occupying the Western highlands and increasingly the central valleys. They have been traditionally better organized, both because of their numbers (1.6 million Aymara and 2.4 million Quechua, according to Gustafson, 2002, 270) and a heritage that values centralism. Quechuas and Aymaras are generally more assimilated than other indigenous groups: a majority of them speaks Spanish as well as one or both of the indigenous languages, and roughly half of them have migrated to urban centers (Van Cott, 2000a, p. 126).

Aside from Quechuas and Aymaras, there are other smaller groups in the Eastern lowlands and valleys. Approximately 32 indigenous groups live in the lowlands, accounting for some 260,000 people (Gustafson, 2002, p. 271). Indigenous groups vary in size from a couple of thousand up to 60,000 in some cases, such as the Guaranis and Chiquitanos. They have traditionally been more dispersed, and sometimes even isolated. In the last two decades, however, they have achieved impressive levels of organization, and received significant assistance from international and domestic NGOs. Finally, some 30,000 Afro-Bolivians live in the valleys and highlands, and have to a large extent assimilated into the Aymara community (Van Cott, 2000a, p. 126).

Until recently, indigenous people were excluded from politics and the public sphere. After the restoration of democracy in the early 1980s, a political party system was established and has been largely consolidated (Van Cott, 2003b; Booth, 2004, p. 8-9). Traditional parties have been led by educated, urban elites, and have alternated power peacefully in the last two decades. Some populist parties have emerged through the years (such as Condepa and Unión Cívica Socialista), but their significance has been transient. Parties have usually appealed to the indigenous majorities during electoral periods, making unrealistic promises, which are forgotten and unfulfilled by the time elections are over. Overall, Bolivian politics, as many others around the region, have been highly clientelistic "with subordinate social groups being 'incorporated' from above rather than integrated as autonomous movements" (Booth, 2004, p. 7). Indigenous movements have formed coalitions and alliances with traditional parties. Some have yielded small victories, but for the most part they have been temporary, and gains have been usually one-sided. Indigenous people, along with many other Bolivians, have a well-justified suspicion about the true intentions of traditional parties and the benefits of the democratic system as a whole.

It is against this political and historical background that indigenous people are redefining the meaning and the practice of democracy. While they have at times played by the existing democratic rules, they view their exclusion as indicative of a weak and unrepresentative political system. Their recent mobilization seeks not to consolidate the existing exclusionary system, but to challenge and redefine it to truly achieve the equity that democratic ideals stand for.

The Emergence and Positioning of Indigenous Movements

In the last two decades, indigenous people have emerged as a new and energetic political force. The emergence of this movement has realigned political actors, and brought new issues to the agenda. The organization and mobilization of indigenous peoples started in the 1970s, and made significant strides in the mid-1990s, peaking during the 2002 elections. Over time, they have used a variety of tactics to advance their agendas. They advocated for their cause internationally; raised awareness domestically; formed key alliances with other indigenous people, with NGOs, and even with traditional parties; formed their own parties and fielded candidates; and used more militant tactics, including road closings, strikes and civil disobedience. This early mobilization established an organizational structure, opened spaces for participation, and led to important advocacy and electoral victories.

It is important to highlight that the indigenous movement is highly diverse, and that different groups within it pursue alternative goals and use different tactics. Moreover, the term 'indigenous' has been highly politicized, and not all native peoples of Bolivia self-

ascribe to it. In the 1950s, the MNR, which forged a successful alliance between miners, peasants and the mestizo middle-class, officially replaced the word 'Indio' with 'campesino.' Indio had been used in a derogatory manner, and 'campesino' was considered more socially and politically neutral. By doing this, however, the MNR effectively dismissed identity-based claims, and transformed them into a class-based struggle. Class struggle resonated in the 1950s, when revolutionary, Leftist ideals were still widespread. Over time, some groups grew accustomed to the word 'campesino' (notably the Aymara and Quechua), and now prefer it. Peoples from the lowlands, however, still identify themselves as Indians. For practical reasons in this paper, I will use the word indigenous to refer to both.

