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## **Proposed Highway Pits Bolivia's Indigenous Against Each Other and President Evo Morales**

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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Native peoples from the Bolivian Amazonia—the lowlands—who do not feel represented by President Evo Morales are staging a prolonged protest against the construction of a highway through a natural park that is also their ancestral habitat. On Aug. 15, they began a more than 600 km march to La Paz, the capital, planning to arrive in the second half of October. They will meet directly with Morales, who is also indigenous and the first head of state to receive an indigenous delegation at the Palacio Quemado, the seat of government.

Tension has surrounded the march since it began in Trinidad, capital of the northeastern department of Beni. Dialogue between the two sides has been impossible. Eight times Morales' ministers were within reach of achieving a dialogue and eight times they returned empty handed.

On Sept. 24, the marchers briefly detained Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca, who is indigenous, as a tactic to get through a police checkpoint. While the verbal war escalated, on Sept. 25, the police violently repressed the marchers in an effort to dissolve the protest. That same day, Morales invited the protesters to come to La Paz, and he announced a plebiscite in which residents of the departments of Beni and Cochabamba would be able to voice their opinions on the road construction.

The president said that his administration did not order the repression, and he blamed high-ranking police officials who, with the support of the political right and the press, are trying to destabilize and discredit his government. Finally, he apologized to the victims of the police action. In the initial fallout after the police crackdown, three top-level government officials resigned, including Defense Minister Cecilia Chacón and Interior Minister Sacha Llorenti. Morales had to walk back his commitment to carry out the project, his second major rectification since the end of 2010, when he had to reinstate fuel subsidies that he had removed ([NotiSur, March 25, 2011](#)).

The Indians refused to accept the president's apology and continued their march. The campesinos and highlands indigenous—the president's primary social base—began their own march, which they are timing to arrive in La Paz on the same day as their Amazonian brothers and sisters. The immediate future, in the second half of October, could be problematic.

### ***Bolivia's indigenous peoples are not united***

The protest of the lowlands indigenous has minimal support from the highlands native peoples. They are not in conflict, but they live in geographic areas with very different characteristics and their cultures have developed according to worldviews with few points in common. Historically, they have taken parallel political paths. They call each other brother and sister, but they do not behave as such.

Not even the arrival of the first indigenous government, headed by Morales, was able to unite them. Now they have distinct attitudes toward their "brother president," who "wants to destroy our way of life," as a flier distributed by the marchers claimed.

The Territorio Indígena and Parque Nacional Isiboro-Sécure (TIPNIS), in the center of the county, is inhabited mainly by the Chimán, Moxeño, and Yuracaré peoples along with smaller groups that include the Mosen, Siriono, and Trinitario. All live along the banks of the TIPNIS' two major rivers, the Isiboro and the Sécure. These lowlands Indians inhabit jungle and savannah areas and are essentially hunter-gatherers who rely on the abundant flora and fauna of those hot and humid areas.

The highlands Indians are the native peoples of the altiplano. The largest groups are the Aymara, the group to which Morales and other members of the executive belong, and the Quechua. Both grow food crops at altitudes of more than 3,500 meters in areas with little water and extreme temperatures, using their traditional techniques.

### *Right capitalizes on differences among indigenous groups*

The right has used every means possible to weaken and destabilize Morales' indigenist government.

It has even exacerbated the deep racism embedded in Bolivian society, going so far as to send out young armed commandos in 2009 to pursue native peoples in what became a veritable hunt. But it could never undermine the president's enormous popular support.

This time the right has put all its media resources at the disposal of the Indians and has publicized the protest in such a way that, beyond the issue of justice, public opinion has largely turned in favor of the lowlands indigenous. The protest leaders are in a heated confrontation with Morales, and the government alleges that they receive money directly from rightist parties, the US Embassy, and various nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

At one time denigrated by the major media, the indigenous protesters are now consulted by them daily and even received help in disseminating a falsehood: the death of a child during the police repression on Sept. 25. The opposition used the nonexistent death to label Morales a killer. Those making the charge included the Catholic bishops conference (Conferencia Episcopal de Bolivia, CEB) and the influential priest Eduardo Pérez, head of Catholic radio station Fides. To date, no one has apologized—not the press, not the bishops, not Cardinal Julio Terrazas—for having denounced the president and published an untrue news story with such social and political ramifications, nationally and internationally.

The large-scale campaign to discredit the government is also built on the differences that separate the Indians on the march from their highlands brothers and sisters. Despite their equality under the Constitution, they have different cultures and many times represent opposing interests.

Analyst Pablo Stefanoni illustrated this by quoting Aymara campesino leader Roberto Coraite, a supporter of the highway's construction, who said the highway project "should be carried out so that the Amazonian indigenous stop living like savages." Coraite's words were as discriminatory and hurtful as those thrown out regularly by the racist right.

The protesters have a list of 16 demands, in addition to the demand to stop the highway construction. The campesino labor confederation, whose members are also indigenous, rejects the entire list because five of the points go against their interests.

"We're not interested in what [the campesinos] say," said Cecilia Moyubiri Moye, a Yuracaré Indian who lives in the TIPNIS. She says the road "is unnecessary because we produce for our

communities and not to sell to those from outside. The Isiboro, the Sécure, and all the rivers of the TIPNIS are all the roads we need."

The culture clash even stems from different perspectives on development. The TIPNIS inhabitants also do not want electrification or cell-phone connections.

### *Brazil interests also at play*

The TIPNIS comprises 1.2 million hectares with a rich biodiversity in the departments of Beni and Cochabamba. Fewer than 12,000 people live there. The paved highway that set off the protest will run between two small communities and cover a distance of 306 km, a small segment of which will be part of the strategic project to connect the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of South America.

A report from Bolivia's private Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Laboral y Agrario (CEDLA) says that the Morales administration declared 27.5% (358,000 ha) of the TIPNIS a "petroleum-exploitation area," which, if true, would exacerbate people's fears of the imminent destruction of their natural environment.

The highway project, which will divide the TIPNIS in two and lead to the deforestation of a vast area, will cost US\$477 million—beyond the reach of an economy such as Bolivia's. The cost will be defrayed with a US\$332 million credit on generous terms from Brazil's Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social (BNDES). Bolivia will contribute the remaining US\$145 million.

In its final phase, the highway of discord will connect Bolivia with Rondônia, a state in eastern Brazil that, thanks to the pervasive soy plantations, has experienced formidable growth. It needs roads to transport its agricultural product to Pacific ports where it will be sent to Asian markets (mainly China), thereby reducing transportation costs. Given this not-insignificant detail, large sectors of Bolivian society say that, one way or the other, the highway is going to be built.

Radio Nederland quoted analyst Guillermo Capobianco as saying that "it would seem that, because of the economic and geopolitical megainterests at play, the fate of the road is already sealed."

Another source for the Dutch radio said that the road's construction "is an imperative for the continental and world centers of power expressed now by the emerging economy of Brazil and the remaining BRICS-group countries (Russia, India, China, and South Africa)."

On the same day that the indigenous march began, various environmental groups mobilized a protest in La Paz, in front of the Brazilian Embassy. Ambassador Marcelo Biato referred to the project's financing, saying, "It is part of a work project intended to help Bolivia develop its potential and its infrastructure." Biato closed his remarks saying that "benefitting Bolivia benefits everyone," a variation of an old slogan of Brazilian diplomacy: "Good business makes good friends."

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