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# Bolivia and the Paradoxes of Democratic Consolidation

by  
Ton Salman

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*In Bolivia from the 1990s on, two presidents were ousted by popular protests, and protests were rampant. The protests expressed a growing discontent not only with successive administrations and their policies but with politics itself. The polity failed to build trust in democracy, ignored or repressed protests, and thus contributed to a process of democratic "deconsolidation." The main factors were corruption and the reluctance of the traditional political parties to discuss the neoliberal economic model. As a result, the current administration of Evo Morales faces two challenges: to change economic policies and to repair the support for democracy.*

**Keywords:** *Democracy, Democratic consolidation, Bolivia, Political protests, Ethnography of democracy*

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*A balanced political culture—in which people care about politics but not too much—is possible only in structural circumstances where people can afford not to care too much.*

—Larry Diamond

In January 2006 Evo Morales was inaugurated president of Bolivia after receiving an unprecedented 54 percent of the vote in the December 2005 elections. He was, in a way, installed three times: first before the indigenous peoples of Bolivia, at the famous archaeological site of Tiahuanacu outside La Paz on January 21, then again in the morning of January 22 before the nation, represented by parliament, in La Paz, and finally once more in the afternoon of the same day in La Paz's Plaza San Francisco, where protests traditionally take place and the *people* gather. Here, before thousands of supporters, Morales vowed not to betray the poor of Bolivia, who, through their innumerable protests in the preceding years, had discredited the old parties and politics and paved the way for his victory. The unusual way in which Morales was installed as president symbolizes a fact of exceptional importance: not only is he the first elected indigenous president on the continent, in a country that has been governed by a white-mestizo elite minority from time immemorial but also he embodies something beyond a mere political changing of the guard—a fundamental shift in the nature of politics—and faces the challenge of combating the deep-seated distrust of governments and political institutions produced over the past few decades. Because Morales is of indigenous descent

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and is supported by the indigenous population of the country, he additionally faces the challenge of giving shape to the criticism of corrupt political practices that increasingly drew upon indigenous criteria for proficient and honorable leadership and the criticism of neoliberal economic models and free-trade treaties that increasingly drew upon indigenous notions of livelihood security, small-scale agriculture, reciprocity, and cosmologically embedded environmental harmony. Morales's election in this sense exemplifies the ongoing indigenous emancipation in its insistence upon the legitimacy of these hitherto marginalized indigenous notions of national identity and sovereignty, the people's future, and governing beyond party systems and representative, institutionalized democracy. He thus faces the challenge of restoring legitimacy to the country's shaken democracy, perhaps by transforming it. Bolivia is embarked upon an exciting and promising experiment, raising high expectations across the continent.

This article, however, does not deal with the first months of Morales's presidency. It focuses on the years preceding this event and attempts to explain its causes. The years from 1999 to 2005 were turbulent. Twice, presidents were ousted by popular protests, and protests were rampant. These protests expressed a growing discontent not only with successive administrations and their policies but with politics itself. To understand Morales's victory, then, we need to analyze how in the preceding years Bolivia's democracy had, in the eyes of the Bolivians, become a disgrace. A brief sketch of and reflection on the short-lived presidency of Carlos Mesa (October 2003–June 2005) may help clarify the situation.

When the right-wing president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada ("Goni") was ousted in October 2003, his former vice president, Carlos Mesa, assumed his office. Comments extolling Mesa's talents and integrity were accompanied by other, more concerned comments focusing on the various obstacles to the country's democratic prospects. These comments highlighted the tradition of politicians' persistent "pacting," the country's economic hardship, the general lack of trust in politics, and "excessive" societal interference in politics in the form of radical demands for "immediate delivery." Some feared that Mesa might become a captive of radical groups (Gamarra, 2004: 5; see also Archondo, 2004) and advocated giving the government the opportunity to implement its plans—in other words, giving democracy a chance. For instance, Varnoux Garay complained that "trade union, corporatist, and peasant leaders, in different manifestations and all in the name of the people, want to push the country towards the abyss of confrontation, taking up absurd positions, encouraging violence, racism, and stupidity" (*La Prensa*, July 7, 2004).

