

## Special Section

# The Millions Return? Democracy in Bolivia at the Start of the Twenty-first Century

Guest Editors

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## Introduction

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Over the last few years Bolivia has been the scene of a series of violent confrontations between the government and a range of social interest groups. These confrontations have led to a rising death toll amongst protestors, the burning of government buildings and the resignation of two Presidents: Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in October 2003 and Carlos Mesa in June 2005. By the end of 2005, Bolivia had had three presidents in one year, as Carlos Mesa's successor, Eduardo Rodríguez, immediately called early elections for December 2005, in order to pacify the protestors. At the time that this issue went to press, Evo Morales, the indigenous coca-growers' leader, had just won those elections with 54% of the vote. Alongside the ramifications of these developments for national politics, the years since 2000 have seen rising international interest in the country as a symbol of anti-globalisation sentiment and action. Both regionally and globally, analysts and politicians have recognised the importance of a series of events, particularly the 'Water War' of April 2000, the 'Gas War' of October 2003 and the protests of mid-2005. We summarise the most important ones in the timeline at the end of this introduction. They are a central link in the chain of events that many interpret as a contemporary 'turn to the left' in Latin America, and as a result the eyes of the world are on Bolivia, from all sides of the political spectrum.

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This special section uses those events as a conceptual and temporal pivot around which to examine the nature of democracy in Bolivia today. We study this at a time when established conventions of politics and democracy in Bolivia and elsewhere are being questioned, and popular will is demonstrating its insistence on a radical reconfiguration of the existing limitations to both state and government. As well as analysing the domestic social and economic context, we draw attention to deep-seated cultural and political problems, and also highlight the importance of international actors and pressures in shaping popular political action and demands. Given the complexity of the contemporary political environment, we consider it appropriate to ask whether Bolivia is currently experiencing the fulfilment of the prophecy made by the rebel Tupac Katari on his death in 1781 at the hands of the Spanish colonisers: 'I shall return, and I shall be millions'.

The articles in this special issue revolve around the interactions between ordinary people, the state and the international system. Taken together, they make a distinction between the neoliberal state, political parties and development experts on the one hand and, on the other, 'civil society' and long-standing traditions of communitarianism, trade unionism and rebellion against the perceived corruption of the state and 'normative' politics. Of course, a neat distinction between two 'political spheres' or 'traditions' is impossible, as people within both traditions interact with each other, both peacefully and in a conflictive and dramatic way. We have titled this collection 'Democracy in Bolivia at the Start of the Twenty-first Century', but in the process of putting it together we have found that our understanding of what democracy is has been called into question. We would certainly argue that it is unproductive to view 'democracy' solely in institutional terms, that is, as elections and political institutions. Although both of these play a very important part in Bolivians' experience of democracy, other political traditions need to be considered if we are to understand 'democracy' in the country as a whole.

Ton Salman traces the development of antagonism between the population and politicians in Bolivia, and places responsibility for this squarely in the hands of the political classes. He argues that a long history of excluding the majority from real influence in politics, despite formal democratic procedures being in place, has produced a crisis of belief in democracy itself, affecting both governing bodies and the party system. Deficient representation has combined with state traditions of corruption, ineptness and 'pacting' between political parties to produce severe distrust of politics among ordinary Bolivians. As a result, the political process has become one of fierce and radicalised discourses and forced negotiations, and relations between the polity and civil society have broken down. Civil society organisations cannot develop *political* alternatives to the current stalemate, since they have become unable to articulate themselves in a strategic way or to negotiate with government representatives. Bolivia's democracy has thus become 'jammed'.

However, the relationship between ordinary Bolivians and the state is not necessarily one of outright antagonism or resistance and may involve negotiation and dialogue – or the expectation of dialogue – even in highly-charged moments such as October 2003. Sian Lazar provides an ethnographic account of civic organisations in El Alto and their interactions with the state system. She maintains that civic and trade union

organisations in El Alto exemplify and enact a form of democracy that is different from the normative neoliberal one of party politics. More corporatist, the El Alto model takes its cue from the notion that leaders must implement the decisions of their grass roots, of the 'people' as a collectivity. She argues that the popular organisations and the state-system interact with each other under 'normal' circumstances in Bolivia. In contrast to Ton Salman's article, she maintains that civic and trade union organisations are accustomed to some form of dialogue with the state, in a democratic cycle of organised protest – negotiation – agreement – breaking of some promises on the part of the government – protest again. In October 2003 that cyclical interaction broke down, because President Sánchez de Lozada stopped listening and negotiating and instead sent in the army. Carlos Mesa subsequently found himself in the position where he was unable (or unwilling) to give in to the demands of the protestors for nationalisation of the natural gas resources, but was also unwilling to engage in the kind of repression that we saw in October 2003. As a result, the only options he had left were, first, the threat and then the act of resignation, in favour of calling early elections. The fact that this satisfied the social movements, at least temporarily, indicates the investment that many Bolivians have in 'normative' politics such as elections.

