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# Bolivia at the Crossroads

## Politics, Economy, and Environment in a Time of Crisis

**Edited by**
**Soledad Valdivia Rivera**

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2021
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*



*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*
Names: Valdivia Rivera, Soledad, editor.
Title: Bolivia at the crossroads : politics, economy, and environment in a time of crisis / edited by Soledad Valdivia Rivera.
Other titles: Politics, economy, and environment in a time of crisis
Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2021. | Series: Routledge studies in Latin American development | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020052834 (print) | LCCN 2020052835 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Bolivia—Politics and government—21st century. | Bolivia—Economic policy. | Morales Ayma, Evo, 1959–
Classification: LCC F3327 .B637 2021 (print) | LCC F3327 (ebook) | DDC 984.05/4—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020052834
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020052835

ISBN: 978-0-367-70772-9 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-14792-3 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by codeMantra

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# 4 Continuity and change in Bolivian land politics and policy

*Bret Gustafson*

## Introduction

This chapter is an overview of the main issues shaping contemporary political struggles over land in Bolivia. The chapter draws on the work of Bolivian researchers with a focus on continuities and potential changes before and after the tumultuous political upheaval of 2019 and 2020. The chapter critically engages the legacies of the government of Evo Morales and sketches out the primary areas of conflict that Bolivian activists and movements are facing going forward. The chapter begins with a general context and traces land policy during the government of Evo Morales, illustrating a shift from a more progressive approach to land reform (roughly 2006 to 2012) toward a conciliatory arrangement with eastern Bolivia's agro-industrial elite (from 2013 to 2019). Four areas are examined in more detail: gender and land; the battle over GMOs, the fires in the Amazon, and Indigenous territorial autonomies. I then turn to the political upheaval of 2019 and 2020. When Evo Morales was forced to resign in November of 2019, an interim government took over that was by and large a direct representative of the agro-industrial elite of the east. I describe various ways that the interim government used the capture of the state to further advance the interests of wealthy landowners. I conclude by considering how the return of the MAS in November of 2020 may or may not bring a return to progressive land policy.

## General context

Bolivia's population was mostly rural until the mid-1980s, but this rural to urban migration accelerated further in the 1990s and 2000s. Economic growth, albeit concentrated in urban areas, attracted more migrants, with Bolivia in 2020 being about 70% urban. But a relatively

high proportion of 30% of the country still lives in the rural area.[1] About 54% of the rural population lives in poverty, with 35% in extreme poverty (CEPAL 2019; Mamani 2020a). In the Andes, lands are simply too scarce to sustain new generations. Combined with climate change, water scarcity and soil erosion – as well as the impacts of mining in some regions – rural survival has become challenging in much of the highlands (Mamani 2020a). In eastern Bolivia, the expansion of large-scale agro-industry has occupied significant swaths of land. Despite some new rural settlements and land titles granted to smallholders, rural communities still struggle to get access to credits and inputs, and often end up sending new generations to the city or abandoning the land. Yet urban life is increasingly equally challenging, given the high levels of un- and under-employment. Andean migration to eastern Bolivia has long offered a safety valve, yet increasingly the availability of new land is limited both by local opposition and the spread of agro-industry.

In eastern Bolivia, the most economically productive lands are increasingly monopolized by large-scale agro-industries, mostly producing for export. Researchers from Fundación Tierra estimate that of the 3 million hectares of arable land in Bolivia, 1.3 million are planted in soy and around 700,000 in corn, sugar cane, rice, or wheat, most of that controlled by big agro-industries. The remainder, around 1 million hectares, produces most of what the country eats. Land inequality is high. About 800 large landowners have holdings of 5,000 hectares or more, while 787,000 small producers have holdings of 50 hectares or less. In the case of soy, the inequality is dramatic. Of the large producers, 2% control 70% of the land, a handful (20%) have mid-size properties of less than 1,000 hectares, and 78% are smallholders, with less than 50 hectares (Fundación Tierra 2020). This creates what has been called a dual structure in the land. On one side, there is large-scale capital-intensive agro-industry, focused primarily on soy and cattle, and to a lesser extent sugar cane, much of it destined for export. On the other side are food-producing smaller holders producing for the domestic market. Recent years have seen the expansion of small- and medium-scale farms producing for the market as well, especially in the regions of settlements north of Santa Cruz and in emerging alternative crops, such as quinoa, as well as coca, fruits, vegetables, and others. Yet even with this tripartite structure, a highly unequal distribution of land and agrarian power persists even in the wake of 14 years of the presumably progressive agrarian policies of Evo Morales (Colque et al. 2016). If the urban economy is not able to absorb labor, the country will need to do more to create economic opportunities for rural communities, which will require challenging the expansion of the agro-industrial elite.