Varnoux Garay is no right-wing diehard. He is, however, a vigorous defender of the rule of law, and he saw it threatened by what he considered the excessive demands and nation-paralyzing actions of social movements and their leaders. He shared the conviction of many Bolivians that Mesa should have an opportunity to govern without being constantly hounded by unrealistic and often vehement demands.<sup>1</sup> In a poll in February 2004, Mesa was still voted the best of the country's most recent five presidents,<sup>2</sup> but several events, combined with his vacillating style, made him seem to many Bolivians just like the earlier "impostors." This perceived resemblance corroborated what many already believed: that democracy was worthless. When Mesa stepped

down in June 2005, his successor Eduardo Rodríguez's primary or perhaps only mandate was to organize the December 2005 elections.

Mesa's failure seemed to confirm the fear that the country had become too politicized to govern and that *less* participation or less radical participation was needed to avoid "destabilizing" democracy (*La Prensa*, February 16, 2004). Many expressed the belief that radicalized protest would not do Bolivia any good and that confidence in the country's democratic system could be jeopardized by further turmoil. It would be wrong to suggest, however, that the "radicalization" was a sign of democratic immaturity among the Bolivian population. Instead, it would be more correct to remind ourselves that what people believe about democracy will be reflected in their attitudes toward it (Salman, 2004; Baviskar and Malone, 2004), and what people believed about democracy in Bolivia at the time was what they had *learned* over the past decades. What they had learned was that giving a government the time and space to implement its plans had proven a bad bet. The Bolivians' "questionable loyalty to democracy," to which those who lamented the ongoing protest after Mesa's installation pointed, was in this sense well founded: their earlier loyalty to and trust in democracy's mores had cost them dearly. Many of the poor in Bolivia were convinced that they could no longer afford to trust and to wait and see. Silence and patience had hitherto brought them only further deterioration of their living conditions and let the corrupt go scot-free, and not even Mesa's prestige made him immune to this deep-seated distrust.

This attitude was engendered by long experience of seeing the official celebration of such democratic virtues as compromise, trust in the politician's good intentions, and ideological and programmatic integrity, tolerance, and patience consistently work out wrong for the poor. The shape given to democracy by traditional politics had brought about an "unlearning" process with regard to these virtues, and Bolivian political culture was therefore unfavorable to "tranquil" democracy.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, a process of *deconsolidation* seemed to be taking place in which the positive feedback between effective societal control, capable participation, and a genuine societal mandate, on the one hand, and the state's responsiveness to it, its implementing capacity, and its maintenance of trustworthy institutions, on the other, was reversed. Bolivian democracy functions as an interaction between what the people perceive as "concealed" and underhanded political dealings and an increasing distrust that eventually leads to a rejection of the polity and of democracy itself. Moreover, although on the face of it it would seem that social movements thrive when such political "dysfunctionality" reigns, the opposite often occurs. In Bolivia the political refusal to address societal frustration hindered the societal capacity to build interest-voicing associations, construct social movements, lobby, or translate frustration into political choices or ideological identifications, since there was no addressee for such initiatives. For many years, democratic institutions were nominally present but no longer fostered the democratic process. Thus, tactics for obstructing the other side's democratic conduct began to prevail in state-society relations. It was only after many years, during the interim presidency of Rodríguez, that Morales managed, at a certain level, to galvanize the heterogeneous frustration in the country and construct a politically effective articulation of scattered protests.

The following attempt to understand this deconsolidation process begins with a brief review of some of the literature on democratic consolidation. The next section is a sketch of the characteristics of Bolivian democracy until 2003. It is necessary to review these episodes of Bolivia's recent history because Carlos Mesa was confronted with the fall-out from the learning processes of those days—this fall-out being heavy enough to make him fail. In the subsequent sections the divergence between polity and society in Bolivia, the tendency to conceal political intentions, the lack of representativeness of Bolivian democracy, and the effects of all this on the society's capacity to articulate its disagreement are addressed and some conclusions are drawn.

