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The Jammed Democracy: Bolivia's Troubled Political Learning Process

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The fact that even the moderate and broadly respected president Carlos Mesa was forced to step down in Bolivia in June 2005 suggests that the country's crisis goes beyond a conflict on specific policies. A longstanding practice of excluding large sectors of the population from all real influence in politics, despite the existence of formal democracy, has produced a crisis of belief in democracy, affecting both governing bodies and the party system. President Mesa was unable to reverse the generalised distrust of politics. This distrust, combined with persisting political stalemate, is currently tending towards societal disintegration, which makes the recovery of genuine democratic practices even more difficult.

Keywords: Bolivia, democracy, civil society, societal trust, protests.

Despite being the most sincere and well-intentioned president Bolivia has had in many years, Carlos Mesa governed for only 21 months. On 9 June 2005 he resigned and was succeeded by Eduardo Rodríguez, previously president of the Supreme Court of Bolivia. This succession was somewhat remarkable, because the constitutional protocol was not fully respected: both the presidents of the Senate and of the Chamber of Deputies were prior to Rodríguez in the line of succession. However, the street protests that had demanded Mesa's resignation had also made it clear that the protesters would not accept anyone but Rodríguez, and so the others renounced their entitlement. Rodríguez was the only man the demonstrators deemed trustworthy enough to take on the task of preparing new elections.

These events illustrate the depth of Bolivia's impasse: even a president who favoured broad dialogue could not maintain sufficient support within Bolivia's agitated society to keep his position. Given the succession of presidential crises, it is hard to uphold the rule of law and the constitutional order, even if no one actually wants to overthrow it. Above all, the crisis laid bare the huge divisions within Bolivian society, where some sectors want the constitution of the country to be rewritten by a Constitutional Assembly and insist on nationalisation of the country's natural gas reserves, whereas other sectors, namely those mobilised by the entrepreneurial elites of the departments where the gas was found, insist on regional autonomy and even threaten secession if the nationalisation agenda were to go ahead.

The country seems to be on course to fragmentation, and it appears that the conflict over how to manage the gas reserves is only one – albeit important – symbol of many underlying problems. The way politics has worked during recent decades has not only brought about societal frustration about specific measures, but has created radical demands that have triggered a counter-reaction among those social sectors opposed to the plans to nationalise the gas reserves. Moreover, neither one of the two leaders of the largest oppositional parties, Evo Morales of MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo, Movement Towards Socialism) and Felipe Quispe of MIP (Movimiento Indígena Pachacuti, Indigenous Pachacuti Movement), seem willing to trust any government. Both prefer to make their voices heard through street protest, although Morales claims to be moving ‘de la protesta hacia la propuesta’ [from protest to proposal]. In these fraught circumstances, Mesa was too late in his attempt to reassure Bolivians that they were to have a say on ‘their’ gas and that he would establish a Constitutional Assembly. Caught in the crossfire of local demands and multi-national requirements, he saw his support crumble in the months preceding June 2005.

The problem lies not just in one president’s loss of popularity, however, but in the troubled historical development of Bolivia’s democracy. The country reintroduced democracy in 1982 after a long period of military dictatorship. The latter years of authoritarian rule were harsh: repression was severe, corruption widespread and drug trafficking blossomed under the protection of the military (Mesa, Gisbert and Mesa, 1999: 684–688). When democracy returned expectations were high. However, the first – left-wing – government failed dramatically, with hyperinflation hastening early elections in 1985. The subsequent government initiated an economic reform programme aimed at ‘modernising’ and ‘neoliberalising’ the country’s economy. Heavily influenced by international debates of the time, the New Economic Policy (NEP) Decree 21060 was aimed at reducing the fiscal deficit, establishing the liberalisation of the monetary system and the market, increasing exports to obtain hard currency and slimming down the state bureaucracy. These structural reforms also initiated the sale of profitable state economic activities such as the oil company YPF (Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Bolivianos) and the closing down of non-profitable ones, such as mining, which meant the dismissal of thousands of miners. The consequence was a massive ‘informalisation’ of the Bolivian economy. Unemployment rose and many people migrated from the mining zones to the cities and to the relatively ‘empty’ eastern parts of the country, where the government promoted the ‘colonisation’ of new and fertile land. As a result of this process the overwhelming majority of the Bolivian workforce are ‘informally’ employed; that is, they pay no income taxes, have no job protection or health insurance and live from precarious incomes.

I will argue that it is precisely this economic context which is to blame for the fact that Bolivians failed to appreciate their democracy. Or more precisely: the fact that economic policies were designed and implemented without the consent of the electorate eventually produced a complete divergence between successive governments and the established party system on the one hand and large sectors of Bolivian society on the other. In the long run, such a situation has resulted in the loss of trust not only in one government or another at any given time, but in the democratic system as a whole. Building confidence in democracy is not dependent on the performance of any one

administration, but rather on producing a generalised feeling that popular influence on political outcomes is possible and real. It is on this point that Bolivian democracy failed dramatically. To elaborate on the ways in which this occurred, it is worthwhile reflecting on some theories of democratic consolidation. With these in mind it will then be possible to better understand and detail recent government practice in Bolivia.

Building Stable Democracies: Conditions and Strategies

In the wake of the euphoria about the ‘third wave of democratisation’, several authors took pains to develop theories on polity–civil society dealings within democracies, in particular those that are still institutionally fragile. Many have stressed the delicate nature of such dynamics and suggested that the consolidation of and trust in democratic values stands or falls on such relationships (O’Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Stuver, 1990; Diamond, 1996, 1999; Linz and Stepan, 1996; Ninou Guinot, 2000; Philip, 2003; Diamond and Plattner, 1996). Diamond (1996, 1999), especially, elaborates on this issue, attempting to tease out the mutual dynamic that would enable the consolidation of a country’s democratic system. At the level of civil society, he suggests that a certain independence from the state needs to take shape, albeit not complete detachment. Civil society has a crucial role in controlling the state, but to be able to live up to this task it needs to function on a self-regulating basis, free from substantial party or any other political interference in the make-up of its organisational and associational fabric. This fabric should preferably be ‘rich’ (Diamond, 1996: 230), comprising a mutually overlapping series of networks of all sorts of affinities, encounters and belongings.

