

## On the Brink of Survival: The Climate Justice Movement in the Morales Era

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As part of a general leftward political turn in Latin America in the twenty-first century, Bolivia elected social democratic president Evo Morales in 2005. A former leader of the coca grower's union, Morales was seen by many early on in his presidency as advancing a social movement agenda. He sought to advance the interests of the majority indigenous peoples and trade unionists, for example, by opening up space for their participation in government. The Bolivian Platform against Climate Change, which formed in the early years of his presidency, is a civil society coalition designed to address the unjust effects of global warming. The Platform worked in creative tension with the Morales administration to demand better environmental protection within Bolivia and to put pressure on the major carbon emitters of the global North to take responsibility for their actions. This collaboration has led to strong and visible Bolivian leadership on the global stage, pushing climate change negotiators to acknowledge the rights of Mother Earth, and the climate debt owed by more powerful to less powerful nations. Recently, however, there has been a major break in this relationship due to concerns on the part of environmental activists that the Morales administration is violating its own alternative vision of sustainable development.

In this article, we explore Bolivia's role in global climate change negotiations. Morales, alongside Platform for Climate Change actors, played a critical role in focusing global conversation on the structural and systemic problems of hypercapitalism in industrialized nation states and holding them accountable for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Closer to home, the Morales administration has struggled to maintain an anticapitalist stance in its economic and social practices. Much of

the "redistributive agenda of Morales" lies upon extractive industries, which wreak havoc upon the natural environmental and have social, economic, and labor consequences for majority indigenous and rural communities. We examine some of the conflicts between members of the Morales administration and members of the climate justice movement in Bolivia based on the competing demands of mitigation of and adaptation to climate change, and efforts to push for a more ecologically sustainable development model to improve the welfare of marginalized communities. This is an important question for environmental activists throughout the global South as the world works toward finalizing a climate change agreement with no binding targets.

### Global Context of Climate Change

Since the end of the Kyoto Protocol in 2012, the international community has been working slowly and painfully toward a new deal to avert the worst effects of human-induced climate change. These negotiations culminated in the Paris Agreement in the spring of 2016, which will take force only after it is ratified by at least 55 nations, collectively responsible for at least 55 percent of greenhouse gas emissions (GHG). As of September 2016, both the United States and China have committed to the agreement. Social movement actors and environmentalists have been mixed on the value of the agreement, with some relieved that the need for action is finally being formally acknowledged. The agreement calls for limiting the rise in global temperature to no more than 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and expresses the desirability of aiming for 1.5 degrees. It calls on all nations to develop and regularly submit plans on how they will contribute to these efforts.

Globally, critics of the plan point out a number of potential weaknesses. The main issue for many is the vague and voluntary nature of the agreement. While the text acknowledges differentiated responsibility and capability, sustainable development, and climate justice, all concepts pushed by countries in the global South, their implementation is left open to interpretation (Robins 2016). The text makes no real mention of which countries and industries are responsible for GHG emissions and contains no legally binding targets and timelines (Morgan 2016). Further, many acknowledge that the agreement and Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDC) thus far submitted are insufficient for achieving the stated aims (Cléménçon 2016). Hope seems to rest on the willingness of nations to develop more ambitious targets over time, and on appeals to technological solutions that remain largely unspecified (Morgan 2016).

Representatives of Bolivia, a signatory to the Paris Agreement, have been aggressive in pushing nations in North America and Europe to recognize their responsibility for climate change and their "climate debt" to the global South. In advance of the negotiations in Paris, Evo Morales convened a second World Peoples Conference on Climate Change and the Defense of Life to discuss approaches to climate change that recognize indigenous rights and knowledge and the rights of Mother Earth, and address climate justice. The Morales administration has consistently maintained an overtly anticapitalist position. When Morales was elected in 2005, he had a two-pronged national strategy to undo the long history of neoliberal reforms by nationalizing key industries like oil and gas, and to incorporate native peoples into the new state through the rewriting of the

constitution. His administration has taken advantage of key natural resources (oil, gas, soy, minerals), in what Linda Farthing and Benjamin Kohl (2014) have called a form of “progressive extractivism,” in order to redistribute some portion of the revenue to disadvantaged populations and create a social welfare system. While Bolivia contributes minimally to GHG emissions compared to hyperindustrialized nation-states largely dependent upon nonrenewable fossil fuels, its economic policy heavily depends upon natural resource extraction, which has social and environmental consequences.

### Bolivia’s Climate Change Priorities

When climate negotiations in Copenhagen failed to produce a binding agreement that could protect nations like Bolivia from radical environmental changes,<sup>1</sup> Morales led a stinging denunciation of the entire process. He declared, “We come from the culture of life, whereas the Western model represents the culture of death. At these summits, we have to define whether we are on the side of life or on the side of death” (Aguirre and Cooper 2010, 1). It was in response to the failure in Copenhagen to reach this binding international agreement that Morales convened the first World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in April 2010, in which 30,000 activists, including labor organizers and NGO representatives, came together in Tiquipaya, Cochabamba, to propose an alternative legal framework drawing on indigenous knowledge and values.