## THE DEBATE ABOUT DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

The redemocratization of Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s initially met with broad acclaim. Later, it also led to disappointment and disillusionment, since only fragments of the hopes attached to democratization materialized. Various scholars have written on the deficiencies of the "democracy" the region achieved and on the challenge of preserving democracy in view of the limited and declining support for democracy in most Latin American countries (O'Donnell, 1999; Diamond and Plattner, 1996; Harto de Vera, 2000; Schor, 2001; Stuvén, 1990; Linz and Stepan, 1996; Philip, 2003; Oxhorn, 2003; Peeler, 2004; see also Siavelis, 2004). Of course, developments differed from country to country, but in many countries solid confidence in democracy failed to materialize and consolidation remained a moot point.<sup>4</sup>

In analyses of Latin America's troubled reencounter with democracy, various elements have been highlighted. Philip (2003) stresses, among other things, the "state-biased-ness" of the continents' democracies, suggesting that the deepening of democratic support in society both lags behind and is too often neglected by the polity's central actors. Lievesley (1999) insists upon the need to broaden and deepen societal trust in democracy and blames neoliberal reforms for the fact that "democracy has not satisfied people's expectations" (1999: 200). My analysis of events in Bolivia bears out this point. Crabtree and Whitehead (2001: 218) also point to the "linkages between the state and civil society." Most of these writers argue that a certain synchrony between societal and institutional evolution is necessary for democratic consolidation. Diamond (1996; 1999) underscores the necessity of a two-tier process, involving both the state and civil society, and his work may provide some insight into Bolivia's situation. Diamond sets out by reflecting on the processes that need to take place "beyond politics" in order to make democracy possible. The crucial preconditions for consolidation need to take shape in the realm of civil society: independence (but not alienation) from the state, a "rich associational life" (1996: 230) that fosters the skills of democratic citizens, and tolerance, moderation, willingness to compromise, and respect for opposing viewpoints. Additionally, civil society may create channels other than political parties for the articulation, aggregation, and representation of interests, resulting in participation, not least at the local level (1996: 231; see also Rojas 1999: 71–109). Mitigation of the principal polarities of political conflict is another "task" of

civil society, along with active involvement in the observation and monitoring of electoral and judicial procedures. Its function in the dissemination of information is yet another crucial aspect of its contribution to democratic consolidation. An "intrusive" society thus helps rather than hinders democracy. As Diamond puts it (1996: 234), "By enhancing the accountability, responsiveness, inclusiveness, effectiveness, and hence legitimacy of the political system, a vigorous civil society gives citizens respect for the state and positive engagement with it. In the end, this improves the ability of the state to govern." Remarkably, however, he adds that "the single most important and urgent factor in the consolidation of democracy is not civil society but political institutionalization" (1996: 238). Although this sounds contradictory, in Diamond's view it makes sense: citizens' support for democracy is possible only when state institutions perform in an intelligible and efficient way. What surfaces from these considerations is not a unidirectional but an interlocking, two-tier process: consolidation is a process through which effective societal control and capable participation and "vigilance and loyalty" (1996: 238) interact with a state's implementing capacity and robust institutions.

This is, beyond doubt, a crucial point and indirectly alludes to the importance of a "state of law" as an elementary basis of democracy (Pachano, 2003: 50–52). However, Diamond's analysis focuses on the duality of institutional capabilities and of a "mature" society's readiness to respond with "eager vigilance," and this focus smacks of ethnocentrism. The "measuring stick" stems from the allegedly mature Western societies. These Weberian features often do not predominate in Latin American institutions. In this sense, insistence on efficient and neutral institutions often echoes the standards employed by Western powers and donors when, as they often do (Nuijten et al., 2004), they press for the improvement of "governance." From this perspective, the South is the place where "Western accomplishments" such as institutional maturity, rationality, and composure have not yet been achieved. Thus, Diamond's focus misses the more culturally loaded interdependence of state command and society's vividness, in particular when the polity's incapacity prevents society from insisting that it improve.

Much of the literature on democratic consolidation skips over this dialectic between political demeanor and societal responses to it, which is an essential ingredient of particular political cultures and a key factor in democratic consolidation/deconsolidation. In most Latin American countries, perceptions of the way democracy works and may be used to obtain certain results are saturated with the idiosyncrasies of the respective political systems. In such cases, people aspire not to "official" democracy or the "prescribed" varieties of consolidation but to democracy *as they know it*. Analyses that fail to take this into account cannot deal with the complex and polymorphous ways in which democracy functions for those who use—and stretch—it in inadvertent ways. Additionally, indigenous movements have increasingly criticized the taken-for-granted liberal, parliamentary model of democracy. Their suggestions, for instance, that democracy be made more participatory and more deliberative are significant for the "new" Bolivia that Morales proposes to create.