‘Civil society’ is a complex and much debated concept. For the sake of argument, I will partially follow Diamond’s (1999: 221) definition of ‘organised social life that is open, voluntary, self-generating (and ...) autonomous from the state’ and which ‘involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere’. However, since my main concern is with the perceptions of ‘ordinary Bolivians’ with regard to politics and democracy, I will include the dimension of mass opinion and behaviour in relation to the democratic system. In my use of the term, then, the ways in which people evaluate democracy and the performance of the political system in their country is part of ‘civil society’; I assume that these evaluations constitute the crucial ‘raw material’ for the collective actions citizens might want to participate in to influence the public sphere and, eventually, politics. When (as is the case in Bolivia) such collective actions assume forms that tend to destabilise ‘democratic routine’, the underlying causes must be sought in people’s confidence in the democratic system. And this confidence – or lack of it – is produced, in its turn, in the interactions between polity and civil society, as is correctly stressed by the authors mentioned above.

Confidence critically depends upon the capacity of the political sphere to offer intelligible, minimally trustworthy and appealing ‘frames’ for the expression of

interests and to offer openness to taking such interests into account. Civil society has no intrinsic capacity to translate the bottom-up recognition of shared interests and identities into the 'stuff of politics'. In order to function, the polity needs to offer political alternatives, and civil society needs to organise in order to be able to address, influence and control these alternatives, trusting the ways in which the democratic system functions.

As I will demonstrate below, this is where things went wrong in Bolivia. The main cause of the failure lies with the formation of the polity. Diamond (1996: 238) stresses that '[t]he single most important and urgent factor in the consolidation of democracy is not civil society but political institutionalisation'. The citizens' adherence to democracy and the rule of law is dependent on the performance of state institutions. Democratic consolidation, taken as 'the process by which democracy becomes so broadly and profoundly legitimate ... that it is very unlikely to break down', rests on the institutional ability to 'ensure that government will be able to make and implement policies of some kind, rather than simply flailing about, impotent or deadlocked' (239). In these earlier formulations, Diamond (1999: 77) is possibly a bit too one-sided, making civil society the dependent variable (Siavelis, 2004). However, three years later he stated that 'legitimacy is also an independent variable affecting the performance of the regime. The deeper and more universal the belief in democratic legitimacy and the commitment to abide by the rules of the democratic system, the more efficacious the regime is likely to be in formulating policy responses to the principal problems the society faces'.

State and civil society, then, have relative autonomy but are crucially interdependent with regard to the consolidation of democracy. Their respective performances have a direct and decisive influence on each other, and their characteristics co-determine the make-up of each other. In revising and studying civil society, we should not 'filter the state out' or treat it 'as a neutral guardian' (Hearn, 2001: 342), but instead take it into account as the most important co-maker of society. In thinking about the state, we should not set aside the features of the society it addresses and is constituted by, but consider the ways in which societal features influence political institutions and mores.

Having stressed the importance of the interrelationship of polity and civil society (see also Salman, 2000), I suggest that in Bolivia a dynamic of schism between the two has developed during recent decades, producing a perverted rather than productive reciprocity. This has resulted from the exclusive nature of the political system and its refusal to take into account civil society's opposition to policies. As Crabtree and Whitehead (2001: 218) warned back in 2001, 'strong oligarchic, clientelistic, and parochial features ... reduce the extent to which representative democracy can take root'.

Instead of a process of building trust – not merely in specific policies or administrations, but in the very viability and legitimacy of the democratic system – there has been a demolition of trust in Bolivia. The polity's perceived ineptness and solipsism has produced systematic distrust and a societal inclination to opt for a *clash* with the state whenever there is suspicion about plans or proposals. Society's 'obstructionism' has in turn produced even greater arrogance and conceitedness among politicians and state

functionaries. Civil society and the state have drifted further and further apart and co-constitute one another as antagonistic forces (Gray-Molina, 2001).

Civil society has therefore increasingly refused to approach the state in democratically 'legitimate' ways, particularly since the position of the COB (Central Obrera Boliviana) was severely weakened by the effects of neoliberalism in the 1980s. Protests are of course not undemocratic, but in Bolivia's case they assume a posture of ultimatums, blackmail, threats and collision. Politics is thus reduced to confrontations on the streets, impoverishing both politics and democracy. This is the case not only because the state has frequently ignored or repressed demands and protests, but because civil society was unable to make sense of the ways the polity articulated political programmes. The abilities of civil society to respond to political propositions depend on there being discernible, recognisable traits in the polity's political and ideological make-up and on the consequences of the policies pursued being comprehensible (Diamond, 1999: 138–140). Where alternative visions within society are disqualified or excluded from political debate, the groups supporting these visions perceive no other choice but to turn to either collision with or evasion of the state. Where visions of common goods fail to be articulated and communicated by state representatives or representational forces in the political realm, the comparison between common and particular goods is also stalled in the societal domain. Consequentially, particular goods prevail, and suggestions about common goods are met with rejection (Salman, 2004). This is what has happened in Bolivia over the last 15 years.

In the next section I will briefly sketch the nature of 'politics-as-usual' from the perspective of many, if not most, Bolivians, and argue that they reject the government's claims of transparency as hollow, and blame the government for the stagnating economy, corruption and the violence of recent protests.

