

Bolivia

Back from the brink

In the middle of this year newspapers reported that Bolivia's government was about to be toppled. **Shawn Hattingh** shows how the attempt to overthrow Evo Morales was defeated through massive mobilisation by ordinary people. Their victory has driven them to make further demands.

Over the last few months, the sight of rightwing thugs attacking indigenous people with baseball bats, pick axe handles and even sub-machine guns had become common on the streets of Bolivia's cities. Such instances of racist violence were all part of a larger and planned campaign by sections of the Bolivian elite. They were backed by the US, to tear the country apart by declaring autonomy in provinces they controlled.

Behind this campaign and its brutality was an unwillingness by the elite to accept that the country's first ever indigenous president, Evo Morales, had semi-nationalised the gas sector and had promoted modest land reform programmes to address some inequalities that have plagued Bolivia since colonialism.

The perpetrators of this violent campaign naively believed that their actions would enable them to re-seize complete control of Bolivia's natural resources and re-implement neo-liberalism in the provinces they controlled.

What this elite, however, failed to realise was that the indigenous, trade union and community movements would not stand idly by and let this happen. These

movements once again mobilised on a massive scale and showed that they will not let Bolivia be ripped apart by the right-wing elite. Indeed, for these movements, the recent struggle to stop the elite was simply part of a greater struggle to reclaim their dignity and freedom that was initially attacked in Cochabamba's streets eight years ago.

ORIGINS OF CURRENT STRUGGLE

For centuries the settler elite used the state to impose capitalism, and later its neo-liberal variety, onto the people. As part of this process, the elite exercised their vast power to subjugate the indigenous people of the country who make up 60% of the population. Through military power the settler elite stole vast amounts of land, along with natural resources, from the indigenous population. By the end of the 20th century less than 1% of the population controlled over 70% of the land. Similarly, the top 20% of the population came to own 30 times more than the bottom 20%.

The death knell for this system, however, occurred when the elite, under the World Bank's tutelage, privatised water in one of Bolivia's largest cities, Cochabamba, through selling it to a US corporation,

Bechtel, in 2000. As part of this deal, Bechtel was guaranteed a 16% annual profit rate for 40 years. To make this profit, Bechtel tripled the population's water bills and people were even charged for collecting rain water from their roofs.

The people of Cochabamba were outraged and organised themselves into a movement, the Coordinadora, in early 2000. Coordinadora's central demand was the complete reversal of the privatisation process.

For several months, Coordinadora organised massive protests and, at times, fought pitched battles with security forces that were protecting Bechtel's interests. Eventually, Coordinadora won and the state was forced to reverse water privatisation. People across Bolivia drew inspiration from this victory and began to believe that neo-liberalism could be defeated.

From that point Bolivia was never the same again. Across the country people began mobilising and demanding that neo-liberalism come to an end and that the country's vast natural resources, such as its gas sector, benefit the poor.

In 2003 indigenous movements, unions and other activists descended on Bolivia's capital, La Paz, to demand that the gas sector benefit the majority of the people.

As crowds swelled to over 500 000 people outside the Presidential Palace, the government collapsed and a new one came in.

One of the first actions of the new government was to call a referendum around imposing greater taxes on gas companies. This received massive support in the referendum. The government, however, failed to implement people's wishes. The result was that by 2005 the movements once again rose up, and this time demanded that Bolivia's gas sector be socialised, that land be redistributed, and that a new constitution be drafted. Yet again, hundreds and thousands of people surrounded the Presidential Palace and the government was once again forced to resign.

An early election was called for December 2005.

MORALES SWEEP IN

One of the main contenders in the 2005 election was Evo Morales. He was a coca growers' trade union leader that had been part of the protests that had toppled the two previous governments. As part of his election campaign, Morales promised to meet the movements' demands for the nationalisation of the gas sector, land redistribution and the drafting of a new constitution. As a result, and on the back of the movements' success, Morales was swept into the presidency.

Upon election, Morales made some moves towards meeting the promises he had made during his campaign. On 1 May 2006 he announced that the gas sector would be nationalised. But this promised nationalisation never fully occurred – rather Morales simply increased the tax that gas companies had to pay. Although falling well short of his original promises, the increased tax



Bolivian President, Evo Morales

provided the government with greater resources to carry out social programmes.

Despite the fact that the elite's gas interests were not fully nationalised, they still felt a deep anger at the tax increases and, as a consequence, immediately demonised Morales. Some of the indigenous and union movements were also angered with Morales and mobilised to demand that he nationalise the gas sector as he promised. This led to clashes between these movements and the police.