In addition to a politicized identity, indigenous people have used different tools to advance their agendas. Lowland movements have used less confrontational and more conciliatory tools. There is great diversity in the Andes as well. The Katarists among the Aymara advocate for a multiethnic society, while radical Aymaras want an Aymara nation, free of 'whites.' Some groups consider themselves superior to others and compete with each other for power (see Gustafson 2002 and Langer 2003). Despite these differences, all indigenous peoples benefit from heightened awareness, greater participation and more inclusive political systems. In short, one should be aware of the diversity of goals and tactics among indigenous peoples, and exercise caution in making broad generalizations.

In the late 1970s, organizations like the United Nations contributed to the initial mobilization of indigenous people. After the establishment of a Working Group on Indigenous Peoples in 1977, indigenous groups throughout Latin America organized around the right to autonomous control over traditional territories (see Van Cott, 2004). Similarly, the International Labor Organization (ILO) passed Convention 169 in the 1980s, proclaiming the rights of indigenous people around the globe. "Many indigenous groups have based their rights to organize and preserve their societies and cultures on the international law embodied in this document, and NGO's in turned have based their rights to aid native people on this law" (Langer, 2003, p. xxii). Bolivia was one of the first Latin American countries to ratify the Convention, and indigenous people across the board participated in international events.

Building on this initial international experience, indigenous people approached international NGOs to act as intermediaries with their own governments. NGOs concerned with human rights, cultural issues and environmental preservation fostered the creation of a Pan-American network of indigenous people. Brysk (1996) argues quite convincingly that indigenous rights became internationalized because the movement was so weak domestically. She writes that "indigenous peoples turned to the international system out of domestic powerlessness" (Brysk, 1996, p. 46). This approach

proved highly effective as it projected a local cause on the international arena, and simultaneously resulted in financial and technical assistance. Brysk asserts, "many if not most indigenous peoples' organizations receive international funding" (1996, p. 43). In Bolivia, the best example is CIDOB, the Confederacion de Pueblos Indigenas del Oriente Boliviano, an umbrella group representing all lowland indigenous peoples. CIDOB was established with assistance of Harvard anthropologists, and has received funding from multiple international organizations (Brysk, 1996, p. 44). Despite issues associated with this assistance, such as financial dependency, the number and influence of NGOs have "brought unprecedented financial support and political leverage to the struggles of indigenous people" (McDaniel, 2002, p. 1).

Indigenous movements effectively used the media and public opinion to advance their causes. In many ways, they used their own marginality to attract media attention. Foreign journalists admit that "the underdog is a good story" (Brysk, 1996, p. 47). Similarly, indigenous people mobilized to organize counter celebrations to the Quincentenary of Columbus's 'discovery' of America. Almost simultaneously, the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro featured indigenous peoples and their relationship to their land. "Both the Columbus festivities in each country and the Rio Summit provided the indigenous groups with an opportunity for heavy media coverage both within their own countries and throughout the world" (Langer, 2003, p. xvi). This favorable international environment heightened domestic awareness.

In 1990, Eastern indigenous groups organized a peaceful but massive 330-mile march from the lowlands to the capital. The March for Territory and Dignity sought to gain state recognition for territorial rights and keep developers away from traditional land.² The March was successful in that it secured two million hectares of land titled to Amazon indigenous groups, and it temporally suspended timber harvesting. "It dramatically raised awareness of the indigenous problem among the political class; it presented the indigenous territory issue as a political, rather than an agrarian issue; and it provided the impetus for increased organizing within the indigenous movement and for coordination between the Amazonian and *campesino* movements" (Van Cott, 2000b, p. 344). The march put Eastern indigenous groups on the map, and was a show of strength and organization.