Bolivian Politics until 2003: Keeping the Population at Bay

In the 1990s Bolivian politicians provided ample evidence that they were indifferent to the problems of rank and file people (Latinobarómetro, 2000, 2004). Successive governments failed to be transparent about their economic strategy: to create lavish opportunities for large national and international businesses, to open up markets and frontiers for commerce and to reduce both state interference in economics and state responsibility for equitable distribution of wealth and opportunities. In the eyes of most Bolivians, corruption and self-interest remained the main traits of politics, as various surveys have shown. Contempt for political parties in Bolivia increased between 1996 and 2002, resulting in parties scoring only ten out of 40 possible points in a survey reported by *The Economist* (17 August 2002). From 1996 to 2004, agreement with the phrase 'Democracy is preferable to any other governing system' decreased from 64 to 45 per cent in Bolivia (Latinobarómetro, 2004). Bolivia was also among the countries with the lowest trust in the law (44 per cent). According to the 2004 Latinobarómetro results (summarised in *The Economist*, 29 October 2004), 71 per cent of respondents think that their country 'is governed for the benefit of a few powerful interests' rather than 'the good of everyone'. In particular, the way in which 'pacting' between parties

occurred¹ was judged to be nothing more than private agreements between parties to allow one another a share of power, nepotism and access to fiscal funds and spoils that was not transparently accounted for (Tapia Mealla and Toranzo Roca, 2000: 79–81; Assies and Salman, 2003b: 48). The current crisis, say Calderón and Gamarra (2004: 6), is characterised among other things by the fact that ‘in the popular perception the parties and their “pacts” are responsible for the situation Bolivia currently goes through’. Recognition of voting tendencies, of demands for inclusion of non-traditional parties, of protests against the measures being implemented were over-ruled in the negotiation of such pacts. As a result, the voter had in effect no say in what his vote meant.²

Sánchez de Lozada’s first government (1993–1997) is often evaluated as successful and was principally characterised by its reformist drive. It introduced a comprehensive package of reforms of both an economic – neoliberal – character, and of a more socio-political character, including new agrarian and forestry legislation, a reform of the Constitution recognising the ‘pluri-multi’ (that is pluricultural and multiethnic) composition of the population, a Law on Popular Participation and a national reform of the educational system, advocating bilingualism and ‘interculturality’. In spite of all these reforms, however, the administration dramatically failed to convince the population of the benefits of all these new ideas and, more importantly, failed to address the problems the people felt to be most urgent, i.e., poverty and unemployment (Medeiros, 2001). Many demands for specific mitigating measures, such as compensation, or policies directed at small-scale agriculture, retail and industrial business, were dismissed or simply never translated into political deliberation, let alone action. As a result, confidence in democracy as a system that would address people’s concerns decreased. This confidence had already been dramatically low at the outset of Sánchez de Lozada’s presidency, and despite a general recognition that the administration was energetic, it hardly rose in the final years of his term, and fell even more so in the subsequent Banzer government (Latinobarómetro, 2000).

Sánchez de Lozada’s neglect of the social consequences of his measures paved the way for Banzer’s campaign in 1997. Central to it was his accusation that the policies of Sánchez de Lozada (also known as ‘Goni’) were unduly ‘harsh’, and his claim that Bolivia needed a more ‘socially sensitive’ government. Banzer tapped into public frustration with the impact of Goni’s policies, which had not led to any increase in

1 In Bolivia, the president is elected by parliament. Because no absolute majorities are obtained in elections, parties negotiate coalitions to choose the president and form a government. Often, during the last decades, unlikely partnerships came out of these negotiations; and parties that in their campaigns had opposed each other vigorously joined together in government. This ‘pacting’, as it is called in the country, confirmed the politicians’ opportunism in the eyes of voters. Sometimes clear winners were ousted, sometimes losers would win the prize. Many people felt that the coalition partners were motivated not by the chance to implement a political programme, but by the opportunity to win access to government jobs, power and financial benefit).

2 For an overview of electoral outcomes in Bolivia from 1982 until 2002, see Assies and Salman (2003b).

employment, any rise in purchasing power, any support for small scale agriculture or, in general, to any faith in a better future for the poorer sectors.

This said, in the course of his administration Banzer also failed to address the broadly felt frustration about the neglect of the poor by government. Although his government did not undo measures that could potentially benefit the poor, such as the law on popular participation, he failed to turn such legislation into something people experienced as improved access to decision-making (Latinobarómetro, 2000) or to deliver any real benefits to the poor. The growth in GNP declined from 5.5 per cent in 1998 to two per cent in 2003.³ Hence, there was no change in the population's assessment that 'governments are corrupt, amateurish and giving the country away as a gift to multinationals' – to paraphrase the results of most of the interviews I conducted on this issue in 2003–2004.

Most of the substantial policy changes initiated by both Sánchez de Lozada and Banzer were directed at further privatisation, the granting of concessions for natural resource exploitation, 'modernisation' of the state apparatus and the slimming down of the state's involvement in economic redistribution. These actions gave more weight to a neoliberal free market focus than to a prioritisation of national development or openness to alternative diagnosis or proposals. Indeed, once again, genuine efforts to consult civil society were absent: '[L]ittle, or no, opportunity was given to civil society to discuss and debate the national macroeconomic policy' (McNeish in this volume). Moreover, from Goni's first government, and even more so during Banzer's time, the eradication of 'excess' coca cultivation was high on the political agenda. In the eyes of many Bolivians, this confirmed the hostile attitude of government towards attempts by the poor to wrest a decent livelihood out of the adverse situation: 'average citizens of Bolivia see the suppression of coca and the stealing of natural gas as a modern-day Spanish Empire silver theft' (Devereux, 2003: 7). During Goni's first government, many people started to feel that their daily worries and possibilities for upward mobility were negatively affected by the impact of political decisions (Latinobarómetro, 2004: 17). They missed a state that would *care* for the poor, through social programmes and subsidies. In many interviews in 1998, 2000 and 2003, my informants confirmed opinion poll findings which stressed that a good government is a government that cares for the poor, but found that in neither the Goni nor Banzer administrations.