The Platform for Climate Change, or La Plataforma—a loose organization comprised of international NGOs such as Oxfam International, Christian Aid (a British relief and development agency),

CAFOD (a British development agency), along with rural Bolivian social movements like CONAMAQ (National Council of Ayllus and Markas of the Qullasuyu), the Bartolina Sisa Movement (rural peasant women’s movement), CIDOB (Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia), CSUTCB (Unified Syndical Confederation of Rural Workers), and CPESC (Regional Federation of Indigenous Peoples of Santa Cruz)—were critical actors at the climate summit and helped draft the People’s Accord. They also helped organize the first Tribunal Internacional de Justicia Climática (International Tribunal on Climate Justice) in Cochabamba in 2009, and have worked on issues of adaptation to climate change within Bolivia. La Plataforma proposed seven critical development goals leading up to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, known as Rio+20. The official discussion at Rio+20 focused on building a green economy to achieve sustainable development. From this perspective, the solution to the current ecological crisis is in large part tied to “green economics,” or the idea that economic policies should build environmental costs into the price of products and services. This outlook is also evident in the Paris Agreement. La Plataforma took a critical stance on the green economy, once again using indigenous worldviews and the People’s Accord to challenge market-based approaches: “Putting a price on nature is not a solution and will only benefit big capital” (Global Alliance 2012).

After Rio+20, according to Martin Vilela (former director of Aguas Sostentable and member of La Plataforma) and other active members of La Plataforma, climate justice activists have become increasingly uncomfortable with the contradictions between the rhetoric

of the Morales administration and its economic policy. Vilela argues that “it became ever more obvious post-TIPNIS<sup>2</sup> that Evo Morales’ party Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement toward Socialism) (MAS) was going to put everything up for sale. . . . Everything we had worked so hard for would be undermined by the overarching economic agenda of the administration.” In 2013, the government unveiled its new national development plan called La Agenda Patriótica 2025 (the Patriotic Agenda for 2025). In it, the government describes how it hopes to make Bolivia a “sovereign and dignified” country. Mining and hydrocarbons will continue to figure largely in the picture, but Bolivia will also develop new, important sources of income. First, it will become a major exporter of energy, drawing on its hydroelectric potential as well as its renewable energy capacities. Conversations have already begun about building a mega-dam similar to those in Chile. Second, it will become a producer and exporter of food products, converting its artisanal farming processes into mechanized, irrigated, and technologically advanced systems. This is part of a larger push toward food sovereignty aimed, on one hand, at ensuring food security among Bolivians, but on the other hand, at massively industrializing food, forest products, and biodiversity resources. He explains that it was in the aftermath of the TIPNIS controversy and the unveiling of this development plan that some members of La Plataforma split from Morales and from the international NGOs; some members formed international coalitions with Climate Justice Action, a network of international (mainly European) grassroots movements fighting for global climate justice. The intent was to link grassroots efforts in order to have a more powerful international presence. Other large NGOs like Oxfam

International remained aligned with the MAS government. Morales's economic policy does not necessarily contradict the Paris Agreement, as the agreement recognizes that developing countries will take longer to limit their growth in carbon emissions in order to achieve development goals. Bolivia's INDC begins with the argument that the commitment of developing countries to their targets will depend on aggressive action from more powerful nations, and that in the shorter term, economic development will take priority (Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia 2015). It also credits climate change to the global capitalist system and a drive toward unlimited growth, and proposes an alternative model. It argues, "the capitalist system seeks profit without limits, strengthens the divorce between human beings and nature; establishing a logic of domination of men against nature and among human beings" (Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia 2015). Thus, "Bolivia presents its intended contribution consistent with its vision of holistic development of the Rights of Mother Earth and Integral Development to Live Well. . . . Bolivia understands Living Well as the civilizational and cultural horizon alternative to capitalism, linked to a holistic and comprehensive vision that prioritizes the scope of holistic development in harmony with nature and as a structural solution to the global climate crisis" (Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia 2015). It puts forward a Climate Justice Index to determine each nation's share of emissions budgets, recognizing historic responsibility for GHG emissions, and colonial and neocolonial exploitation. It proposes that non-Annex 1 countries (those least responsible for historic carbon emissions) retain 89 percent of future carbon emissions, and Annex 1 countries 11 percent.