## The unfinished agrarian revolution

Evo Morales, elected in 2005, launched a new agrarian reform in 2006 that promised just such a challenge. Prior land reforms, after the 1952 Revolution, and then again in 1996, had distributed some land to small farmers, but were ultimately limited in their effects and did not address deeper structures of inequality. The 1996 reform, aimed more at creating conditions for a free market in land than in pursuing social justice, initiated a limited process of land distribution and Indigenous territorial demarcation. But in both cases, large land-owning elites appropriated the legal measures to consolidate their hold on ill-gotten lands or to prevent more radical forms of redistribution. The law passed by the Morales government in 2006 was more ambitious. It set criteria for "socio-economic" function, such that lands held for speculation or farms exploiting workers through debt peonage could be expropriated by the government. It stopped the auctioning off of public lands and established collective titling for Indigenous and peasant farmers, meaning that any distribution of state lands would no longer go to the wealthy. Finally, it allowed for the participation of peasant and Indigenous organizations in the process and gave the state more power to intervene. In short, it was indeed a "redirection" of the agrarian reform (Colque et al. 2016:215).

The effort was marked by the redistribution of publicly owned land, titling of Indigenous territories, and cadastral "cleaning up" (*saneamiento*) of contested claims. In parts of the country, the MAS used the land reform to advance Indigenous and peasant claims, often leveraging these against particularly troublesome political opponents (Gustafson 2020a). It was a conquest of the government that saw almost 85% of the country's land "*saneado*" (with clear titles). A significant portion of the land that was redistributed went to Indigenous Peoples and small farmers. For example, over 50% of the land titled by 2014, almost 23 million hectares, were for the Indigenous "communitarian lands" (*tierras comunitarias de origen* [TCO]), territorial conquests of years of struggle (Colque et al. 2016:185).

Yet the government of Evo Morales, although voicing a seemingly radical language of land reform and Indigenous rights, ultimately demobilized more radical demands for land and abandoned significant efforts to limit the amount of land held by the latifundists. As it sought to defend its hegemony, it redirected peasant political mobilization into

state patronage rather than challenges to agrarian inequality. In addition, while the MAS had backed land occupations by peasant organizations, these radical efforts were eventually brought to a halt. There were also internal schisms. Many peasant organizations – primarily migrants from the Andes, or their descendants – wanted individual or family titles. Most Indigenous organizations, those largely in the eastern lowlands who shared a different agrarian history not characterized by insertion into commercial production, supported collective territories. The schism led to conflicts within the Morales government, which gradually sidelined supporters of collective Indigenous territories (Gustafson 2020a). Indigenous organizations had hoped to transform the TCOs into autonomous territories, but the new constitution limited Indigenous autonomies to existing municipal jurisdictions, and only to those where Indigenous peoples could muster a majority vote to convert them to autonomous municipalities (Garcés 2011). At this writing, there are only three out of over 300 municipalities in the country. In addition, the TCOs were not largely in economically productive lands and remain partly occupied by third-party (non-Indigenous) smallholders. In terms of large-scale expropriation of latifundias, this never really happened. Most lands redistributed were government lands. Many private holdings that should have been expropriated – due to their illegality or because they did not fulfill a socio-economic function – were left untouched (and, as below, granted more time to try to certify that they were actually productive). Evo Morales's election challenged the absolute power of the eastern Bolivia agrarian elite, but it did not dismantle it. In fact, by 2010 or so, the Morales government began to make concessions to the agrarian elite in a bid for political stability. This included, paradoxically, increased titling of lands to those who were not poor peasants or Indigenous peoples and, as above, a general halt to more radical efforts to expropriate land that was not fulfilling a social and economic good (one of the criteria established in the 2006 law). The government approach to land shifted from a revolutionary stance to one that seemed focused on appeasing large landowners and using the land reform office to expand the patronage networks of the government (McKay 2018).

## Gender and land

Despite the recent improvement of the economic indices in Bolivia, a significant sector of the population continues to live in poverty. Of this group, those who continue trying to eke out a living on rural small-holdings include a significant population of around 1.6 million women in the Andes. Because men often migrate to the city, leaving



behind the women in the communities, researchers have referred to a "feminization of the rural," which, by extension equates to a feminization of rural poverty (Mamani 2020a). For decades, scholars have argued that one of the fundamental issues of gender inequality in Latin America revolves around unequal access to land for women (Deere and León 2001). It has been argued that land ownership is not only a key to subsistence but is also tied to political subjecthood (Lastarria-Cornhiel 2009). Traditional forms of collective ownership, such as the ayllu in the Andes, or non-privatized customary use of the commons may have allowed for more equitable access for women. Yet collective titling can just as easily marginalize women – or pit women's interests against Indigenous interests (Deere and León 2001). At any rate, once privatized regimes of individualized land ownership were established, the impact has been to deepen gender inequality because individual titles were largely written in the name of the male as the head of household. In this way, even ostensibly revolutionary projects of land reform could cement male power further. Such was the case of the 1952 Land Reform in Bolivia, which established individual ownership through male heads of household and organized peasant unions (*sindicatos*) to mediate relations between land, communities, and the state. The ayllu form persisted in some areas, but male title-holding and the *sindicato* structure cemented deeply patriarchal forms of state politics onto Andean life. Furthermore, over time, individual land-holdings were increasingly subdivided among heirs, leading to out-migration and the phenomenon known as "minifundia" – families whose land consists merely of tiny plots or rows of land that do not allow for subsistence.