Under pressure from the movements, Morales eventually moved in early 2007 to nationalise certain sections of the gas industry, but not all. The elite were further angered by this move.

Running parallel to this, Morales initiated a process to draft a new constitution by forming a constituent assembly in the constitutional capital, Sucre. The right wing opposition, with the support of the US, immediately moved to block this process. They organised bands of fascist youths to attack indigenous people and assembly delegates in Sucre's

streets. This forced Morales to move the constituent assembly to another city where rightwing forces were less prominent. The opposition then withdrew from the constituent assembly. Eventually, a new constitution was drafted without the opposition.

The new constitution contained a number of progressive clauses which allowed for the nationalisation of natural resources, promoted land redistribution; and entrenched people's right to social services. Nonetheless, not all clauses in the constitution were progressive, for example private property was still respected. Before the new constitution could come into effect, however, it needed the approval of 65% of Bolivians in a referendum and the Senate's approval which was, and is, controlled by the right wing.

In a desperate bid to stop the new constitution coming into effect, the rightwing stalled the vote in the senate and called for a referendum in August 2008 to have Morales recalled. The plan to have Morales removed, however, backfired as 67% of voters demanded that he remain in office. With this defeat, the right wing implemented a new strategy: to literally tear Bolivia apart to halt the adoption of the new constitution.

RIGHT WING PUSH FOR AUTONOMY

Since the 2005 elections, Bolivia's right wing elite have been in control of the governorships of five of the eastern provinces, which contain 90% of the country's gas resources. In 2007, the right wing began pushing for autonomy in these provinces. As part of this, they wanted to set their own tax rates on gas companies, to set their own land policies, and to control the security forces in these provinces. The idea was to end Morales'



Activists from across Bolivia marched on La Paz to demand the new Constitution – some walked as much as 200kms

progressive tax on gas companies and undermine any proposed land redistribution that would be part of the new Constitution.

When their referendum bid to remove Morales failed, the right wing took the drive for provincial autonomy to the next level. In late August 2008 they organised fascist paramilitaries to seize control of all central government buildings and transport nodes in the five eastern provinces. They thereby declared these provinces independent of the central government.

Coupled with this, indigenous people in these five provinces were routinely attacked by paramilitaries in order to terrify them into submission. The Morales government did not help the situation as it moved very slowly to stop the secessionist drive and seemed reluctant to confront the right wing elite.

PEOPLE FIGHT BACK

The indigenous and union movements, however, immediately sprang into action. Meetings took place across the country to organise marches in the five provinces and put a halt to the right wing's vicious

secessionist actions.

On 11 September this year, indigenous activists organised a protest in one of the breakaway provinces, Pando, to stop the right wing occupation and looting of central government buildings. The protest was, however, ambushed by paramilitary forces resulting in the killing of 15 activists and another 106 'disappeared'.

In response, indigenous and union movements took a decision to march on the Santa Cruz province, which was acting as a de facto headquarters for the right wing, and put an end to the elite's secessionist ambitions. Over 600 000 activists mobilised in Santa Cruz and a further 20 000 activists marched and blockaded the secessionist's headquarters for two weeks. In the end, the right wing elite were forced to hand back all of the central government buildings they had occupied. In effect, this ended the right wing's hope of tearing Bolivia apart.

In follow up to this action, the movements then marched on the Senate in La Paz to demand that it vote in favour of the new constitution. The march turned out to

be one of the largest in Bolivia's history and was 15 kilometres long.

Meanwhile, Morales had entered into negotiations with conservative members of the senate in a bid to get them to accept the need for a new constitution. As part of the negotiations, Morales made certain concessions to the conservatives. These included the insertion of clauses in the constitution that granted a degree of autonomy to provinces and that stated that only unproductive land would be redistributed.

Many activists were angered by this, and could not understand why Morales had made such concessions to the right wing, who had effectively been defeated by the movements. In the end, however, the senate voted in favour of the new, but modified, constitution and a referendum on its adoption was set for 2009.

CONCLUSION

The recent actions by the indigenous and union movements to defeat the elite's secessionist plans was one of the biggest victories for the poor in Bolivia's history. Indeed, for the moment the right wing are effectively neutralised and discredited.

In fact, a new sense of radicalism seems to have swept through Bolivia once again. Many within the movements are now demanding more than the adoption of the new watered down constitution; they are demanding a social revolution that overturns the entire political and economic order that has plagued Bolivia for centuries. The question now is: will Morales be moved with this tide? LB

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