### Growing Tensions between Morales and La Plataforma

Critics (some from within La Plataforma) have pointed out that these development plans have dangerous implications for the environment and are inconsistent with this anticapitalist rhetoric. For example, in 2014, Morales declared that by 2025, the country should increase hectares of production from the current level of 3.5 million hectares to 10 million. To accomplish this, the government has recently agreed to allow people to deforest up to 20 hectares without any permission from the Forest Ministry, as long as they use the land to produce food. This represents a radical departure from previous regulations and promises a rapid deforestation of fragile Amazonian lands. This past summer (2016) when talking to lowland social movement activists like former Landless Peasant (MST-B, El Movimiento Sin Tierra) leaders, they explained this development plan as one of the great *fracasos* (failures) of this government. Silvestre Saisairi (former leader of MST-Santa Cruz) describes it as an ecological disaster waiting to happen. Some think that the combination of deforestation and the expansion of monocultures are key drivers of the drought this year. Even the big agro-industries are suffering because animals (particularly cattle) are dying from lack of water in the lowlands. Saisairi, along with others, argue that much of the "food sovereignty" plans (expansion of small-scale agriculture for peasant family consumption) of the government have been undermined by proposals to continue to deforest large parts of the Amazon and expand monocultures like soy. Places like Santa Cruz (the agro-industrial capital of Bolivia) are referred to as the epicenter of export-oriented soy production (Fabricant and Gustafson 2016). Large-

scale genetically modified soy production is wreaking havoc environmentally, on soils, waterways, and even food sovereignty.

Alongside soy expansion lie governmental plans for more oil and gas exploration, which will include more deforestation, opening up remote rural areas, making it easier to slash and burn, and polluting water basins and drinking water. As anthropologist Bret Gustafson (Fabricant and Gustafson 2016) documents, rural communities in the Chaco region bear the burden of gas extraction: rivers and streams are now tapped by industry to provide water for drilling as toxic waste increases. There is even talk of possible fracking, which will continue to exacerbate environmental inequities for rural and indigenous communities. The possibility of reconstructing the climate justice movement is challenging in a place like Bolivia today.

### An Uncertain Future for Bolivia

Where does this leave us in terms of thinking about radical social movements in Bolivia, particularly a climate change or climate justice movement? Martin Vilela, former member of La Plataforma, argues that "we must rearticulate a movement that has the capacity to understand complex systemic relations, the structural causes of the climatic crisis and the limitations of the governing structure of the UN. This would be a movement capable of confronting the powerful states and businesses [fossil fuel industries], but a movement that could put into effect an alternative practice of solidarity and complementarity" (Skype interview by Nicole Fabricant, March 2016). He argues for the importance of building a climate movement more independent from the nation-state and capable of confronting the internal

inconsistencies of the MAS development strategy. Finally, he supports a strategy that brings together distinct political ideologies in order to create a broad-based climate justice movement centered on alternatives to capitalism. This anticapitalistic stance seems key, particularly in a place like Bolivia. How and in what ways can alternative agricultural and energy projects survive and thrive? What might cooperative or collective laboring relations look like in rural highland and lowland regions?

Vilela's vision comes out of his positionality as a former NGO worker and urban mestizo in La Paz; yet articulating this anticapitalistic vision and implementing it in rural regions of Santa Cruz, La Paz, or Cochabamba seems a bit more challenging. Many rural peasants are focused on daily survival. As a former MST organizer from Santa Cruz told us this past August, "Antes de usos y costumbres uno es comerciante buscando como vivir/sobrevivir" (before usos y costumbres [indigenous uses and customs] one is a merchant searching for a way to live/survive" (interview, August 2016). This seems to be the big question today in some of the poorest nation-states in the Western Hemisphere: short-term and daily survival versus reigniting a more radical climate justice movement that incorporates local and daily struggles and articulates a coherent and practical vision for more sustainable futures. While Bolivia might have represented a kind of hope for the global South in terms of proposing a radical alternative to the fossil fuel industry, they too remain tied into the tentacles of the global resource regimes; today many rural communities and indigenous peoples are teetering on the brink of survival. The Bolivian context illustrates the impossible set of choices for nations in the global South between a noninstrumental relationship with nature and protection of the rights of Mother Earth, and using

large-scale resource extraction to finance social welfare, all the while hoping that the largest carbon emitters will act in time to prevent imminent ecological disaster. As Vilela articulates, a strong climate justice movement coming out of a place like Bolivia—but expanding toward other nations in the global South—proves critical for holding highly industrialized nation-states in the North accountable for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and demanding critical resources for adaptation and mitigation programs.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Bolivia, along with other nations in the global South, has contributed negligibly to greenhouse gas emissions but is beginning to experience their effects, particularly in indigenous communities. Impacts of climate change will be complex, given the country's ecological diversity. The country is experiencing radical retreat of glaciers in the highlands and major droughts in the lowlands.
- <sup>2</sup> In 2010 Morales announced his proposal to build a major highway from the tropics through the Amazon to the Brazilian border, right through the Isiboro Secure Indigenous Territory and National Park. Many in the lowlands feared that the road, funded by Brazilian development dollars, would create significant ecological destruction and native displacements. It is important to note that not all indigenous communities in the lowlands were opposed to the highway; however, many objected to the fact that Morales failed to carry out prior consultation with them as required by the new constitution.

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