Building on this experience, other indigenous groups took important steps to open spaces for participation. A number of key reforms that significantly changed the political landscape were introduced in the 1990s.³ Some were the direct outcome of indigenous activism, and others resulted from multiple factors. Two of the most important developments included a Constitutional reform formally recognizing Bolivia as a multiethnic society, and the twin laws of municipal decentralization and popular participation which opened spaces for political participation at the local level. The reforms strengthened indigenous peoples, and encouraged them to formalize

their movement and seek political office.

Integration of Indigenous Peoples into the Political System

In the 1990s, Bolivia underwent a series of political reforms, which indirectly and sometimes directly empowered indigenous peoples and enabled them to play larger political and social roles in their communities and in the national agenda. Two important reforms happened almost simultaneously: a constitutional reform and the twin laws of decentralization and popular participation. These reforms, combined with established and organized indigenous movements, led to important electoral victories in the 2002 national and 2004 municipal elections. While the reforms provided the necessary recognition and a sense of empowerment to indigenous people, they were more an attempt to incorporate them into the system from above than an effort to redefine political, social and economic structures. In this section, I will explore the effects of these reforms on indigenous peoples.

Starting in the 1980s, indigenous organizations conceived and introduced ‘pluriculturalism’ (also known as ‘unity in diversity’) into the political agenda and the MNR party platform. The main Peasant Workers Confederation, known as CSUTCB, brought together fragmented campesino organizations and promoted these ideas among different political tendencies.⁴ Pluriculturalism or Katarismo, which grew out of the Aymara intelligentsia in the early 1980s, advocates for the coexistence of indigenous and Western cultures within the same state. Katarists “espouse an ideology that blends class consciousness with ethnic revindications and calls for the reconstruction of the Bolivian state along ethnic criteria” (Van Cott, 2003b, p. 9). The class aspect of this ideology made it an attractive feature for Leftist parties, which wanted to appeal to indigenous majorities. Katarismo was eventually adopted by the MNR in the late 1980s, which by then was no longer a Leftist party and it instead espoused a neoliberal economic agenda. This early endorsement led later to an electoral alliance and victory.

In 1993, an Aymara party formed an electoral alliance with the MNR, and successfully injected Katarismo into the redrafting of the Constitution. After the 1993 MNR victory, where Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (also known as Goni) was elected president, Victor Hugo Cardenas, a leader of the indigenous party MRTKL, became vice-president. He was instrumental in infusing the tendency in the Constitutional reform process. The reforms that followed this alliance were largely led by Goni himself, who played a central and sometimes double-edge role in the advancement of indigenous goals. The 1994 Constitution officially established Bolivia as a multiethnic, pluricultural state, recognized three indigenous languages (Aymara, Quechua and Guarani) as official, and acknowledged the existence and legitimacy of indigenous authorities. Gustafson (2002) argues that Katarismo was not the only

element considered, and that the reform blended ‘liberal’ and ‘pro-indigenous’ policies.

Notwithstanding its origins, the constitutional reform was considered widely successful. First, it offered constitutional recognition to the indigenous movements, legitimizing cultural and ethnic claims. Before the reform, the “problem of the state was tied to the imposition of a homogeneous national identity without basis in the actual ethnic, cultural, and regional diversity of Bolivian society” (Van Cott, 2000a, p. 134). Second, it brought attention to the indigenous question. The reform recognized Bolivia’s indigenous roots, and forced this acknowledgement onto non-indigenous Bolivians who had historically avoided the issue. Still, some argue (see Gustafson) that non-indigenous Bolivians did not embrace multiculturalism with the same fervor. Finally, the reform extended, “the authority of the state and the rule of law to previously vacant terrain, which in Bolivia covered a majority of the territory” (Van Cott, 2000b, p. 344). While the constitutional reform did not provide a final solution to indigenous discrimination or issues of political representation, it was an attempt to incorporate indigenous concerns into the political agenda, and provided constitutional recognition to indigenous heritage.