The focus here will therefore be on the interaction and entanglement of state structures and initiatives, on the one hand, with popular images (Salman, 2000), viewpoints, and strategies vis-à-vis these state actions, on the other, and the

insulation of many crucial policy decisions in Bolivia in recent decades from electoral deliberation and decision. More concretely, the point will be made that external conditions (e.g., the imposition of neoliberal reforms in the economy and in politics) play a decisive role in impeding constructive interaction between the state and civil society (Lievesley, 1999; Sousa Santos, 2004).

### DIVERGING UNIVERSES: POLITY PRIORITIES AND SOCIETAL QUALMS

Bolivia regained its democracy in 1982, although many Bolivians feel that it was only in 1985 that the new practice really started. This is when a coalition government took office and finally managed to restore macroeconomic order. During the preceding three years, a center-left government—the Unión Democrática Popular coalition, headed by Hernán Siles Zuazo—had dramatically failed to reactivate the economy and produced hyperinflation. Siles Zuazo stepped down and called elections a year before ending his constitutional mandate. The succeeding coalition was made up of the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (Revolutionary Nationalist Movement—MNR) and the Acción Democrática Nacionalista (Nationalist Democratic Action—ADN) (the party Hugo Banzer had founded after stepping down from his dictatorial seat), who signed a “Pact for Democracy.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus, 1985 was the year in which the nature of Bolivia’s regained democracy was established. Two features have stood out ever since: the neoliberal model as the indisputable frame of governing, irrespective of power shifts and the ideological backgrounds of the parties of the alternating coalitions, and the blurred, doxa-like (Bourdieu, 1984: 471) way in which this creed was kept out of electoral contests and the political discourses with which the parties approached and tried to convince the electorate. Whereas such themes as corruption, social programs, infrastructure, and poverty were prominent in campaigning and in televised political debates, the foundational points of departure for governing were fenced off from explicit controversy.

At the end of August 1985, the Paz Estenssoro government introduced its New Economic Policy (NEP). International financial entities such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) insisted on the need for such measures and made loans dependent upon them. The economist Jeffrey Sachs, heralding “monetary liberalism,” helped the Bolivian government to design the package. These externally induced basics for the economic model have governed Bolivia ever since but have never explicitly been the subject of political debate or campaigning. The NEP consisted of harsh shock therapy implemented by the planning minister and later president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. The introduction of neoliberal policies put an end to the “national-revolutionary cycle” initiated in 1952.<sup>6</sup> The NEP consisted of the usual recipe of reducing the fiscal deficit, reforming the monetary system, rationalizing the bureaucracy (through mass dismissals), liberalizing markets, promoting exports, and reforming the tax system. It also involved an overhaul of the state-owned mining company involving the dismissal of 23,000 miners. This measure too was suggested by the World Bank, convinced as it was of the detrimental effects of state involvement in the economy—even if the economic



activities were of strategic interest or great social (e.g., employment) importance. A further effect of trade liberalization was that Bolivian markets were swamped with cheap imported goods, leading to the closure of many large and medium-sized factories. Urban unemployment jumped from less than 6 percent in 1985 to 12 percent in 1988.<sup>7</sup> At the same time it should be noted that the relative macroeconomic success of the NEP was also related to the fact that the package facilitated the laundering of narco-dollars. Perhaps we should read this as a kind of “collateral damage”: withdrawing state control, in accordance with World Bank prescriptions, in this case facilitated a type of delinquency that the official U.S. cooperation with Bolivia fiercely resisted. New Bolivian economic legislation, however, focused on asking few questions and reducing bureaucracy with regard to investments, which allowed for the boosting of hard-currency reserves, to facilitate the servicing of foreign debt and provide funds for infrastructural development. “To launder the revenues derived from the drug trade, traffickers have invested in certain sectors of the economy, especially in construction, public utilities, and banking” (Vellinga, 1998: 21). Cocaine became the country’s most important export product, and the relative importance of the coca economy has been estimated at 20–50 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) (Laserna, 1997: 177).