Into Goudsmit proposes yet another possible configuration of the relationship between the Bolivian people and the state, one that is experienced as a sense of distance and fetishisation. He examines the ways that peasants in Northern Potosí think and feel about the national and local state. Rather than rejecting the normative state-system outright, Goudsmit argues, the peasants of Toracari fetishise 'Government', in the person of the President. 'Government', however, is not the same thing as the state. Indeed, Goudsmit argues that Toracari peasants do not have a notion of the state understood as a hierarchically ordered entity which relates local public institutions to national government. The fetish of Government is felt to be utterly distant from their everyday lives, and only really important during Independence Day celebrations. The legitimacy of the normative system at a national level is stable within the community as long as this irrelevance continues. Local manifestations of what we might call the state are more likely to be associated with local landlords, and the combination of fetishisation of distant Government and the prominence of the local landlords prevents the peasants from resisting the national state. Goudsmit points out that an analytical obsession with the State as idea may prevent effective and serious research into local political structures, which may be felt as much more powerful than what we understand as the state.

The issue of felt and actual distance between the people and the state also has ramifications for how we understand the problems of 'development' in Bolivia. Non-governmental organisations and other private institutions are increasingly taking on roles previously associated with the state, becoming 'state-like systems' (Trouillot, 2001) that operate at local, national and international levels. At the national and international levels, the complex of development experts and multilateral institutions becomes crucial. John McNeish's article examines the role of this complex in creating or exacerbating Bolivia's contemporary problems. It highlights that whilst Bolivia has been hailed by the World Bank and the United Nations as a 'good practice' example of

democratic and development reform over the last decade, many sectors of the Bolivian population not only remain dissatisfied by their level of political representation, but have been kept out of any role in decision-making related to national economic policy. He argues that whilst this situation has arisen as a result of a history of internal prejudices its persistence must be connected to a series of contradictions within international development policy and institutions. He further demonstrates that despite persisting prejudices about the capacities of the poor to envisage solutions to their own poverty and development, ideas for appropriate development, as well as realistic alternatives for change to government and democracy, are visible amongst the different social groupings involved in recent demonstrations. Indeed, whilst some reservations can be raised, a match can be made between these ideas and new discourses on development and democratic reform now taking form amongst some important actors of the international community.

The articles in this collection reveal a tension, then, between the separation of 'indigenous' Bolivia from normative, institutional politics (seen as primarily white or mestizo and including development agencies and experts) and their imbrication with each other. The importance of contemporary events in Bolivia must lie in the fact that the two spheres are merging to such effect, and not only in terms of the impact of popular protest on institutional politics. Andrew Canessa's contribution points to how important indigeneity is becoming for national politics. He places its increased salience in the context of contemporary global and regional trends towards the valorisation of 'the indigenous' and widespread interpretations of the events of October 2003 (and previous uprisings in April and September 2000) as indigenous upheavals. Canessa traces the rise of a globalised notion of the indigenous over the latter part of the last century, and questions whether in the same way as the mestizo was the iconic Bolivian citizen in the mid-twentieth century, indigeneity will become the most important political identity of the twenty-first, especially as increasing numbers of urbanites self-identify as indigenous. The question is what kinds of ideas about indigeneity are most potent politically, and certainly a notion of indigeneity heavily influenced by global developments is crucial to the rhetoric of several political leaders in Bolivia, most prominently Felipe Quispe and Evo Morales. There is a constant circulation of ideas from the global to the local levels and back again. Evo Morales is the most popular manipulator of such language, at both levels, not least because it is clearly allied in his case with a highly developed critique of global capitalism, and because his version of indigeneity is an inclusive one, in contrast to that of Quispe. However, Canessa strikes a note of caution with a discussion of other forms of lived indigenous identity among rural indigenous people, which contrast sharply with those expressed by the most prominent indigenous leaders. If a politicised (and globalised) indigenous identity is the most important language of politics for Bolivia in the current regional context, it is a specific kind of indigeneity that may turn out to marginalise alternative versions.

