

# The Construction of Resilience: Independence, Memory, and Collective Resistance in Bolivia's Social Movements during the 2019–2020 Crisis

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At the height of the COVID-19 epidemic, Bolivian social movements forced the unelected president, Jeanine Áñez, to call elections, which culminated in the return of the party they had thrust into power in 2005, the Movimiento al Socialismo, or MAS. Just as they have for centuries, in the face of a perceived threat, social movements unified into a solid resistance, demonstrating their ongoing resilience and capacity to regroup. This is in part fueled by the collective memory of their long-standing political struggles, which transcends generations and is deeply rooted in indigenous cultures.

In a country where the indigenous majority did not win the vote until 1952 and democratic transitions were the exception before 1982, political demands have largely been expressed through frequent protest. Even after almost forty years of civilian governments, these politics still often surpass formal political processes.

When Evo Morales was elected president in 2005, Bolivia's social movements were among the world's most militant, with defiant resistance traditions dating to the Spanish invasion. Aymara-speaking highland peoples in particular led significant uprisings in 1769, 1771, 1781, 1821, 1899, and 1921. Class-based and indigenous

movements were essential players in Bolivia's 1952 revolution, forced the return to democracy in 1982 after eighteen years of military dictatorship, and fiercely resisted the US-financed War on Drugs in the Chapare east of Cochabamba in the 1990s. In 2000, they halted the privatization of Cochabamba's water supply and in 2003, the export of natural gas through Chile.

By the mid-1990s, peasant and indigenous movements had forged a "political instrument" (rather than a political party) that became the MAS, which they conceived of as their electoral arm. After 2002, the MAS expanded into urban areas, propelling Morales into office. Social movements went on to play a vital role in the MAS government, including the passage of one of the world's most radical constitutions in 2009.<sup>2</sup>

But during Morales's fourteen years in office (2006–2019), these movements relinquished much of their mobilization capacity, as their leadership was incorporated into government positions and the MAS party. Opportunism meant some movements were co-opted by government largesse—for example, the government on occasion provided funds for new union headquarters. In contrast, those who resisted MAS hegemony over their movement, as those

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<sup>2</sup> The 2009 Constitution instituted sweeping reforms, particularly related to indigenous rights, gender parity, environment, labor, land tenure and rights to public services. It also called for a more active role for the state in the economy and greater state control over natural resources (Schilling-Vacaflor 2011).

representing lowland indigenous peoples and the most indigenous identified of the highland groups did, were marginalized when they protested government policies. In response, the MAS, mirroring strategies from the 1950s, set up parallel unions with the same names under their control (Springerová and Vališková 2021).

In addition, unionization rates dropped after Morales took power, further undermining the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB, Bolivian Workers' Central), which in its heyday, before it was battered by neoliberalism, was one of the world's most powerful labor movements (McNelly 2022). During the Morales years, marches became largely sectoral rather than society wide, and a deeply entrenched *caudillista* system in the government and in the unions themselves provided few opportunities for new and effective leadership to replace those siphoned off into government posts.

However, it is shortsighted to view these movements as only carrying out the MAS's bidding rather than the other way around (as the relationship was originally conceived). Anria (2018) contends that social movements were always able to force the MAS government to back down and, often when least expected, they behaved autonomously. Krausova's 2018 interviews with social movement leaders show that all five of the organizations that had formed a Unity Pact in 2004 to move their political project forward, believed they had won important aspects of their agenda through the MAS.<sup>3</sup> Mayorga (2011:33-34) describes the relationship as encompassing "moments of collaboration, occasions of subordination to the MAS, and situations of autonomy." The elements of independence that survived facilitated social movements' drawing on their long history of resistance to effectively regroup in the adverse circumstances of late 2019 and 2020, when the leader of the political party that most of them were aligned with was in exile and both MAS party and government officials were subject to sustained repression.