With the neoliberal era voicing the discourse of "gender equality" fit into a liberal model of market-oriented reform, the issue of co-ownership (joint titling) was introduced in the 1996 land reform legislation, the so-called Ley INRA (*Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria*). Deere and León (2001) argue that the so-called "engendering" of neoliberal land reform was largely aimed at legitimating a broader process of market-oriented policies and establishing formal legal equality for women and men. Yet, as they did elsewhere, neoliberal economic policies did not produce substantive equality. In the case of Bolivia, neoliberal reforms ushered in a period of growing poverty and inequality that did little to redistribute real structural or economic power to the poor, much less to women (Farthing and Kohl 2006). Furthermore, while the neoliberal INRA Law set out the criteria of gender equality, it did not mandate joint titling or establish firm procedures for pursuing it, such that it came down to decisions made by land functionaries and communities at the moment titles were written up – spaces largely

dominated by men. The INRA process did little to inform women of their rights or train its own personnel in the issues of gender equality in titling. Other challenges, including illiteracy, lack of state IDs, and the functionaries' lack of knowledge of Indigenous languages also limited women's participation (Lastarria-Cornhiel 2009:2016–2018; 224). The main goals of the 1996 reform were to encourage the formation of a free market in land, not to redistribute land or power to women and the poor. By the time INRA began to rethink its approach to gender, the entire neoliberal project had begun to collapse.[2]

The 2006 Agrarian Reform law passed under Evo Morales sought to address this in part by implementing joint titling more forcefully. What this meant is that the historical pattern of titling lands only in the name of men, as the head of the family, would be transformed such that all titles for nuclear families were to be written as co-owned by women and men. The process had a significant impact. Of the 2.1 million beneficiaries of land titling tied to the reform, about 46% are women (Mamani 2020b). As such, almost a million women are now recognized as full or joint owners of land. Although women have gained some access to legal titles, there is still much more to be done to translate this ownership (or joint ownership) into effective power. In some areas, women were titled marginal or unproductive lands. In political organizations, women are often excluded and women remain subject to high levels of domestic violence. There are notable exceptions, of course, such as the women's branch of the national peasant movement, known as the "Bartolinas" (*Confederación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas Indígenas Originarios de Bolivia "Bartolina Sisa"*), which has been an influential political actor. Many women from this organization took prominent roles in the MAS government. Yet challenges remain. During the MAS government, several initiatives aimed at addressing these issues were implemented, with uneven success. These included laws aimed at curbing domestic violence, racial and gender discrimination, and sexual harassment. Nonetheless, implementation challenges in rural areas, along with some community opposition from male leaders, has limited their reach. Despite more parity for women in urban political spaces, including at the national level, the need for more assertive agrarian policies to ensure legal security, support rural agrarian projects for rural women, and secure women's roles as political administrators of their lands is clear (Mamani 2020a, 2020b).

## GMOs: the roots of fascism?

The global consolidation of transnational corporations seeking to control agrarian production by way of genetically modified seeds – known



colloquially as GMOs (genetically modified organisms) – is worrisome. Six companies have merged to form three giants – Bayer/Monsanto and Dow/DuPont (of the USA), and ChemChina/Syngenta (of China). While these corporations market GMOs as improved seeds necessary for human survival, GMOs are not just seeds, they are a socio-technological and economic apparatus that relies on dangerous chemical inputs and which by virtue of GMOs' material dependence on specific legal and political arrangements of power, tends to deepen economic and political inequalities. GMO seeds are programmed to be treated with toxic herbicides like glyphosate and others, chemicals sold and controlled by the seed companies themselves (Colque 2020). The same companies, through local subsidiaries, buy the products (soy in the case of Bolivia) and export them, exercising control over virtually the entire chain of supply, production, and commercialization. This involves chemical subordination and dependence, economic domination, and the expatriation of profits which accrue to those who control the rights to seeds, chemicals, and outputs.

The history of GMO expansion in Bolivia dates to 1998, when Monsanto, the global agribusiness giant, began pressuring Bolivia to allow the introduction of its GMO soy called "RR" (or RR1). RR was resistant to glyphosate, a weed-killer also manufactured by Monsanto, as Roundup, a chemical identified by the World Health Organization as a probable carcinogen (IARC 2016). Because of opposition from environmental organizations and others, Monsanto failed to introduce it into Bolivia legally. But RR soy entered the country illegally and its use spread, creating a de facto and growing dependence. Finally, under immense pressure from big agro-industry, RR soy was finally made legal during the tumultuous period of the Carlos Mesa government that followed the massive uprisings of 2003 and the ouster of the neoliberal President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. When vice-president Mesa took over, he found himself pressured by the eastern Bolivian agrarian elite and was vying for their support. In his last days as President, a ministerial resolution was signed that approved RR1 soy. When Mesa resigned and Eduardo Rodríguez Veltzé became president in April of 2005, that resolution was raised to the level of a supreme decree. GMO soy had arrived (Molina 2020).