By the end of the Paz Estenssoro administration, the MNR unilaterally withdrew from the Pact for Democracy and put Sánchez de Lozada forward as presidential candidate. Although he won most of the votes in the 1989 elections, the ill feeling created by the unilateral withdrawal from the pact drove Banzer and Jaime Paz Zamora of the *Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionario* (Movement of the Revolutionary Left—MIR), who until then had been arch-enemies separated by a “sea of blood” because of the repression the party, along with the MNR, had suffered during Banzer’s authoritarian period, into a coalition against the MNR. They brokered a gentleman’s agreement, the *Acuerdo Patriótico*, that allowed Paz Zamora to become president (1989–1993). His government essentially continued the adjustment policies despite the fact that these policies had not been a central theme in the earlier campaigns. To make things worse, the new coalition failed to improve the country’s economic situation. The absence of economic growth and the deterioration of livelihood opportunities for hundreds of thousands of Bolivians eroded its popular support. Opposition from the MNR was fierce, but in the eyes of many Bolivians most of the political settling of accounts in this period had nothing to do with what was really troubling them, namely, persistent poverty, unemployment, and the lack of progress in such areas as education and health care. The feeling that many politicians merely took care of themselves began to grow.<sup>8</sup> And during this whole process, an explicit public and political debate on the course of economic policies and on the predictable effects of one or another direction in managing the country’s economy remained absent. This resulted in a situation in which frustration and powerlessness were felt by many but could not be transformed into a discourse or “frame” that people could identify with or reject. Frustration remained dispersed; the lack of a recognizable policy direction translated into the absence of a counterdiscourse. This became manifest in the inability of sectors of civil society to press political parties to commit themselves to concrete measures, reactive rather than proactive forms of protest, and a lack of exchange of ideas and proposals between

protesters and government officials. Bolivia in 2004 was the country in which confidence in the possibility for changing anything through voting was the lowest in the hemisphere (*Latinobarómetro*, 2004: 28).

The 1993 elections yielded an MNR government headed by Sánchez de Lozada, with the Aymara leader Víctor Hugo Cárdenas as his vice president, in—once again—a surprising alliance between the MNR and one of the small Katarista parties, the *Movimiento Revolucionario Tupaj Katari de Liberación* (Revolutionary Liberation Movement Tupaj Katari—MRTK-L).<sup>9</sup> Cárdenas had turned into an intellectual and thus, to the mestizo electorate, a more digestible indigenous leader who championed the cause of pluriculturalism and multi-ethnicity. This alliance was remarkable not only because of the rightist/leftist marriage but also because traditionally the MNR had tended to iron out the ethnic element in Bolivian politics. The decree issued after the 1952 Revolution to replace the word “Indio” and even “indígena” with “campesino” was its doing, and in general the party represented a nationalist rather than a multiculturalist doctrine. But the MNR had changed again. It had opened up to ideas related to decentralization, participation, and multiculturalism<sup>10</sup> and had also prepared the implementation of a “second generation” of neoliberal reforms aimed at, among other things, the modernization of the state apparatus. However, no public information was available on the consequences of these measures in terms of the degree to which the state would protect wage workers and the vulnerable or be able to influence economic equilibrium, development, or investment.

After the election, the coalition involving a core of MNR neoliberal technocrats and *Movimiento Bolivia Libre* (Free Bolivia Movement—MBL) and MRTK-L reformers, supported in parliament by some other parties, launched a type of “neoliberal social reformism.” Although Goni’s first presidential period is evaluated by most observers as decisive, purposeful, and efficient and received less devastating criticism from among the population than earlier and succeeding ones, it conspicuously concealed the gist and concrete arrangements of its economic reforms and privatizations. It failed to be transparent about its economic strategy, which was to create maneuvering room for business, to open markets and frontiers, and to reduce both state interference in economics and state responsibility for the equitable distribution of wealth and opportunities. The persistent and growing problems that ordinary Bolivians experienced as a result of the new measures paved the way for Banzer, who in his campaign stressed the need for a more social turn. But after winning the 1997 election without an absolute majority, Banzer resorted to “pacted democracy” as had his predecessors and as would his successors. By then, in the eyes of the Bolivians, such “pacts” were nothing more than private agreements between parties to allow one another a share of power, nepotism, and access to funds and spoils that were not accounted for transparently (Tapia and Toranzo, 2000: 79–81; Assies and Salman, 2003b: 48). The recognition of voting trends, demands for the inclusion of nontraditional parties, and protests against the measures being implemented were overruled in such pacts. They denied voters a say about what their votes had meant.