## Resistance in 2019 and 2020

Jeanine Áñez was chosen president in November 2019 in an unconstitutional process after Evo Morales's electoral victory in the October elections was widely contested. Morales had run for a fourth term in office, in clear violation of the 2009 Constitution that his government had shepherded into existence and of a 2016 referendum in which the electorate rejected his bid to stand again. Conservatives used a to-date contested fraud narrative and mined middle-class fears of Morales becoming a dictator to effectively mobilize thousands of demonstrators into the streets. Over three weeks, nightly demonstrations in urban areas became increasingly violent and explicitly racist, with social media playing a key role in fueling fears and spreading disinformation (Machaca 2022). In Cochabamba, vigilante youth *motoqueros* (motorcyclists) roamed the streets attacking Indigenous people, particularly *señoras de pollera*—Quechua and Aymara women easily identifiable by their traditional dress (Mena 2019).

Despite repeated exhortations to working-class and indigenous peoples to take to the streets to support Morales staying in office, many had lost their appetite for him and remained home. "It was time for Evo to go," said Miriam Chavez, a twenty-four-year-old taxi dispatcher in Sucre. "He played an important role, but we need new leaders and new perspectives" (Farthing and Becker 2021).

The uproar over the elections came to a head when the police mutinied and the military sided with the protestors, compelling Morales to resign. Death threats surged against those constitutionally in line to assume the presidency (all from the MAS party which controlled the legislature). This meant that an unelected group largely representing a disparate opposition jumped over the constitutionally mandated chain of succession to appoint Jeanine Áñez, second in charge of the Senate, as president.

<sup>3</sup> This includes the two lowland and highland organizations that withdrew from the Unity Pact after 2011.

The anointing of an explicitly racist, Bible-thumping president changed the equation. After police in El Alto, most of whom are from indigenous backgrounds, ripped the indigenous *wiphala* flag from their uniforms, thousands of demonstrators poured into the streets of their own accord against Áñez, without waiting for social movement leadership. Between fifty thousand and one hundred thousand working-class and indigenous protesters streamed into La Paz alone during Áñez's first days in office (Bigio 2019). The COB and the Unified Confederation of Bolivian Peasants' Unions CSTUCB called for nationwide strikes while neighborhood councils mounted vigils and initiated the longstanding tactic of road blockades. Demonstrators shut down central La Paz and shut off entrances into the capital, chanting, "There was no fraud, just a coup d'état." As the protests spread, the Áñez government and the opposition more broadly accused marchers of being affiliated with Cuba and/or Venezuela, drug traffickers, or MAS "terrorists" (Rocha Gonzales 2022).

Although most of the protestors opposed the growing racist violence, they were not necessarily committed to the return of Morales. Rather they moved beyond their almost fifteen-year support of MAS governance to draw on collective memories of struggle and indigenous identity, as activist Iván Apaza (2020, 53) describes:

It's not the *Masista* who blocks the roads. It's not the *masista* who is furious about the racist offense of burning of the *wiphala*, for the indifference, the hypocrisy, for the paternalism. No, a thousand times no. Understand. It's not the *masista* who is in the streets. It's an entire society of migrants from Aymara territory who are mobilizing. In this Aymara city, it is the veterans of 2003 (the Gas War). It's the orphans who lost their parents because of government bullets by those who now propose "democracy." It's not the *masista*, it's el *alteño* who is fighting. It's the Aymara.

As Apaza shows, in Bolivia, the indigenous concepts of time and space (*pacha*), memory and territory, are always connected in the body politic. Collective memory, strengthened by indigenous cultural practices that make the past present, creates a responsibility to act that is deeply rooted in place. The result is a mutually-constituting, positive link between memory, place, and activism (Farthing and Kohl 2013).

By the middle of November, working-class and indigenous demonstrators were barricading at least sixteen highways at some ninety blockade points (Rojas 2019). In response, Áñez and her entourage deployed the military. In Sacaba, east of Cochabamba, police and military blocked thousands of coca-growing campesinos from the Chapare when they tried to join up with other demonstrators to march to La Paz.<sup>4</sup> Although many demanded Morales's reinstatement, the march's stated focus was on protecting Indigenous rights. At the Huayllani bridge, masked police officers and military vehicles, including tanks and soldiers with high-powered weapons, started firing with live ammunition. By the time it was over, on Áñez's fourth day in office, state forces had killed at least 10 and injured more than 120. Not a single police officer or soldier was harmed (Farthing and Becker 2021).