GMO soy gradually displaced conventional soy entirely. Yet as weeds became resistant to glyphosate, it became clear that RR was no miracle seed. Outputs began dropping after a few years (based on figures by Gonzalo Colque in Fundación Tierra 2020). In addition, the soy industry hoped to expand into the drier lands of the Chiquitano forest. The transnational firms with a presence in Bolivia are now

pushing two new GMO soy varieties: HB4 and Intacta. HB4, with a gene from sunflowers, is supposedly drought resistant and has genes to protect against both glyphosates, and a new herbicide called glufosinate (*glufosinato de amonio*). Glufosinate has already been banned in France for its toxic risks. Intacta is supposedly resistant to both glyphosate and certain insects and both are said to be more productive than RR (Molina 2020). Yet during the early years of the MAS government, characterized by environmentalist rhetoric in defense of the *Pachamama,* or Mother Earth, there were no more openings to GMO soy. Yet as the more progressive period of agrarian reform gave way to the conciliatory turn to the agro-industrial elite (and gas revenues started declining), the MAS began to make moves aimed at expanding the agricultural frontier in the east. In part, the argument was that this would aim to increase biofuel production. The idea was to replace imported diesel fuel, a key input for the agro-industrial sector itself that had long been subsidized by the state. Biodiesel produced from soy and ethanol produced from sugar were seen as an answer to fossil fuel dependency that would also encourage more agricultural production. Yet RR soy was no longer productive and the big farmers wanted the new seeds. Again, using a supreme decree (see Table 4.1),

*Table 4.1* Major legal actions affecting land use in Bolivia, 2005–2020

| | |
|---|---|
| *Interim Governments of Carlos Mesa and Eduardo Rodríguez Veltzé (2003–2005)*<br>*the last days of 'neoliberalism'* | |
| DS 28225<br>July 1, 2005 | Authorization of the use of GMO soy (RR, glyphosate resistant) |
| Law 3207<br>September 30, 2005 | Five-year tax holiday to promote biodiesel production |
| Evo Morales and the MAS (2006–2011)<br>*the unfinished agrarian revolution* | |
| Law 3545<br>November 28, 2006 | Redirection of the Agrarian Reform; some expropriations and redistribution of land |
| New Constitution<br>February 7, 2009 | New constitution with limited Indigenous autonomies; prohibits import of GMOs |
| Law 144<br>June 26, 2011 | Prohibited introduction of GMO seeds that threatened Bolivian biodiversity (i.e. corn); required identification of GMO-based food & seed imports; also called for procedures to control "production, importation, and commercialization" of GMO products |



| | |
|---|---|
| Evo Morales and the MAS (2012–2019)<br>*the opening to the agro-industrial elite* | |
| Law 337/2013 | Replaced penal sanctions for illegal deforestation between 1996 and 2011 with small fines |
| Law 502/2014 | Extended the reduced fines for illegal deforestation |
| Law 739/2015 | Extended the reduced fines for illegal deforestation through 2017 |
| Law 740/2015 | Five-year extension for large landowners to verify their socio-economic function |
| Law 741/2015 | Allowed for limited deforestation in areas zoned for forest protection |
| Law 1098/2018 | Law to promote biodiesel production and its purchase by the state |
| DS 3874<br>April 18, 2019 | Established "abbreviated procedures" for two new soy gmos (HB4 & INTACTA) for biodiesel production |
| Law 1178/2019 | Forgiveness for unauthorized burning |
| DS 3973/2019 | Allowed for controlled burning and expansion of agricultural frontier in lands zoned for forest in Beni |
| Jeanine Añez Interim Government (2019–2020)<br>*state capture by the agro-industrial elite* | |
| DS 4232<br>May 7, 2020 | Established "shortened procedures" for evaluating introduction of GMO corn, sugar cane, cotton, wheat and soy |
| DS 4238<br>May 14, 2020 | Ordered the National Committee on Biosecurity to approve the procedures for the new GMO seeds |
| DS4348<br>October 23, 2020 | Called for the identification of areas for the use of GMO corn |
| Inauguration of Luís Arce, Return of the MAS government (Nov. 8, 2020- ?) | |

Sources: CEDIB (2020); Villalobos (2020); Molina (2020).

the government of Evo Morales moved to accelerate approval of HB4 and Intacta, just a few months before the chaotic November 2019 elections. Nonetheless, the 2009 Constitution states in one article that the "production, importation, and commercialization of [GMOs] will be regulated by law," suggesting that a presidential decree was insufficient to make such a change. And, somewhat contradictorily, another article in the Constitution "prohibits the importation, production, and commercialization of [GMOs] and toxic elements that damage health and the environment" (cited in Molina 2020). Reflecting the conflicted negotiations between the social movements and agribusinesses

that marked the writing of the constitution, from either perspective Morales's pro-GMO decree is unconstitutional. These contradictions are also reflected in Bolivia's 2011 Law 144 on the "Communitarian and Agroindustrial Productive Revolution" (see Table 4.1). The law both prohibited GMO seeds that threatened Bolivia's natural biodiversity but also called for procedures for the import and sale of other GMO products. With the TIPNIS conflict and this contradictory approach, the turn toward the agro-industrial elite continued. By late 2019, Evo Morales himself had been ousted and was in exile in Argentina. I return to GMOs and the coup government that followed below.