The Popular Participation Law (LPP), introduced shortly thereafter, had a positive impact on the indigenous movements, but indigenous groups were in fact less successful in making their voices heard. Decentralization reform created 311 municipalities, where there were previously only a dozen. It demanded mayoral and municipal council elections; recognized municipal autonomy in resource management; and created a ‘coparticipation’ fund to distribute government resources based on number of inhabitants. After the first round of local elections in 1995, indigenous people won 28.6 percent of municipal council seats, and were a majority in 73 of 311 municipalities (Van Cott, 2003b, p. 3). These early victories represented the incorporation of indigenous peoples into the political system. The most original aspect of the reform was the creation of a mechanism for civil society and indigenous groups to participate in municipal affairs. Vigilance committees were designed to identify community priorities and provide local oversight over newly elected officials. This mechanism was meant to cater to indigenous practices, which traditionally include a higher level of community involvement. In the Andean tradition (Aymara and Quechua), responsibility for public affairs rotates among heads of household, and every family head is expected to hold public office at least once in their lifetime. Even today, “fulfillment of these duties is considered an obligation and confers great personal authority and prestige” (Ströbele-Gregor, 1996, p. 78). Traditional forms of organization are based on two intertwined concepts: collective action and reciprocity.

Despite the positive effects on participation, indigenous people were only marginally consulted regarding the reform. This was developed behind close

doors, in theory because its content was highly technical. The reform was first developed at the new Unit for Popular Participation (UPP), which operated with a small budget and was for all practical purposes outside the traditional government bureaucracy. As a proposal began to take shape, a National Commission on Popular Participation was established to find creative alternatives. The Commission was composed of UPP staff, government officials, politicians from the government coalition and independent consultants. Interestingly, the Commission kept its existence and operations secret. "Once the project was made public, the government was forced to engage in multiple consultations to deflect criticism that it was drafting a law of popular participation via a completely nonparticipatory process" (Van Cott, 2000a, p. 157). UPP staff met with indigenous organizations in the lowlands and highlands to learn about issues of interest and concern. Simultaneously, indigenous groups sent proposals on a new indigenous law. Government officials felt that the LPP was more far-reaching than the indigenous proposal, and did not pass the proposal on to Congress. Aside from occasional public consultations, indigenous groups were largely excluded from the drafting of and eventual decision on the legislation.

In addition to discounting indigenous participation in the drafting of the legislation, the law fell short of its goals. The drawing of municipal borders, for example, fragmented existing Indian communities into different districts. This resulted in the disintegration of established communities, and significantly reduced organization (see Assies et al, 2000, pp. 181-194). Similarly, vigilance committees have failed to provide effective oversight. Their role has remained ambiguous, and elected officials have found it easy to ignore or co-opt them. The legal recognition of territorial-based organizations, including established indigenous groups, has been truncated by unnecessary layers of complexity. Moreover, territorial-based organizations are defined by the 'territory' in which they operate and not by historical or existing communities. In short, the effect of the LPP on the consolidation of the indigenous movements is mixed. While it consolidated democratic practices at the local level and brought the government closer to the people, it ignored important agenda items for indigenous peoples. The reforms did not meet their full potential in strengthening indigenous peoples, or in generating necessary buy-in. Moreover, both reforms were efforts to incorporate indigenous peoples into existing or new structures, without their full participation in the formulation of these reforms.

Rebelling Against the System

Early advocacy victories and a more open institutional framework became a breeding ground for indigenous movements. Indigenous organizations went through internal changes and leaders secured electoral victories at both regional and national levels. Slowly, a more cohesive agenda began to emerge. A number of events, including unfulfilled government promises and the

privatization of national industries, ignited indigenous fury. Suddenly, a sense of empowerment and urgency filled the ranks of the movement, hardening advocacy tactics and increasing its bargaining power. Indigenous people began to disrupt public life and the economy by blocking main highways and stopping the movement of goods. These harder tactics were (and still are) considered necessary to break through social and political barriers. Traditional political actors reacted with force, feeding into a pattern of oppression and further escalating the conflict. These factors, combined with a fractured Left and inflammatory remarks by the US Ambassador, led to an unexpectedly high electoral victory in 2002. This show of popular support further consolidated the movement and its tactics, leading to an outright rebellion against the system. This sentiment was embraced by a group called the "anti-systemics," which voiced dissatisfaction with traditional political parties and the system in general, and which included many indigenous leaders.