Protests against the Áñez government skyrocketed, particularly in the largely Aymara city of El Alto. Peasant federations from all over La Paz department joined with neighborhood organizations and urban unions to pour through El Alto's central business district, La Ceja, while students from the Public University of El Alto called public meetings (*cabildos*). In addition to their insistence on Áñez's resignation, as well as respect for the *wiphala* and traditionally dressed indigenous women, they demanded a trial of responsibilities against Áñez and her advisers for the Sacaba massacre.

<sup>4</sup> Coca growers are regularly denigrated in the largely conservative Bolivian press as violent drug traffickers, when in reality most are peasant farmers who grow the leaf, with only some involved in the drug trade.

A main locale for vigils was in front of the Senkata natural-gas plant in El Alto's southern district. The plant has served as a key site of protest for decades because of its strategic position on a major highway and as the main supplier of fuel and cooking gas to La Paz. During Bolivia's 2003 Gas War, protestors blockaded the highway and the plant, and later during the Morales administration, demonstrations there pushed for improved water and sewage services. Through this history, the plant transformed into a *lieux de siege* for Bolivian social movements: a place that is a critical component of a protest identity tied to place and one that can encompass a moral obligation to defend local interests (Nora 1989, Poole 2008).

Residents who lived near the Senkata plant launched vigils from the start of Áñez's presidency, but the number of participants mushroomed dramatically after the attacks in Sacaba. As cooking gas became scarce, the government installed a convoy of tanks and soldiers inside the plant itself. The next day, four days after the deaths in Sacaba, soldiers began firing on the hundreds of protestors, killing eleven people and injuring dozens of others. Just as in Sacaba, not a single soldier or police officer was shot.

By the end of November, at least thirty-five people were dead, the vast majority Indigenous and working-class opponents of the Áñez regime. November 2019 was the deadliest month of state killings since the Gas War. To halt more confrontation, the government agreed with the social movements and the MAS to withdraw the army and police in exchange for new elections without the participation of Evo Morales or former vice president Álvaro García Linera.

During the subsequent year of Áñez's presidency, persecution of social movement leaders and MAS government officials was constant. According to veteran union leader Rolando Borda Padilla, of Santa Cruz, "The repression we suffered was worse than under the dictatorships that I lived

through as a student because for the first time, they threatened to harm our families and burn our houses down."<sup>5</sup>

When protests against the Áñez government's failure to call elections were announced for January 22, the interim government deployed seventy thousand soldiers and police "to guarantee the mandate of the constitutional presidency of Jeanine Áñez" (ATB Digital 2020). Generalized fears that holding a march would almost certainly result in a slaughter led social movement leaders to cancel the demonstrations.

Despite their fears of violent repression, social movement organizations resuscitated the Unity Pact and together decided to disband the MAS-government-controlled Coordinadora Nacional por el Cambio (known as CONALCAM), which had been formed in 2008 to channel their input. Their growing independence from the MAS became even more visible when they differed in January 2020 with Morales and his inner circle on who should be MAS candidates for the next presidential elections, at that point scheduled for May 2020. It required several days of strained negotiations for the social movements to abandon their choice of David Choquehuanca and young coca-grower leader Andronico Rodríguez as presidential and vice-presidential candidates, respectively, and embrace the Luis Arce–Choquehuanca ticket chosen by the MAS party leadership in exile in Buenos Aires (Ortiz et al. 2020).

At the same time, hundreds of people were being arrested while others fled into exile. Áñez's government particularly targeted MAS government officials as well as journalists and human rights activists, arresting critics for "sedition" and "terrorism." After repeatedly insisting she had no intention of running for the presidency herself, Áñez did an about-face in January 2020 and announced her candidacy.