The paradox of all of this in the Bolivian case is that large-scale agro-industry in eastern Bolivia is, economically speaking, unprofitable and nonsensical, working against human welfare and nature. Once GMO soy expands, given its dependence on toxic herbicides like glyphosate, other crops can no longer grow in the same region, not to mention the risks for human health and the contamination of soil and water. Soy from Bolivia is shipped to Peru and Colombia, and returned as finished products (oil and processed foods). Despite the marketing tactics of the multinationals, it does not contribute to food security or food sovereignty. Nor does large-scale agriculture employ much labor. The wider process of soy expansion and mechanization actually tends to reduce the need for labor, displacing smaller farmers and creating surplus populations who have little alternative but to migrate to the city (McKay and Colque 2016; McKay 2018).

This exclusionary push combines with the domination of those smaller or medium-size farmers who remain as providers of soy to the buyers. Smaller landholders who participate in the soy industry are invariably trapped in debt relations that force their continued dependence on seeds and chemical inputs. It is for this reason that the agro-industrial elite is often able to mobilize some smaller growers to support their push for GMOs (and likely partially explains the MAS overtures to this sector as well). Yet the system tends to keep smaller growers trapped in debt and moves wealth upwards. The model tends to exacerbate land inequality by concentrating larger and larger landholdings into fewer hands. The agro-industrial sector pays very little in the way of taxes, a fraction of what other businesses are required to pay on their profits. The industry also relies on government subsidies on diesel fuel (and the government is also subsidizing biofuel production), and government-subsidized loans, often forgiven when crops fail or prices drop. Finally, and despite those who argue that GMOs are crucial for food security or food sovereignty, most of Bolivia's food production comes from smaller farmers, not from the big agro-industry,



much less from GMO soy. As Gonzalo Colque argues (Fundación Tierra 2020:50), despite the fact that the entire apparatus of GMO soy is virtually unprofitable and contributes very little to the public good (actually costing the state in subsidies and bailouts), the attachment of economic interests – purveyors of chemicals, seeds, machinery, and the like – creates a network of powerful interests that defend its survival and expansion. By extension, since all of this entails a specific legal regime (laws, decrees, regulations), its expansion requires deep penetration of the state by the interests of multinational firms and their local partners, among them large landowners and business chambers. It is this convergence of anti-democratic power aimed at solidifying monopoly control – and its association with other arch-conservative ideological strands in eastern Bolivia – that have led some researchers to refer to GMOs as the expression of fascist power (Colque 2020).

## Indigenous autonomies

The Indigenous movements of Bolivia have been central protagonists in the shaping of agrarian and land policy for many decades. In the 1990s, Indigenous peoples marched from the lowlands of the east to the capital at La Paz, not once, but several times, demanding territorial rights. While peasant farmers and migrants from the Andes to the lowlands have generally organized around peasant unions – and often demanded familial or individual titles – one of the central demands of Indigenous peoples has been the demarcation of collective territories. Unlike the North American context, the vocabularies of "self-determination" and "sovereignty" are not as familiar in Bolivian Indigenous languages of struggle. However, in the early 2000s, the word "autonomy" was increasingly taken up as a goal of these territorial demands (Gustafson 2009b). The ongoing struggle over land and Indigenous rights is centered around this unfinished process of territorial recovery and consolidation, as well as the configuration of some form of political self-determination that might represent a form of political, economic, and cultural autonomy within the Bolivian state.

Across Latin America autonomy has increasingly been deployed by social movements as a language for contesting various forms of power – the state, capital, large landowners, political parties – and demanding control over bodies and territories free from the exercise of multiple forms of violence, extraction, or exploitation. In Bolivia, right-wing elites have also tried to appropriate the discourse of autonomy, applying it to their demands for more regional power (Gustafson 2006, 2020b). Furthermore, the term autonomy, as elsewhere in

Latin America, also refers to institutional autonomy of certain public entities – like municipal governments or universities, who demand "autonomy" over their own budgets free from the intervention of the political party that happens to be in the seat of national power. As such, the term is laden with conflicting meanings in Bolivia, such that "Indigenous Autonomy" and what it might mean is an ongoing debate that is only slowly emerging in practice.

As pointed out above, what started as a demand for more political control over demarcated territories (the TCOs) was gradually watered down and transformed into a very limited notion of autonomy in the new constitution of 2009 (Garcés 2011). The TCOs were demarcated in ways that often cross-cut municipal boundaries, although they were not allowed to disrupt departmental boundaries. As such, TCOs were already dictated in some ways by the existing territorial order, whereas a more radical and decolonizing approach would have privileged Indigenous territorialities over existing jurisdictions. In addition, the TCOs were not given any particular economic or political powers of their own, and they remained subject to the authorities (and the budgets) of the municipalities where they happened to overlap. In some cases, the TCOs and the Indigenous population made up a large portion of the municipal space and population, such as the Guarani TCO of Charagua and Isoso. In other cases, TCOs were rural spaces minoritized within larger municipal or departmental populations. A radical approach to Indigenous autonomy might have imagined transforming all TCOs into jurisdictions of their own, but the 2009 constitution set out a series of legal hurdles that reconfirmed the existing municipal structure. Furthermore, Indigenous autonomy was only possible where a referendum vote could be had (and won) at the municipal level, such that Indigenous peoples (or rare as they might be, pro-autonomy non-indigenous allies) had to vote to transform a municipality into an "Autonomous Indigenous Territorial Entity". Wherever this happened, Indigenous peoples had the right to rewrite the municipal statutes in a way that theoretically reflected their own concepts of political order, doing away, if they desired, with mayors and councils, and implementing new forms of government, within limits. All of this had to be approved by the national constitution, setting another limit on its decolonizing potential.