One of the most important problems for Bolivia today is a conflict between entrenched interests within the governing classes nationally and internationally and the increasingly powerful popular democratic traditions. When protest flares up, temporary advances are usually made, such as the promise to hold a referendum on

the fate of the natural gas in 2003–2004. However, retrenchment swiftly follows, and as a result the protesters become more radical. We saw this with the development of the hydrocarbons law: initial government resistance to higher taxation of the private extraction companies was partly responsible for the fact that the oppositional social movements came to demand outright nationalisation of the natural gas. As for the elections at the end of 2005, the national electoral court moved to reorganise the balance of congressional deputies according to population figures. This had the effect of increasing the numbers of representatives from the wealthier eastern parts of Bolivia, and reducing those from the more indigenous highland areas. Its impact on the character of the new Congress may make Evo's tenure challenging, and the situation in the country remains difficult. The hardening of positions is evident on both sides of the class and ethnic divide, as elite civic bodies in the wealthy eastern regions are now seeking greater autonomy and political separation from the highlands.

The articles in this collection came from two sources: a panel held at the SLAS conference of early 2004, and a workshop held in Cambridge later that year. At both events, the participants agreed that the only certainty in Bolivian politics at the moment is uncertainty and instability. The events of 2005 have borne out that analysis, and currently no resolution is in sight. Protests are increasing in frequency, positions on both sides are becoming more and more entrenched and Bolivian democracy as we currently understand it at times seems fragile. This could be a good thing if the result is that normative politics becomes more representative of the majority population of Bolivia. There are, however, other possibilities. Institutionalised politics could become ever more self-referential and distant from ordinary life, instead of opening up. Alternatively, and perhaps most likely, Bolivia might simply carry on in a state of instability and flux, which one could argue has been the case for much of its recent history. It is impossible to predict how Bolivian democracy will develop in the future, but we hope that the articles collected in this special section assist readers to go beyond simplistic and judgemental analyses of its fragility.

## **Timeline 2000–2005**

**April 2000:** 'Water War' in Cochabamba: protests which expelled the foreign-owned water consortium Aguas de Tunari, after a tripling in local water rates. Peasant blockades on the altiplano [highland plain], led by the CSUTCB (Confederación Sindical Unica de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia, the national peasant union) led by Felipe Quispe (known as 'the Mallku').

**September 2000:** Peasant blockades on the altiplano, led by the Mallku. Cocalero [coca-grower] blockades in the Chapare region against government eradication proposals.

**November 2000:** The Mallku forms the political party Movimiento Indígena Pachakuti (Indigenous Pachakuti Movement).

**June–September 2001:** Peasant blockades in the Department of La Paz.

**January–April 2002:** Government decrees the prohibition of sale of coca grown in the Chapare region, provoking blockades, protests and confrontations with the army. CSUTCB-organised blockade on altiplano in support.

**June 2002:** Evo Morales, cocalero leader and head of the Movimiento Al Socialismo (Movement towards Socialism, MAS), comes second in national elections. Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada becomes President.

**February 2003:** ‘Black February’. In response to IMF pressure to reduce the fiscal deficit, Sánchez de Lozada declares an increase in income tax, which provokes a police mutiny in La Paz, confrontations between the police and the army, and rioting in La Paz and El Alto. Thirty-two deaths over two days, including civilians.

**September–October 2003:** ‘The Gas War’ or ‘Red October’, resulting in the resignation and exile of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada on 17 October. More than 80 people are killed, and hundreds injured. The Vice-President, Carlos Mesa, takes over.

**July 2004:** Referendum on the fate of Bolivia’s natural gas.

**September 2004:** Mesa presents a project for a new Hydrocarbon Law, which increases taxation on the private gas extraction companies, but is heavily criticised by the opposition.

**December 2004:** Municipal elections. Advances for local populist leaders and the MAS.

**December 2004–January 2005:** Widespread protests against increased petrol prices, especially in the eastern region of Santa Cruz, where civic bodies demand regional autonomy.

**January 2005:** Protests organised by Federación de Juntas Vecinales de El Alto (FEJUVE, Federation of Neighbourhood Councils of El Alto) directed against the foreign-owned water company, Aguas de Illimani, and resulting in the renegotiation of their contract.

**March 2005:** Introduction of a new Hydrocarbon Law. Protests continue, and Carlos Mesa threatens to resign and call elections.

**May–June 2005:** The COB (Central Obrera Boliviana, Bolivian Workers’ Union) calls a general strike to demand the nationalisation of Bolivia’s natural gas and petrol resources; protests escalate and Carlos Mesa resigns on 6 June. Eduardo Rodríguez, head of the Supreme Court, becomes caretaker president and promises to call new elections by the end of the year.

**December 2005:** National elections.

## Reference

Trouillot, M. (2001) ‘The Anthropology of the State in the Age of Globalization’. *Current Anthropology* 42(1): 125–138.