The use of aggressive tactics is not rare in Bolivia. And different groups, from university students and workers' unions to indigenous people, have taken the streets in defense of their causes countless times over the last two decades. Booth writes that mass opposition, "almost invariably takes the form of potentially violent street protest on the basis of a list of more or less radical 'demands'.... The official response typically combines arrogant assertions of the right to rule with dramatic (but usually not implementable) concessions, underpinned by unrestrained and often ill-organized repression" (Booth, 2004, p. 12). Indigenous people have been trapped by this cycle of protest and unfulfilled promises more than any other social group. In the last five years, they have regularly used aggressive, and sometimes violent, rebellions to advance a variety of issues. While these tactics have proven successful, the consistent use of this approach alienates potential supporters who consider them disruptive and unnecessary. They have also led to political instability. Indigenous people may consider this instability a necessary step in the redefinition of democracy.

In addition to ongoing protests, indigenous people also pursued democratic channels to advance their agenda. In 2002, Evo Morales and Felipe Quispe (both indigenous leaders) ran for president representing two different parties. In the months leading to the elections, both identified with the "anti-systemic movement," which challenged the existing party and political system. The demands for a new political and economic 'model' resonated with non-indigenous Bolivians, who were also tired of politics as usual and had suffered from a five-year economic downturn. Morales, representing the MAS, ran on a Leftist platform that challenged globalization, neoliberal economic policies and the US coca eradication program. Quispe and his MIP party had an Indigenist agenda, which included issues of land reform and the consolidation of an Aymara nation.

The results of the 2002 elections were unpredictable,

and in many ways revolutionary. Morales came in second with 20.94 percent of the vote, after the MNR gathered only 22.46 percent. Quispe also did surprisingly well, gathering 6 percent of the vote and 6 congressional seats (Van Cott, 2003b, p. 12). The MAS and the MIP represent the second largest majority in both Houses. Roughly “one-third of the seats in the 157-member body are occupied by indigenous representatives with strong links to indigenous and peasants organizations” (Van Cott, 2003b, p. 1). With strong indigenous and female representation, the 2002 Congress represented the makeup of Bolivian society more closely than ever before.

The emergence and positioning of the indigenous movements, combined with the political reforms of the 1990s, led to these electoral victories and simultaneously opened a window to redesign the democratic institutions and the system as a whole. The institutional reforms of the 1990s, the collapse of traditional parties, a fractured Left, the unpopularity of the outgoing government and the perceived US infringement of Bolivian sovereignty may have all been contributing factors (see Van Cott 2003b). But I believe three concrete actions taken by the indigenous movements ensured this electoral victory. First, indigenous parties were able to identify and articulate a popular sentiment of dissatisfaction with the existing system, thus expanding their own agenda. Second, they became a viable alternative for people outside their traditional base of support; that is, outside indigenous communities. And third, they were able to mobilize indigenous voters. The combination of these factors may help explain the 2002 electoral success, and might lead the way to the continued consolidation of indigenous movements and Bolivian democracy.

Some hoped that the 2002 election results would “enable the confrontation between the two Bolivias—the included minority and the excluded majority—to be shifted from outside the state to within the new legislature” (Van Cott, 2003b, p. 11). Indigenous leaders, however, do not appear interested in using established political channels, and have continued to use protests and road closings as their main tactics. Booth argues that the continued use of “extra-parliamentary mass protest” damages the government, as it itself has a “weak policy capacity” (2004, p. vii). Indigenous leaders have consistently underutilized legislative means to advance their agenda. “The movement is still inexperienced in the ways of representative politics and has little organizational machinery distinct from that of the union movement from which it has grown” (Booth, 2004, p. 31). The indigenous movements and its congressional representatives lack in fact the interest and capacity to properly use legislative channels. This is mostly because their goal is not to become part of the existing system but rather to redefine it. Moreover, the lack of capacity to develop and propose policy alternatives is not unique to indigenous movements, and traditional parties have also been notorious for their inability to formulate innovative policies. Because indigenous parties have grown out of a