While many municipalities in the Andes are largely Indigenous and could have easily voted to transform themselves into autonomous Indigenous entities, there was no great rush to change the legal structure or status. In some cases, Indigenous authorities were already in control of the municipality and many supported the MAS party. Here there emerged splits between those who wanted to pursue "autonomy" and



those who sought to defend the status quo, or felt that the municipal structure was serving their needs well (Tockman 2017). In a few cases in the Andes, autonomy processes were successfully pursued, but by and large, the Indigenous Autonomous Entity is rare. In the lowlands, the situation was different. While most Indigenous organizations might have desired some form of territorial autonomy, the demographic conditions were such that winning a referendum was virtually impossible in most areas where TCOs were found. The notable exceptions were in the Guarani region, where the Guarani make up a majority in the municipality of Charagua. Charagua successfully transformed itself into an Indigenous Autonomous Entity in 2018 (Morell i Torra 2018). It remains to be seen what the longer-term impacts of this transformation might be. Of the 300-odd municipalities in the country, with around half of those potentially "Indigenous" – only about 24 municipalities are in the process of transformation. Tockman (2017) suggests that there is a kind of hybridity – with some autonomy processes closely mimicking the liberal model of existing municipal governments and others taking a more culturally varied or "communitarian" form (see also Inturias, et al., eds. 2018). For the moment, an optimistic read suggests that these municipal-level autonomies might grant more power to Indigenous peoples to determine the direction of local public investment. A warier approach might point out that this merely allows new people to access an existing system of rent-seeking – and the state budgets and revenues that that brings with it – but may not bring radical changes in daily life.

## Amazon on fire?

The question of land more broadly also involves millions of hectares of forest and grassland not apt for agriculture but increasingly targeted for cattle ranching or timber cutting. Perhaps more so than other issues, the burning of forest lands has attracted intense international attention. Around August or September, farmers and ranchers burn to clear land, with fires often getting out of control. In 2019, much more than in years prior, agricultural burning was destroying vast swaths of forested areas of the Amazon basin and the dry Chiquitano forest. By 2019, the yearly burning had seemingly gotten out of control, but in fact reflected aggressive and intentional efforts by landowners to clear more agricultural land. The fires, which burned about 6.4 million hectares of vegetation, about 31% of its forests, were the largest in Bolivia's recent history (CEDIB 2020:8). A number of Bolivian NGOs, such as Centro de Documentación e Información Bolivia (CEDIB), blamed the policies of the MAS government (CEDIB 2020).

While fires have always been a yearly event, it is true that in the later 2010s the MAS government began to shore up its power in the east by making a series of legal concessions to the agro-industrial elite, some of which forgave past burning and incentivized new forest clearing. For example, in 2013 the government passed a general pardon for those who had carried out illegal deforestation between 1996 and 2011. What was once a criminal act subject to the penal code was transformed into cause for a relatively light fine. In subsequent years, the time frame was extended through the end of 2017, such that those who continued to break the law were equally absolved. On the other hand, a series of laws were passed that provided incentives to expand the agricultural frontier, while weakening protections. In 2015, another law allowed deforestation by small landholders by reducing restrictions on legal burning in areas zoned for forest maintenance (it led to burning since smaller farmers generally do not have heavy machinery to clear land). The measure, according to critics, gave way to uncontrolled burning while larger landowners took advantage of the opening to do some burning of their own. In 2018 another law reversed Evo Morales' longstanding opposition to biofuels (biodiesel from soy and ethanol from sugar). Confronting a fuel shortage and intense pressure from the soy and sugar industry, the government moved to promote plant-based fuel production and promised to buy ethanol. This incentivized more deforestation. In April of 2019, just a few months before his ouster, Morales signed the decree to facilitate approval of two new GMO soy varieties resistant to both drought and glyphosate. The reason was that the soy frontier was expanding into the dry forest area of the Chiquitanía region, and farmers hoped it would do better there. At the same time, the government passed a law that in effect reduced sanctions and fines on burning, implicitly encouraging new fires. In June of 2019 a presidential decree authorized new deforestation in areas of Santa Cruz and Beni departments (Villalobos 2020; Gustafson 2020b). The combined interest in expanding soy and sugar frontiers for biofuels and expanding cattle production for exports to China both implicated government policy as a proximate incentive for burning (CEDIB 2020). Even if he did not light the match, Evo's policies certainly helped shape conditions for the inferno.