Banzer was considered the worse of the two for two main reasons. First of all, he paid no attention to popular demands for a 'socially sensitive' turn in policies and triggered even more widespread anger towards the government's insensitivity to widely felt problems of poverty, unemployment and livelihood insecurity. Banzer reinforced people's conviction that the differences between parties and ideological denominations were irrelevant, that campaign promises were worthless and that their choice at the ballot box made no difference (Latinobarómetro, 2004: 30). My interviewees in their overwhelming majority underlined opinion poll results by stating that they saw little

3 See <http://www.indiainbusiness.nic.in/commercial-relation/bolivia.htm>, and also data by the Pan American Health Organisation: http://www.paho.org/English/DD/AIS/cp_068.htm. Also <http://www.coha.org/Press%20Release%20Archives/2001/01.26.pdf>.

use in distinguishing between politicians of different parties, and the lack of credibility was something which applied to politicians as a species. General complaints about politics increasingly referred to a disbelief in the fair functioning of the governmental system (cf. PNUD, 2004). The refrain that 'todos son iguales' with regards to politicians and parties became pretty much the standard phrase in interviews in 2000 and 2003, and the grievances explicitly began to address the functioning of politics as such. In this sense, Banzer's government contributed to an already broadly based dismay with the idea of democracy. People gave up on the idea that they could make a difference. Only 37 per cent of the Bolivians responding to a survey in 2004 felt that voting could make any difference, the lowest score in the continent (Latinobarómetro, 2004: 28). Subsequent administrations were seen as all alike in their reluctance to facilitate meaningful dialogue and to explain the measures they were taking or to connect them with the promises they had made before the elections. This reinforced my suspicion that it was not an authoritarian style as such, but rather the divergence between 'democratic politics' and 'good politics', that became the main trigger for the gradual loss of confidence in political democracy. As a result, the 'deep, unquestioned, routinised commitment to democracy and its procedures ... [as a] crucial element of consolidation' (Diamond, 1999: 65) was blocked in Bolivia.

Secondly, whereas Goni's first administration was generally evaluated as effective and vigorous, Banzer's administration was especially marked in the eyes of the Bolivian public by its inefficiency, ineptness and corruption. In my interviews, individual evaluations of governance increasingly skipped assessments of specific policies, plans or measures; and informants sought instead to focus upon the dishonesty, the cover-up strategies and the rumours of illegal enrichments among politicians.

In Latin America, it is not uncommon for people to view politics and politicians with distrust. But in Bolivia the situation is worse than elsewhere in the region. Even the most minimal attempt to weigh one government, coalition or party against another has started to appear futile (Costafreda, 2004). In the public's view, the rationality of trying to make such comparisons has been undermined, as they are all deemed to be the same. Although Banzer's team was more often accused of fraud and corruption, people experienced only marginal differences in Goni's period of government in terms of the impact on their livelihoods or governmental concern for the issues expressed in their many protests.

McNeish (in this volume) suggests that strong international pressure lies behind the reluctance of subsequent administrations to discuss their macro-economic agendas – a reluctance I connect directly with the failure to gain trust in democracy and democratic consolidation. The neoliberal reforms are insulated from debate: they are considered to be 'beyond negotiation' and above public discussion. People's experiences of the negative consequences of these policies in their daily life, combined with a realisation that a questioning of the 'basics' of the economic model was impossible, resulted in an attitude of rejection towards all governmental discourses and actions, irrespective of their possible merits. In the Latinobarómetro survey of 2004, only 24 per cent of Bolivians felt that they could choose a party to vote for if there were to be elections next Sunday; to them, 'making a choice' had lost any sense. Once again this score was the lowest in Latin America (Latinobarómetro, 2004: 30).

Ninou Guinot (2000) argues that consolidation can only happen through a two-tier process: a gradual 'hardening' or strengthening of institutions and procedures will occur simultaneously with the gradual growth of a regime's societal legitimacy and popular trust in these institutions' capacity to resolve conflicts peacefully and evenhandedly. She also argues that socioeconomic factors are crucial: severe poverty and inequality affect support for the incumbent system in the long run. Bolivia illustrates well the absence of both: trust in robust institutions did not develop because of corruption, pacting and governmental incapacity, and trust in economic progress was frustrated due to the meagre results of the economic reforms and the almost complete absence of any improvements for the large poor sectors of Bolivian society. It illustrates the downward spiral of polity/civil society interaction in Bolivia, and thus helps to account for social mobilisation in 2003 and 2005.

After Goni was re-elected in August 2002, he confirmed the prevailing conviction that 'governments never listen and forget all they promise'. His perseverance in pursuing the same policies was even more remarkable because the June 2002 elections showed some surprising results and sent a clear message that the traditional politicking and political style was increasingly being rejected by the population.

Two political parties with strong links to indigenous movements obtained, respectively, over twenty per cent and six per cent.⁴ These were the *Movimiento al Socialismo* and the *Movimiento Indígena Pachacuti*, which were considered 'problematic' and unrealistic, even foolhardy and dangerous, by mainstream political and economic spokespersons. These parties, however, represented the hitherto silenced rejection of the macroeconomic doctrine as well as presenting alternative economic proposals (albeit embryonic). Their ascendancy was a shock to the established parties. It was a surprise to them that two competitors they had disqualified as 'undemocratic' and as mere 'agitators' during their own campaigns could count on so much support. Indeed, MAS amassed so much support that it brought its leader Evo Morales one step away from the presidency.

Together these two parties gained about a quarter of the votes and when in August a new Congress was installed, indigenous delegates were prominently present for the first time in Bolivian history. It was nothing less than a revolution in the Bolivian parliament to have all these 'Indians' there, making defiant statements in their native languages about their newly-won presence in the Bolivian polity. From the MAS and MIP benches, a fierce critique was made towards the *mank'agastos* [those who eat without working; e.g. all who belong to traditional parties and have been and still are thieves and loafers], and grand words like 'etnocidio' and 'economicidio' were uttered.