## DEMOCRACY: SILENCING THE POLICIES

What is most important for my argument is not the conflict about the contents of the policies pursued but the mismatch between people's perceptions of politics and politicians' perception of their actions and the reasons behind them. This mismatch strengthened people's idea that governments—all of them—were deaf to their demands. This is exemplified by the fact that most measures of the governments of the 1990s were never made part of electoral promotion or political campaigning or of party programs. This applies to the privatization of the national oil company (YPFB), the national telecommunication company (ENTEL), the electricity company (ENFE), the airline (LAB), and others under Goni's administration (Mesa, Gisbert, and Mesa, 1999: 721–723; Morales, 2001: 52–55). It also applies to the earlier suspension of the state mining activities, the decision to cut government spending, and the abolition of import tariffs that were protecting national industries. A similar strategy was in place with regard to the investment in larger-scale agriculture in the tropical/subtropical East of the country instead of designing measures to help small-plot agriculture in the highlands and with regard to the policies fostering the exploitation of forest resources in the North and Northeast of the country. None of these high-impact new policies, which amounted to a shift from public- to private-sector dominance (Morales, 2001: 52), was ever made a transparent issue in the "communication" of political entities with the population, and none of them was raised or discussed in broader or representative societal sectors or associations. Most often, they were excluded from public debate (Gray-Molina, 2001). As McNeish (2004: 7) has argued, "Carrying out neoliberal reform is essential for a country to maintain credit with the international financial institutions and for investor confidence in its economy. Yet, this process also requires a government to ignore the wishes of many, if not most, of its citizens."

It was this process, which was accompanied by the deficient development of civil-society articulation and involvement in public debate, that laid the groundwork for the almost complete divergence of societal perceptions and priorities, on the one hand, and governmental behavior perceived as "solipsist," on the other, that was to develop during the administrations of Sánchez de Lozada (1993–1997) and Banzer/Quiroga.<sup>11</sup>

Conspicuously, one of Banzer's principal campaign themes was the charge that Goni's policies were "harsh" and a more "socially sensitive" government was needed. Here he tapped into the frustration with the results of Goni's policies, which had not led to any increase in employment or buying power, support for small-scale agriculture, or optimism about the future of the poorer sectors' living conditions. Even Goni's more "social" measures, such as educational reform, decentralization, local participation (Gray-Molina, 2001: 72–80), and, toward the end of his term, pensions,<sup>12</sup> besides most often being inspired by privatization impulses, had not convinced the population of the government's willingness to listen to societal grievances.

Most of the substantial policy changes in the 1990s were directed at further privatizing or granting natural-resource exploitation concessions, "modernizing" the state apparatus, or reducing the state's involvement in redistribution models. Both Banzer and Goni gave more weight to a neoliberal free market than to national development. Additionally, from Goni's first administration

on (and especially during Banzer's government), the eradication of "excess" coca cultivation was high on the political agenda. Already during Goni's first term, many people felt that their daily worries and future upward mobility possibilities were negatively affected by the impact of political decisions. They missed a state that showed that it cared about the poor through social programs and subsidies (Camp, 2001; Wiarda, 2001: 328–334; interviews, 2004).

Banzer only added fuel to the discontent by not delivering on his promise to give a more compassionate turn to socioeconomic policies. Once again, problems such as poverty, unemployment, and livelihood insecurity were, in the eyes of the people, largely ignored. The idea that voting was senseless increased. Grievances were directed not only against a particular policy but against the functioning of politics. In this sense, Banzer's government contributed to an already broadly based disillusionment with democracy, and extraparliamentary means of expressing protest became the norm. Moreover, Banzer's team was notable for its ineptness and corruption, and this added to people's anger about *all* politics: politicians and parties were, on the whole, untrustworthy, incompetent, and sleazy.