protest movement, they have become better known for what they stand against than for their policy proposals. “However, a more serious worry in 2003 was whether [the indigenous movement] had the will and capacity to contest the political *status quo* on the terrain of politics proper, as distinct from winning political advantage by deploying its traditional weapons of struggle in the streets and highways of the country” (Booth, 2004, p. 31). In the two and a half years since the political rise of the indigenous parties, it has become clear that indigenous people are not interested in politics proper as defined by traditional actors, but rather seek to redefine the what ‘proper’ means.

In February and October 2003, protests erupted throughout the country, leading to the eventual resignation of Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, the 2002 democratically elected president. Protests were not exclusively organized or fielded by indigenous peoples, and many joined the streets and the opposition to the government. In February, the government tried to lower the income tax threshold, which effectively meant imposing a new tax on middle- and low-income earners, especially civil servants. Many, including the national police, went on strike, allowing for riots and lootings across the capital. The government sent in the army, and violent confrontations left 31 deaths. ‘Black February,’ as the incident has been known, was repudiated by all social sectors and ethnic groups, seriously decreasing the legitimacy of the government. In October, indigenous leaders mobilized against a project to export natural gas through Chile, a historic adversary. Soon, other issues, including anti-globalization sentiments and peasant-union grievances, were added to the ongoing campaign against the government. La Paz was once again isolated, and all public life was effectively stopped. With fears of more lootings, schools and shops were closed for weeks, and food shortages were common. After violent clashes between the indigenous and the army, which resulted in 60 deaths, the president stepped down in favor of his vice-president Carlos Mesa (For more on the February and October 2003 events, see Booth, 2004).

Mesa governed through June 2005, when he also resigned amidst protests and political instability. In his months as president, he attempted to keep indigenous leaders at the negotiating table, and to discourage mass protests. Although Mesa was more conciliatory and open, and never used force against civilians, his administration was also plagued with social protests. Mass protests led to increasing political and economic instability, and a growing sense of citizen insecurity. He eventually resigned in utter frustration, unable to meet indigenous demands and with little support from congress. Both resignations constituted unprecedented victories for indigenous mobilization, and in many ways legitimized the use of mass protest as a main advocacy tactic. They have represented the ultimate rebellion against the existing political and democratic institutions.

Reinforcing Democratic Values and Consolidating Indigenous Movements

Throughout this paper, I have tried to identify the agenda and goals of the indigenous movement, and explained how it transitioned from a marginal to a central player in Bolivian politics. In doing this, I have also explored the tensions between a thriving social movement, and an increasingly fragile political and democratic system. These systems are still discriminatory to the indigenous majority, and traditional actors still need to move beyond empty rhetoric and an antagonistic stance. Finally, I argue that instead of salvaging a discriminatory and fragile democratic system, traditional actors should focus on advancing a set of principles or democratic values that can be embraced by all Bolivians. Simultaneously, indigenous movements, if they seek to consolidate and remain at the center of Bolivian politics, need to explore alternative tactics for advancing its agenda. Using alternative tactics will appeal to and secure non-indigenous support; will be more effective with traditional actors; and will ensure long-term democratic stability. Moreover, indigenous leaders must demonstrate, “that they can govern more effectively than traditional parties, under the same domestic and international constraints, while constructing a viable alternative model” (Van Cott, 2004, p. 5). They must shift from a protest to a proposal-based discourse and consider some of the recommendations listed below.