Apart from this flamboyant indigenous entrance into the circles of the 'honourable members of parliament', there was also an additional message of the electoral outcome: it expressed a strong and growing resentment against the blinkered way in which

4 The ethnic composition of the protests is one of the crucial axes of the current Bolivian situation, and we have analysed the ethnic dimension of the Bolivian crisis of democracy in Assies and Salman (2005) (See also Andrew Canessa's article in this volume). In this article, however, I want to focus on the failing interaction and absence of trust between polity and civil society.

politics was being practised in Bolivia (Assies and Salman, 2003a, 2003b). Yet despite its clarity this message was once again disregarded. The established parties were unwilling to concede any place to critical voices and refused to reconsider their platform. A coalition pact was forged, and once again the established parties secured their proximity to power and key positions, through the formation of a bizarre coalition between formerly sworn enemies. Many saw these manoeuvres as merely an attempt to keep Morales out of power. To make things worse, the coalition parties started quarrelling over positions, appointments and divisions of parliamentary commission chairs as if nothing untoward had happened. But the most serious matter that started to undermine Goni's credibility was his continuation of neoliberal reforms, a series of measures and policies that many Bolivians thought they had unambiguously turned down when they expressed their electoral preference. Even if we take into account that outspoken opponents to such reforms (including other leftist parties besides the MAS and MIP) did not obtain a majority large enough to prevent the traditional parties from pursuing their plans, it is nevertheless curious that they were deaf to the clear rejection of 'more of the same' that the elections had unequivocally announced. It is even more curious that the governing parties thought they could translate campaign slogans that had invoked 'the people' (pueblo) into support for further facilitation of 'free' international trade and of making the market the sole regulator of the prospects for Bolivia's economy and Bolivia's underprivileged sectors. Once again, this illustrates that the link to society, let alone the representative function of the parties, was in shambles.

Three examples of Goni's autocratic performance further illustrate this point. The first of these contrivances was the tax bill Goni proposed in early 2003, which increased income tax by 12.5 per cent for every salary above 880 Bolivianos (around US\$115) a month. His government proposed to increase state revenues to reduce the fiscal deficit, a change that would help the country obtain a new IMF loan. The fact that the IMF was once again imposing its demands on the country triggered broad protest. Goni's administration ignored the protest. This bill was only retracted after over 30 deaths and riots in La Paz and El Alto.

Sánchez de Lozada's stubborn enthusiasm for pursuing negotiations on trade treaties (Prasad et al., 2000) was considered another machination. Here again, Goni's administration was categorical in its refusal to take into account societal assessments and valuations of the programme he was trying to implement. The issue is thus again not only about the *contents* of politics, but also – and mainly – about the complete *solipsism* of government, which has led to a complete divergence of views between the governing and the governed as to what 'democracy's practices' should be.

These contrivances created the background for protest, but the issue that finally ended Goni's second presidential period was the decision on the exploitation of hydrocarbons. As gas grew in importance for the Bolivian economy, it became increasingly emblematic for the Bolivian public of the unfairness of the privatisation of any natural resources. The public felt that concessions were given and profits made only by the few, while the country hardly benefitted and nobody was allowed to control and monitor the negotiations or their outcomes. Goni's proposal to export natural gas to Mexico and the USA was seen as a repetition of the pattern, with specific conditions attached to the deal that made it even harder to swallow: the gas was to be exported through Chile. The idea of

exporting the gas by way of a Chilean port, which had been Bolivian territory until the Pacific War 140 years ago, was infuriating, as Chilean–Bolivian relations had been tense ever since that war. Additionally, the sale of gas was to be to a consortium of foreign interests, namely the Spanish-owned Repsol YPF, British Gas and Panamerican Gas, a partner company of the American transnational ENRON (well known for its administrative virtues). According to experts, the contract was also disadvantageous for Bolivia: the price was low, and the arrangement failed to acknowledge the part of the processing of the gas that would take place in Bolivia instead of in Chile or elsewhere, and thus missed the opportunity to extract a surplus from that process. Finally, Bolivia’s sovereignty with respect to its natural resources was not considered (Assies and Salman, 2003b: 62–64).

The illusion that different governments would deal differently with societal reservations and protests against the measures these administrations proposed, was thus conclusively destroyed by Goni’s second term. By then, the belief in a democratic, rational and proportionate channel to make the government retract had already been shattered. Of course, not only the governing actors are to blame. They were supported by the political parties, the entities that allegedly represent the population’s will and interests. A principal cause of failure of the country’s democratic functions must therefore also lie with Bolivia’s established political parties.

Inward-Oriented Parties and the Lack of Representation

The party system in Bolivia is characterised by the predominance of a petty intra- and inter-party logic and an inability to build bridges to wider society (Lazarte, 1998). Political parties are often absorbed in internal settling of scores; they recruit their cadres from unrepresentative sectors of the population and defend themselves from new political contenders with self-protective legislation and through mutual pacts, as discussed above (see *La Prensa*, 5 July 2004; Mayorga, 2001, 2002). Thousands of Bolivians feel that their interests and problems are hardly ever reflected in the political deliberations and debates of parliament (Albó and Barrios, 1993; Koonings and Mansilla 2004; Gamboa, 2001). They have come to the conviction that neither the party in government, nor those in opposition will ever defend their interests. According to Koonings and Mansilla (2004: 8), some of the principal deficiencies of democracy, in the eyes of many Bolivians, are ‘the separation of politics and ethics’, the degeneration of the coalition system into a “‘fraternal” distribution of funds, power positions and other privileges’ and the lack of internal democracy within the parties.