Of course, many people in Latin America as a rule fiercely criticize both politics and politicians, but in Bolivia things are worse. Overwhelming majorities throw all parties into one basket. In people's view, the rationale for comparisons between parties had withered. Although Banzer's entourage may have been subject to more intense charges of fraud, deceit, and corruption, in the end people experienced only marginal differences from Goni's era in terms of the impact on their livelihood or perceived governmental concern for the issues raised in their many protests.

Goni's return to power in August 2002 reaffirmed the widespread conviction that voting trends were of no concern to politicians. In spite of the surprising results of the 2002 elections and an unmistakable message of distrust of "politics as usual" in the outcome, the traditional parties pacted as usual. Again, an improbable pact (between the traditional archenemies MNR and MIR) was forged. In the eyes of many Bolivians, this time the pact was born of the traditional parties' decision to keep Morales out in spite of his surprising electoral result.<sup>13</sup> To make things worse, the coalition parties started quarreling over positions, appointments, and divisions of parliamentary commission chairs as though nothing had happened.

With regard to policies, Goni again emphasized measures to modernize the economy (and thus, he claimed, to create growth, jobs, and increased incomes for both Bolivians and the Bolivian state). With this emphasis, he further contributed to the general impression that ordinary people's convictions and opinions were irrelevant. Rather, the prevailing conviction that governments never listen and forget everything they have promised was merely reinforced. As a consequence, support for democracy continued to be weak in Bolivia. In 2001 satisfaction with democracy was low, 16 percent, as a result of the lack of success of the Banzer administration; in 2002 and 2003 it rose slightly, to 24 percent (far from the 34 percent of the late 1990s), and in 2004 it plummeted again to 16 percent (Latinobarómetro, 2004: 23). Goni's attitude and his political measures were responsible for this sharp drop in support for democracy.

For instance, he launched a tax bill in early 2003 in order to obtain a new IMF loan. The bill proposed a 12.5 percent increase in income tax for every salary

above 880 bolivianos (approximately US\$115) per month. Protest was played down until a demonstration in the main square in La Paz turned into a shoot-out between the police and the military that resulted in 30 dead. The subsequent governmental crisis and reshuffling of the cabinet underscored the growing feeling that the country was being ineffectively and “egoistically” governed and triggered new protests that continued throughout 2003. People became increasingly convinced that only the street was available for getting through to government.<sup>14</sup>

Another line of policies that contributed to this feeling was Goni’s insistence on negotiations on free-trade treaties and zones. By then many Bolivians had developed a great distrust of such treaties. In 2004 Bolivians were among those with the least trust in the market economy in the region, with only 11 percent of the population endorsing the idea (Latinobarómetro, 2004: 38; Hindery, 2004). Sánchez de Lozada’s stubborn and monomaniacal enthusiasm for such negotiations represented his disregard of these broad misgivings about what he would have called “economic modernization.” Attitudes toward privatization in most Latin American countries had meanwhile become downright hostile (Economist Intelligence Unit, August 2002). Goni ignored this fact, and by doing so he contributed to the disqualification of “normal” democratic channels for influencing politics. People preferred to reject any given proposal in the streets than to run the risk of having to pay the bill for it later.

A third component of Goni’s policies, the one that ended his second term, was the policy on the exploitation of hydrocarbons. His proposal to export substantial amounts of Bolivia’s massive gas reserves to Mexico and the U.S.A. was seen as a repetition of the pattern with regard to the exploitation of Bolivia’s riches in which few benefited and many were left empty-handed. According to critics, the contract Goni proposed was disadvantageous for Bolivia:<sup>15</sup> the price was low, the possibilities for extracting a surplus by claiming that part of the processing of the gas would take place in Bolivia instead of in Chile or elsewhere were overlooked, and Bolivia’s sovereignty with respect to its own natural resources was practically being given away (Assies and Salman, 2003b: 62–64). The whole affair documented the multinational corporations’ power to constrain the decisions of a “sovereign” country like Bolivia with regard to the exploitation of its resources. Protests mounted, and Goni responded to them with repression. As the numbers of victims rose, Vice President Carlos Mesa withdrew his support for the president. After a few confusing days, Goni chose to make the best of a bad job and fled the country on October 17.