Environmentalist NGOs have worked to draw attention to these contradictions of the MAS government in relation to the Amazon basin. Yet the question of the fires, the Amazon, and the environment have also entered a polarized political sphere. Paradoxically, right-leaning political actors and urbanites have held up the issue of the "environment" as a way to attack Evo Morales, as early as 2011, during the



TIPNIS conflicts.[3] At that time, a plan to build a highway through a protected area and Indigenous territory led to intense conflicts between Indigenous organizations the government. Although many on the left, including those formerly sympathetic to the MAS were also critical, what was surprising was the way that otherwise reactionary actors also transformed, virtually overnight, into defenders of nature and of Indigenous rights. This pattern continued in subsequent years, as organizations like *Ríos de Pie* (Standing Rivers) emerged as outlets for environmental attacks on Evo Morales, even though their funders and supporters were aligned with right-leaning 'human rights' organizations. Leading up to the November 2019 coup, with the fires burning, these organizations once again organized social media campaigns like #SOSBolivia, which seemed to suggest that Evo Morales was solely to blame for the devastation. Curiously, and unaware of Bolivia's internal politics, even European organizations like #ExtinctionRebellion amplified these campaigns, which were more aimed at destroying the reputation of Evo Morales than in promoting progressive environmental policies. During the year of right-wing control that followed the coup, with the fires burning once again and new decrees emitted to support agro-industrial expansion, these same organizations were largely silent. The challenge going forward will be to align the goals and projects of wider social movements with a new vision of agro-ecological change, rather than supporting the co-optation of environmentalist discourse and the cynical exploitation of Indigenous peoples by conservative political groups.

## The coup regime

When Evo left the country in 2019, a government led by Jeanine Áñez took control. Áñez was part of the "Demócratas" party, a political vehicle with its base among the agrarian elite of eastern Bolivia. She was allied with a more extreme sector of that elite as well, the forces tied to Luís Fernando Camacho and his soy and vegetable oil baron backer, Branko Marinkovic. Marinkovic had been living in exile since 2009, having been accused of participating in a plot to kill Evo Morales. Yet after the coup, he came back. His family is one of the largest landowners in the east. Like many, his family has used the state (especially subsidized loans and low taxes) to accumulate wealth, and unsurprisingly has sent earnings overseas for sheltering, as revealed in the Panama Papers. Between the Demócratas and this more reactionary political sector, it was clear that coup government represented the agro-industrial elite. By the end of Áñez' time in office, Marinkovic

himself was named Minister of Development and Planning, a far cry from his alleged role in a criminal plot from years before.

The interim government made a number of policy moves that sought to take advantage of presidential decree power. In relation to land policy, the new president handed over control of the national land reform office (INRA) to the wealthy, naming Eliane Capobianco, also a representative of the eastern agrarian elite, as Minister of Rural Development and Lands. Capobianco, to Indigenous movements and environmentalists alike, was a notorious figure. In the early days of the MAS, when the country was rewriting the constitution, she is remembered for her racist statements in the constitutional assembly, admonishing Quechua representatives to either speak Spanish or remain silent (Gustafson 2009a). Capobianco had been a director of INRA in the pre-Morales era, during which time she was accused of running a network of corruption that used the agency to benefit large landowners. Her own family was involved in fraudulent efforts to avoid the payment of taxes. The family of Branko Marinkovic was also implicated in these corruption rings (*La Prensa* 2007). She was also an advisor to the cattlemen's chamber of Santa Cruz (FEGASACRUZ) and the Association of Vegetable Oil Producers (ANAPO), both entities tied to the most conservative factions of the agrarian capitalist elite. In this context, the government set about signing an accord with the agrarian chamber of commerce (CAO) that actually directed the land reform office to confirm thousands of acres of land titles for businesses.

In May of 2020, the President of Bolivia, Jeanine Áñez, signed into law a Supreme Decree (DS 4348), that allowed for the identification of areas for the use of GMO corn. Over 100 social organizations and NGOs immediately cried foul, signing a manifesto that decried the move, arguing that not only would it incentivize further deforestation (and fires, already raging at the time), it was an attack on the "genetic patrimony" of the country (Página Siete 2020). Just a few months earlier the Áñez government had also signed another decree (DS 4232) that removed obstacles to the approval of GMO corn, sugar, cotton, wheat, and soy – abbreviating oversight processes that are established in the Constitution. Although GMO corn has been planted illegally since at least 2015, the agro-industrial elite wanted to legalize and expand its use as it had done with soy, along with these other crops (Fundación Tierra 2020:24). Furthermore, the government of Áñez itself was seen by many as illegitimate – or at least as lacking a mandate – having come to power after the social upheaval and the forced resignation of Evo Morales in November of 2019. It seemed that the so-called "interim government" which represented by proxy and in the flesh the agro-industrial elite of eastern Bolivia, was working as fast as it could



to deepen the political grip that these agrarian elites have long held over land policy in Bolivia.

In May of 2020, as the interim President signed the pro-GMO decree, the agribusiness chamber (CAO, Cámara Agropecuaria del Oriente) also staged a press conference to tout a supposed agreement with a lowland Indigenous organization, the Confederación Indígena del Oriente Boliviano (CIDOB). Though it did not mention GMO seeds specifically, the stunt was aimed at performing a convergence of interests between Indigenous organizations and big agro-capital. Other Indigenous organizations denounced the agreement as a farce, and the CIDOB itself denied that the individuals signing the document had any authority. But in point of fact, in early 2019 a more curious statement emerged from the peasant unions of the northern Santa Cruz region. Though ostensibly identified with the MAS, the organization issued a statement supporting the expansion of GMOs, suggesting efforts by big business to cajole – or coerce – smaller growers into supporting GMO seeds. As with other policies tied to land and territory, this revealed a schism between those more commercially oriented farmers and Indigenous organizations (CIPCA 2019). The bigger point is clear: the agro-industrial elite are determined to use deceptive and illegitimate strategies to defend their interests. In addition, the event brought to light a deeper problem inherited from the MAS period: the division of Indigenous movements and the coopting of leaders separated from the organic decision-making control of their bases.