‘If about 90% [. . . of the population . . .] feels it is not participating, or only does so when voting, that means that the parties are practically absent in *the political life of the civil society*, as mediators or articulators of representation’ (Tapia Mealla and Toranzo Roca, 2000: 30). Indeed, the authors add that the 1.6 per cent who report that they *do* participate represent the happy few obtaining jobs in the post-electoral repartition process.

Many political parties in Bolivia were founded to satisfy the electoral ambitions of politicians and their entourages rather than for programmatic or ideological ends.

Although the MNR (Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario, Nationalist Revolutionary Movement), began as a *political* movement and later became a party, emerging from discontent with the old, aristocratic and elitist governing system, in the course of time it gradually shifted from a progressive to a market-oriented party. It has lost touch with 'the people' it rarely fails to call upon, and lacks the capacity or the will to communicate its programmatic agenda to the constituency that it still attracts. The MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria, Revolutionary Leftist Movement) split off from the MNR in the late 1960s for ideological reasons, but has since then been notorious for its inclination to nepotism and corruption, as well as for its links to drug traffickers. Conspicuously, neither the name of the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario nor the name of the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria have anything to do with either party's identity or policies today. With the exception of some small leftist parties, most political parties have tended to serve as vehicles for individual politicians rather than alternative political options (Mayorga, 2001). Parties draw their appeal from a politician's charisma or the demise of the incumbent politicians. The parties' campaigning discourses hardly ever reveal analyses of Bolivia's situation or visions for its future and make no attempt to distinguish themselves from political competitors through a focus on content. Party differences have nothing to do with positions on policy, nor with efforts to articulate the interests of different societal sectors. Furthermore, the minority sectors of the population to which the various parties do appeal are by and large the better-off sectors. This appeal is not one based on affinity with political analysis or policy statements, but one based on inherited family ties, clientelism or prebendalism (Mayorga, 2001).

A consequence of this modality of the party system is that it is hard, if not nearly impossible, to address the parties and 'remind' them of their mission or of their promises. Parties cannot be held properly accountable for their actions as governing or opposition members, since there is no political 'identity' against which concrete calls for accountability can be measured. Since this picture has characterised the parties' performance for decades, the majority of the population has learned not to compare parties' self-presentations in terms of political differences or in terms of affinity to their proper interests and grievances. The effect is not only that the parties 'forget' to search for a distinguishable constituency, but also that people's quest for a representative in the political realm is smothered (Mayorga, 2003). When the interaction between people's perceptions of political directions and actions and their access to the actors and entities embodying these directions and actions breaks down, a rift between the political dimension in society and the polity emerges; only to be mended by 'unmediated' collisions between the two, as Bolivia witnessed during the last decades.

Thus, 'democracy', in the eyes of many Bolivians can quite bluntly be considered a sham. In 2004, only seventeen per cent of the Bolivians declared themselves 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied with their democracy (Latinobarómetro, 2004: 23) which was one of the lowest percentages in the continent. '¿Democracia? Es mucho texto...', one interviewee commented to me. The process which took place in Bolivia is precisely the opposite of the one referred to in the literature on democratic consolidation (Diamond, 1996, 1999). Where a party system and a parliamentary procedure are unable to speak in a language that reflects or at least alludes to identities, perceived collective threats and opportunities and the perceived impacts of political decisions, civil society is

hampered in its efforts to recognise shared fates and to interpret the link between political measures and the differentiated impact they would have on various societal sectors. Hence, societal sectors are impeded from articulating their grievances, comparing their plights with other societal sectors, weighing the consequences of particular policies and from responding to 'politics' in *political* language. An insulated and unresponsive polity wrecks the possibility of a mutually intelligible and therefore constructive (even if fierce and antagonistic) exchange with representation-seeking sectors of 'the people'.

Of course, differences between the vocabulary of the 'rank and file' and politicians always exist, and of course divergences and mistrust often characterise this relationship. More specifically, the poor often tend to value concrete issues such as income, services and employment over abstract ones such as sophisticated ideologies, policy technicalities, legal formulations, procedure-prescriptions, the rule of law and the like. They value 'responsiveness' and gains (even if they are particularistic in their delivery) above abstract universalism and 'civil and political liberties'. And in Bolivia, few fully understand the technicalities of the privatisation cases, of tax proposals, gas contracts and the like. But the distrust is deep and widespread.

In Bolivia the centrifugal dynamics between polity and civil society are stronger than elsewhere. '[W]hen policy is made entirely from above, with few legitimate channels for citizen participation, citizens become frustrated and alienated from governmental processes. The political elites have become almost as far removed from the mass of citizens as authoritarian regimes (albeit without the same level of repression). Elite – or Schumpeterian – democracies, even if they have competitive elections, thus run the risk of alienating citizens and causing democracy to decay, or worse' (Bickford, 1998: 20).

An apparent symptom of this phenomenon is the compartmentalisation of civil society. Instead of finding the balance between a certain independence from political and state control on the one hand and a focus on the state and the quest for representation in state bodies on the other, in Bolivia the generalised lack of trust in politics boils down to difficulties in articulating and amalgamating interests in organisations and movements that would be able to play the game of political lobbying and influencing. The polity's value as a sphere where competing versions of a 'common good' are articulated, or where alternatives reaching beyond a particular concern are expressed, recedes. As a consequence, protests tend to be fragmented and ad hoc. Wherever people feel affected, they rally on their own terms, formulate their personal demands and are indifferent to the common good, because the common good has disappeared from sight. Civil society thus tends to develop precisely those features Diamond considers detrimental to the bolstering of democracy.

Politics in a New Setting: Bolivia's Protests under Mesa

The aborted administration of Carlos Mesa illustrates the harmful effects of such a persistent mismatch between the polity and civil society. In the eyes of most Bolivians, the political system did not change radically enough with Mesa to usher in a different mode of communication with the government. The state–civil society interaction was

therefore still characterised by democracy-hampering rather than democracy-enhancing traits.