The indigenous movements have shown their strength both in the streets and in the polls, and must now demonstrate their ability to offer economic and political alternatives to ongoing domestic challenges. Indigenous involvement has traditionally been obstructionist, in congress and in the streets. In congress, indigenous activism prevented the export of natural gas and blocked the introduction of additional neoliberal policies, among others. In the streets, it blocked roads in protest of land reform and coca eradication, and demanded rural development and bilingual education. But indigenous leaders have only rarely proposed alternatives. Improving its programmatic capacity is the first step towards a proposal-based movement. Formulating viable policy alternatives does not mean embracing the current system. If Bolivians agree on a set of democratic values, which may include principles such as equality, participation, representation and transparency, indigenous people can make concrete proposals to redefine the system of governance.

Indigenous leaders must familiarize themselves with international best practices, and economic constraints and obligations. Bolivia is not the only failed state in the developing world, and much can be learned from countries in the region and across the world. These lessons can be incorporated in a new, stronger, more inclusive and transparent democracy. Similarly, indigenous people must be aware and understand economic obligations, such as loans and international contracts, and other constraints to formulate viable and informed policies. Understanding does not mean endorsing, but rather speaking the same

language when challenging the current framework.

Finally, if the movement seeks to consolidate and broaden its base of support, it must articulate its demands in a positive tone. This will secure mainstream support and recruit new supporters from outside indigenous communities. Similarly, locally-elected leaders should play a more important role in the movement, revealing how they have changed and improved systems of government at the local level. This will show the diversity of the indigenous movement, and demonstrate their capacity to govern.

Although these recommendations may seem straightforward, indigenous leaders might face great opposition when attempting to shift tactics. Deeply-ingrained tensions lie just beneath the surface. Some indigenous leaders will argue that ‘radical’ tactics have proven effective, as they have called for public and government attention to the indigenous agenda. They may fear that moving away from these tactics will decrease bargaining power and street credibility. Others may oppose conforming to existing political and democratic rules. They will argue that it is part of a forced assimilation process, and that they are at odds with indigenous traditions. Some may fear that shifting tactics will make them too similar to traditional actors, and that indigenous people rose with an anti-systemic rhetoric. These challenges may be legitimate, but confronting them is a necessary step in the movement’s maturing process. Indigenous leaders and constituents must jointly decide on how to move forward with their agenda. Alliances with new sectors and keeping mainstream support may become increasingly important in this calculation.

The emergence and positioning of the indigenous movements have challenged the existent system of representation and the political rules that govern the party system and government bureaucracy. Bolivia’s formal and informal political and social structures are obsolete, discriminatory and unjust. The multiethnic rhetoric of the 1990s is no longer enough to appease the vibrant indigenous majority; and real changes must now be made to Bolivia’s policy priorities, reform agenda and democratic system. Any realignment of political forces brings with it public disruption and ‘disorder.’ “However, it is the remnants of political systems designed to exclude ethnic majorities and minorities, not indigenous political mobilization, that pose a threat to political, social and economic progress. And it is likely that further ‘disorder’ will be necessary, “to sweep away the exclusionary structures and discriminatory attitudes of the past” (Van Cott, 2004, p. 5). As Bolivians do away with a discriminatory system, and define a new set of democratic values, this disorder will slowly fade away to become united in favor of a truly inclusive and representative democracy.

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End Notes

1 Estimations vary according to the source used. Gustafson (2002) states that 57 percent of the population is indigenous based on the 1992 census. Van Cott (2000a) estimated they represent 66 percent based on other sources. More recently, the 2001 census confirmed that 62 percent of the population was indigenous (Van Cott, 2003b).

2 It should be mentioned that Eastern indigenous people did not benefit from the 1952 agrarian reform. At the time, only the Aymaras and Quechuas were organized and only they participated in the Revolution. Since Eastern indigenous groups have become more organized, they have consistently fought to secure territorial rights.

3 Much has been written about the timing and content of these reforms. See for example, Van Cott (2000a), Van Cott (2002), Assies et al (2000), Gustafson (2002).

4 CSUTCB is an interesting organization, because while it is technically a class-based peasant union, it often acts as the interlocutor of indigenous demands. It exemplifies the complexity of indigenous and peasant identities.