## Futures of policy and movement

The country went to the polls for the second time in a year in October of 2020, and handed the reins of government back to the MAS party with an overwhelming vote of 55% going to candidate Luís Arce. While political tensions remain high, particularly with the arch-conservative – fascist to many – sectors of Santa Cruz, Arce appears to have a mandate for a five-year term. Whether this new era will reflect a continuity of the more conciliatory relationship to agrarian capital remains unclear. Arce, who was Evo Morales' Minister of the Economy for most of his 14 years in office, is known to be a backer of the biofuel idea. Yet the rising tensions with the most conservative sectors of the agrarian elite might lead Arce to return to a more assertive stance, calling on the social movements to support his government and its policies. At this writing, predictions are difficult.

What is clear is that the often-repeated critique of extractivism (whether of gas, soy, or minerals) is generally unable to mobilize alternative visions of agricultural production in eastern Bolivia. The

seemingly unassailable hegemony of the soy and cattle industries has been critiqued through two lenses – that of GMOs and that of deforestation and fires. These are useful mobilizing points but do not alone offer political visions of alternative land use. The underlying assumption appears to be that smaller-scale agriculture, some form of organic or alternative projects, and more diverse forms of land use would be good. Yet the precondition for such projects would be the state's withdrawal of subsidies to big agriculture and state's commitment to effective redistribution. These would both entail dismantling a hegemonic bloc, and perhaps, state or popular violence, both of which seem unlikely. What might unravel in the longer term could be a destruction of the soy market through expansion of electric vehicles (thus collapsing demand for biofuels) and the resurgence of more militant peasant organizations in the face of urban poverty and lack of employment (similar to the MST in Brazil, whose short-lived Bolivian counterpart was demobilized by the Morales government). More research and creative thinking are needed to document the situation of rural Bolivia – both in the high Andes and in the agrarian landscapes of the east. Bolivian NGOs and social movements may find new synergies in the new political moment, but it remains to be seen if the new MAS government will continue to back the subordination to global agro-capital or whether the government can use its power to help create a new agrarian model. As this went to press and the country prepared to inaugurate Luís Arce as the new president of Bolivia, Bayer Bolivia (the new name of the company formed from the merger of Bayer and Monsanto) was touting its promotion of a contest that a Bolivian NGO was participating in. The winner would receive a cash prize, and would promote "new seeds for the future". While the shape and terms of land struggle, reform, and revolution have shifted in new ways, and amid new complexities, the struggle in defense of nature, human well-being, and for a more egalitarian society and distribution of the means of production is still being waged against the interests of multinational capital.

## Notes

1 For comparison, Argentina has been mostly urban since the 1950s, and is currently 92% urban (CEPA 2019).
2 As documented by Lastarria-Cornhiel (2009:225–26), it was not until mid-2003 that INRA directors issued memoranda requiring the participation of women in meetings. The neoliberal project began to unravel with the Gas War of October 2003 (Gustafson 2020a).
3 The TIPNIS conflicts stemmed from government efforts to build a highway through a protected Indigenous area (the "Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro-Sécure", hence TIPNIS). See McNeish (2013).



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# 5 Lithium and *vivir bien*

## Sovereignty and transition

*Fabio S. M. Castro, Sinclair M. G. Guerra and Paulo A. Lima Filho*

### Introduction

At the entrance of the new century, a proposal for a sovereign nation project based on the emancipation of indigenous and peasant communities emerged in Bolivia. Under the indigenous leadership of Evo Morales, through the social movements organization, it took advantage of the commodity boom and distributed income in the country, a process that came to be known as 'Bolivian Wonder'. It was a process that started in 2006 and that lasted for almost 14 years. Although interrupted for one year by a military coup, the path to *vivir bien* (living well), even if plunged into deep contradictions, is expected to resume after the democratic elections at the end of 2020.

This historical process, which is known in the country as *proceso de cambio* (process of change), even after the crisis in 2009 and the sharp drop in commodity prices in 2014, which led other South American countries into deep crises, permitted a continued growth at around 5% per year. However, this did not prevent a reaction of the traditional elites against this popular project. Riding the wave of the strengthening of the extreme right in the region, at the end of 2019, against the result of the elections that would lead to a fourth term of the Movement toward Socialism (*Movimiento al Socialismo* – MAS), the Bolivian middle class took to the streets expressing their discontent and, supported by the military, they pressured Evo Morales to resign.

We interpret what happened as a coup d'état, as do Lambert (2019) and Engdahl (2019). At the international level, discussions about whether it was a coup or not were intense. The hegemonic media attested to the legitimacy of the facts in view of their origin in the manifestations of the middle class; nonetheless, they failed to consider the external influence that was established and the definitive participation of the military who were co-opted to reinforce the coup.

On the other side, in alternative media outlets, a narrative that indicated the link between the coup and the interests of North American