When Carlos Mesa became the new president of the country in October 2003, practically all reservations, both domestically and internationally, with regard to the maintenance of constitutional and democratic standards vanished. The new president's reputation, and the fact that his accession to office complied with the constitutional rules for such cases, contributed to his general acceptance. Many commentators also applauded the fact that the vitiated party system had been pushed aside, through Mesa's choice of an independent and expert cabinet. It was generally accepted that these initiatives would give the discredited parties a chance to reflect and to reorganise and would offer them time out in which to consider why they were so loathed by Bolivian society. The parties that had made such surprising gains during the 2002 elections, such as MAS and to a lesser degree MIP, also sensed that their prestige could only grow by a mature show of acceptance of the situation. In one of the first speeches he delivered, Mesa explicitly asked the parties, if not to support, at least to *enable* his government to prevent the country from disintegrating any further.

However, slowly but surely the parties regained self-confidence and began to make their support for Mesa's proposals conditional. The referendum on future government policy towards the hydrocarbons sector of July 2004 gave the government a boost. The government's proposal, treading a middle ground between rejecting any re-nationalisation and proposing higher taxes and increased state participation in the industry, obtained 77 per cent support. At the same time, however, it marked the start of the parties' dissidence towards the government, which deepened during the December 2004 municipal elections, in which most traditional parties lost out and therefore no longer needed to keep their profile low in order to secure their electoral fate. The parties' growing self-confidence became particularly clear in the process of translating the outcome of the referendum into a new law that would encapsulate its main thrust. Particular and party interests re-emerged. Whereas leftist forces rejected the government's first proposals for not being radical enough, others opposed them because they would allegedly scare off foreign investors, or because the regions where the natural gas was found would not benefit enough from its revenues. With the latter argument, the hitherto latent regionalism in the country re-emerged stronger than ever before. Meanwhile the hydrocarbons law remained in limbo, along with many other urgent issues the country faced. The initial honeymoon period rapidly came to an end, both because the mobilisations began once again from January 2005 onwards and at the same time poll support for Mesa began to become regionally dependant. While at the national level his support fell to 47 per cent, in El Alto, La Paz and Cochabamba it remained at 62 per cent, 68 per cent and 72 per cent, respectively (<http://www.bolpress.com>, 10 February 2005).

This suggests that it was impossible to restore genuine mutual trust between the country's polity and civil society – at least as a national aggregate – and moreover, it suggests civil society was once again adopting the pattern of repeated, dispersed protests, irrespective of the consequences for shared national interests. Party interests, often in disguise, stimulated such mobilisations, without offering real alternatives or without much consideration for the deplorable state the country was in. On this

occasion, the country divided along regional lines, but the logic of the separation followed the pattern discussed above. It would be wrong, however, to focus on civil society as the sole perpetrator of this relapse. The cause behind it was the breakdown in trust between government and civil society that Mesa proved unable to mend, despite his popular reputation.

Most Bolivians were unwilling to wait for the outcomes or to settle for the concessions that the new administration was offering. Indeed, on several occasions the Mesa administration admitted that the public were justified in their impatience with regard to the many pressing problems, but because of a lack of trust the government was unable to make substantial progress on any of the most hotly debated issues. Most of the traditional parties chose to reappear in disguise, both through 'independent' candidates for the municipal elections, as well as through the mobilisation of people by 'civic' organisations allegedly defending sectoral or regional interests. Santa Cruz' pursuit of increased regional autonomy is an example of such a strategy. Most observers agree that it was the protagonism of local entrepreneurs within the movement that generated the pressure that forced Mesa to give way in January 2005 and to promise substantially more self-governance for the region (Bolpress, 24 October 2005).

However, local and regional leaders from other latitudes of the country responded to these calls for regional autonomy with scepticism (*La Razón*, 9 February 2005). They feared that these gains were an example of regional selfishness and that the poorer sectors of the Department of Santa Cruz had nothing to gain from the increased influence of regional elites on economic and tax policy. The mobilising power of these local leaders was substantial, but critics stated that it was based not on a discourse articulating interests and clarifying the estimated outcomes of new local prerogatives, but on a discourse directed at regionalist sentiments. On the whole, the process confirmed that populist sentiments and illusions about 'progress' (albeit unevenly distributed nationally) were stronger mobilising frames than were statements about substandard democracies. This, in turn, suggests that civil society was still not in a position to *generate* political articulations, but continued to be seduced by political options that stopped short of interacting with societal sectors. These limited political options were the result of elite manoeuvrings rather than the fruits of societal self-recognition.

Examples from elsewhere along Bolivia's party political spectrum suggest further alternative analyses. MAS and MIP have been depicted as the anti-systemic parties (Assies and Salman, 2003b) and have stimulated much debate about their capacity to set another standard for political representation. They succeeded in converting fragmented civil anger and protest into more continuous, stable and politically sophisticated organisations. Episodes such as the Water War and the Gas War confirmed their role as the advocates of discontented and politically frustrated Bolivians and turned them into political parties that not only challenged specific policies and the neoliberal logics behind them, but also the working of the democratic system as such.

The question remains, however, whether the formation of MAS and MIP indicate that Bolivian civil society is beginning to overcome its impotence vis-à-vis political manipulation and failing representation. Moreover, we might ask whether a process is occurring in which frustration increasingly translates into political insight and

alternative policies. There are signs that this is the case: protest leaders systemically insist on the culpability of international capital, structural adjustment policies and privatisation and of racially structured exploitation and discrimination; although compartmentalised, protest is not random. Reviewing motives, themes and occasions, it becomes clear that protests expressed anger and anxiety triggered by the consequences of restructuring and adjustment policies in a setting of institutional ineptitude and political squabbling.