<sup>5</sup> Rolando Borda Padilla, telephone interview, October 21, 2020.

Then in March, COVID-19 hit, and Áñez, like repressive government leaders throughout the world, seized on the cover the virus provided to expand attacks on her political enemies (Slater, Faiola, and Masih 2020). Her government's repeated postponement of elections appeared motivated less by public health concerns than the consolidation of her authority.

Bolivia's challenges in confronting the virus were enormous. Despite considerable MAS government investments in health care, the country had approximately only one-third of the intensive-care beds that public health officials estimated necessary (Bolivia Information Forum 2020a). Few could stick to three months of one of the strictest lockdowns in the world, which accelerated the spread of the virus and combined with inadequate medical resources, catapulted Bolivia to the world's third-highest per capita death rate by October 2020 (Statista 2020).

The pandemic provided Áñez with additional options to contain resistance to her regime. In late March, Supreme Decree 4200 allowed for the arrest of those who "misinform or cause uncertainty in the population . . . and for crimes against public health." Within the decree's first month, the government had charged at least sixty-seven people for violations, swiftly convicting thirty-seven of them (Slater, Faiola, and Masih 2000). Nonetheless, sporadic protests repeatedly erupted in low-income neighborhoods all over the country, demanding the easing of total lockdown and calling for immediate elections.

In the coca-growing Chapare region east of Cochabamba, where loyalty to the MAS and former coca grower Evo Morales runs deep, farmers expelled the police. Banks refused to operate without their presence, which meant that residents were unable to collect one of three government COVID-19 emergency subsidies and loans. In mid-April 2020, the government cut off the Chapare's gasoline supply, ostensibly to curb drug trafficking. This created chaos in the sprawling region, and although protests and blockades forced an agreement, gasoline

supplies remained reduced. Increasingly the Chapare became off-limits to Áñez government officials.

The urgency behind the social movement's insistence on new elections remained undiminished throughout May and June, even as the number of COVID-19 cases trended upward. Throughout, the MAS maintained its position as the most popular national political force (Bolivia Information Forum 2020b). With majority control of the Legislative Assembly in MAS hands, Senate president Eva Copa successfully pressured Áñez to announce a new election date, although the government pushed the elections back a month, to September 6. In late July, however, Áñez suspended elections for a third time, this time circumventing the required support of the Legislative Assembly. Elections were scheduled for October 18, almost a year to the day of the 2019 vote.

Protests erupted immediately and often spontaneously against the postponement across the entire country. The COB, alongside the Indigenous Unity Pact, declared a nationwide strike. Similar to when the COB successfully forced the return to democracy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in August 2020 a massive mobilization blocked over 170 highways and principal roads, paralyzing the country and serving as the catalyst that secured elections.

With this coordinated action, the grassroots groups that backed the MAS reasserted a further degree of independence from the party. Not only were MAS officials not in charge of the August mobilizations; the social movements publicly criticized MAS leaders for negotiating with the government without consulting them (Mamani Cayo 2020). The political scientist Fernando Mayorga (2020) argues that this change reflected a revitalization of the party's origins as the "political instrument" of the country's urban and rural unions.

## Resilience, Endurance, and Collective Memory

Once again, Bolivia's social movements had changed the course of the country's history. After fourteen relatively peaceful years under the MAS, despite the Áñez government repression, exacerbated by the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, social movements managed to mobilize effectively to force new elections in October 2020.

Although often seen as shackled to the MAS party, which movements had formed to represent their interests, and despite being increasingly treated as its foot soldiers, Bolivia's social movements unhesitatingly stepped into the vacuum when MAS leadership fled into exile. They drew on centuries of collective resistance in which memory and activism, especially among indigenous peoples (Farthing and Kohl 2013). These memories are buttressed within and transmitted across groups and generations through the ongoing performance of protest. This constant feedback loop between collective memory and the act of protest is an essential component in guaranteeing social movements' collective resistance as well as their persistent independence, and it contributes significantly to understanding why taking to the streets will continue to be so central in Bolivian social justice politics.

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