However, tensions between Quispe and Morales continue and seem to be inspired by personal incompatibilité d'humeur rather than by differences in political viewpoint. Also, a rift within MAS between the two main leaders, Evo Morales and Filemón Escobar, is deepening. In February 2005 Morales suggested that elections should be held and that he should be a candidate. This suggestion was immediately repudiated by several of his party colleagues. Meanwhile, relations between Morales and the parliamentary delegates of his party became difficult. Morales' ambiguous statements about defending democracy, supporting Mesa and then calling Mesa an enemy of the fatherland (after Mesa's proposal for raises in fuel prices) were fiercely criticised both by his followers and by his opponents. Quispe, meanwhile, resorted to statements in which he gave Mesa ultimatums to show whether he was 'with the Bolivian campesinos' or 'a friend of the gringos'. Such statements, and such positions vis-à-vis the developments in the country, are beyond doubt rhetorical tropes that express the anger and frustration many feel towards traditional politics. That said, they hardly demonstrate a constructive stand in Bolivia's current predicaments.

These attitudes, combined with a wavering capacity for mobilisation (the rallies bringing down Mesa were only partially orchestrated by MAS and MIP), a complete lack of synchronisation and the unpredictability of support for particularistic demands, give no indication of a consolidation within the ranks of the opposition. This demonstrates the enormous difficulty Bolivian society encounters in recognising and articulating shared interests and shared fates. This difficulty can be traced back to the inability of the polity to articulate visions and differences that would express intelligible alternatives with regard to politico-economic decisions. Such 'intelligible alternatives' do not necessarily imply that intellectual language is called for: we have learned enough about popular classes' views on politics and ideology to know that they often exclude themselves from this sort of debate (Bourdieu, 1984: 397–465). What has been lacking in the way political parties and governing coalitions have transmitted their messages and differences is even a minimal reference to visions of politics and to the consequences of such measures for the various sectors of the population. This omission of any acceptance by the parties of their duty to represent resulted eventually in the irrelevance of politics in the realm of the entire party system. This is an enormous handicap for attempts to form meaningful, politically oriented, societal differentiation and association. Discursive collective identities, translated into strategic orientations, are less likely to emerge in a setting in which the perception of livelihood-affecting policies remains unconnected to at least a rough image of political alternatives (Bader, 1991). A distinguishable political 'firmament' facilitates the acknowledgement of one's likely alliances and opponents; a clientelistic and self-serving party system blocks representation precisely because the horizontal ties and linkages remain veiled. This

makes for protest which is disjointed, particularistic and ruthless. Mesa's fall can therefore hardly be attributed to an articulated perception of his position in relation to that of other politicians. It resulted from a deeply-felt and well-founded distrust, capitalised on by a variety of parties and movements, but not from a *political* processing of this distrust.

Conclusions

Diamond (1996: 229), in one of his contributions to the debate on the preconditions for democracy and democratic consolidation, remarks that civil society should be an 'ideological marketplace', embodied in, among others, independent mass media, universities, think tanks, publishing houses, theatres, film production companies and artistic networks. Whilst to some extent this observation is an ethnocentric portrait, it does nevertheless capture a crucial point, namely the ability of civil society to articulate, to 'test' and to promote specific analyses of processes affecting the country. A vital component of such an ability is basic trust in the 'decency' of democracy. The indispensable complementary factor is that of the state having 'sufficient autonomy, legitimacy, capacity' (237) to respond. Where both elements are lacking due to a poisoned interaction between the two parts of the whole, the logics of state/civil society interaction can easily take a turn in which the democratic system as such loses strength and legitimacy. Especially in the case where many sectors of society feel that the state is distant, inept and inscrutable, the spiral takes the shape of a lack of willingness to compromise in the part of civil society, and what we might call 'ad-hoc-ism' on the part of the state.

Diamond's (1996: 237) scenario in which '[a] hyperactive, confrontational and relentlessly rent-seeking civil society can overwhelm a weak, penetrated state with the diversity and magnitude of its demands, leaving little in the way of a truly 'public' sector concerned with the overall welfare of society, appears appropriate to explain recent processes in Bolivia. The lack of trustworthy political parties is to a great deal responsible for the 'relentlessly rent-seeking civil society' of today. Diamond (1996: 238) rightly remarks: 'No coherent party system, no stable democracy'. The current protagonism of protest mobilisations is the expression of a process in which the parties failed to 'aggregate interests (more) broadly across social groups' (238).

Peeler (2004: 66) also speaks of a 'fragmented party system' in Bolivia and adds that '[p]arties and competition among them are essential to the practice of liberal democracy because they process and structure the options to be made available to the electorate' (102). In his table on the characteristics of party systems in Latin America, Bolivia scores among the countries with the lowest party institutionalisation (103). Conspicuously, he draws some optimism from the possibility that the resistance against a stubbornly pursued (neoliberal) globalisation agenda might convert into a new impulse for democracy (207). Little is said, however, about the necessity Peeler himself affirmed of a party system ready to capture and channel the disperse protests into alternative political options. In my view, the failure of such a party system to

materialise is the main reason for Bolivian civil society's failure to act more creatively in the present indeterminate political environment.

Many scholars have addressed the issue of deficient party systems in Latin America and in Bolivia (Bickford, 1998; Lazarte, 1998; Sánchez Gómez, 1999; Calderón and Szmukler, 2000; Crabtree and Whitehead, 2001; Mayorga, 2001; Schor, 2001) Most of them agree on the idea that in many Latin American countries – Bolivia among them – political parties and governments failed to represent and appeal to societal sectors looking for political articulation and defence of their interests. It seems as if there has evolved a pattern of complete disqualification of the party system and of the polity in Bolivia. The distrust has assumed a breadth and depth that cannot be neutralised by new actors within governmental circles, even if these new actors receive credibility for their integrity and capacity.

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