## SHORTCOMINGS OF THE PARTY AND THE POLITY

The institutionalization of the Latin American state has often been criticized for its authoritarian style, its inability to establish a clear and transparent separation of powers, and its lack of legitimacy. In the eyes of the poor, the rules are strict for some, lax for others, and completely put aside for yet others. And many are convinced that the state apparatus is invariably peopled with incompetent and untrustworthy members of a tribe incapable of governing or even of applying the laws and policies it has decided upon.

This seems to support Diamond's assertion that trust in and loyalty to democracy 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" (1996: 239). A democratically chosen government unable to implement its decisions and support its legislation loses its legitimacy and weakens confidence in the democratic model. A repetition of the pattern ends in disillusionment with democracy itself. In Bolivia, this is exacerbated by yet another feature of Bolivia's polity: the political parties' inability to represent. The party system is characterized by the predominance of a petty intra- and interparty logic and the inability to build a bridge to society. Political parties are absorbed in the internal and mutual squaring of accounts, in recruiting their cadres from unrepresentative population sectors, and in receiving new political contenders with chicanery. Thousands of Bolivians feel that their interests and problems have hardly ever been reflected in the government's deliberations or parliamentary debates (Albó and Barrios, 1993: 146–148).<sup>16</sup> Although the level of trust in politicians and parties is traditionally low in Latin America (see Camp, 2001), it reaches dramatic depths in Bolivia: according to a 1990 survey, 77 percent of Bolivian respondents expressed the conviction that parties did not work for the good of the country and merely defended group interests (Gamboa, 2001: 101).

Tapia and Toranzo (2000: 30) criticize the country's political parties for failing to be mediators or articulators of representation. Party programs or campaigns usually lack any content-focused attempt to distinguish the party from political alternatives. Party differences have nothing to do with positions vis-à-vis policy alternatives, efforts to articulate different sectors, or different interest patterns among the population. The most serious effect of this party modality is that parties can hardly be held accountable for their actions as governing or opposition members. No political "identity" is present against which concrete stands can be measured. And the fact that this has characterized parties' performance for decades means that people have "unlearned" to compare parties' self-presentations in terms of political differences and in terms of closeness to their proper interests and grievances. Thus, in the end, the effect is twofold: the parties "forget" to search for a distinguishable constituency, and people's quest for a representative in the political realm is smothered (Mayorga, 2003).

Recalling the emphasis on a two-tier process pointed to by Diamond and others, the impact of such a complete dissimilarity between societal groups and political discourse is that society unlearns to articulate and express its stratifications, traditions, differences of opinion, and interests in a way that is compatible with standard democratic procedure. In recent decades, society in Bolivia has expressed, sometimes violently, its anger, disgust, protest, and outcry in a series of creative and obstinate ways, but it has been unable to translate this protest into "purposeful" political positions and analyses. In the eyes of many Bolivians, "democracy" means "protest or suffer" (interview, La Paz, August 2004). The process is an exact reversal of the one referred to in the literature on democratic consolidation. When a party system and a parliamentary routine are unable to speak in a language that reflects the perceived collective threats and opportunities and the perceived impacts of political decisions, civil society is hampered in its efforts to associate, to recognize shared fates, and to interpret the link between measures and the differentiated impact they would have on various societal sectors. Thus, it is impeded in its attempt to articulate

its grievances, to weigh the consequences of policies, and to respond in political terms. In a way, sectors of civil society need the polity, even if it pursues measures that go against their interests, to make out their collective identity, their shared fortune, and consequently the importance of politics and the need to invent the strategies to resist it. A polity unable to be such an interlocutor gives way to either apathy and inertia or categorical rejection of *anything* proposed by the authorities. Such a polity destroys the possibility of a mutually intelligible and therefore constructive (even if fierce and antagonistic) exchange with representation-seeking sectors of “the people.” Where weak institutions reign (Diamond, 1996), this is also bad news for horizontal organizations. No calling into existence of peer groups or interest groups occurs. The horizontal organizations tend to be the best at building interpersonal trust (the mortar of civil society) and confidence in the worthwhileness of one’s effort (Power and Clark, 2001). Thus, Bolivians have little trust and barely any confidence in their political participation—which is why the argument that “they only listen to force” has been a paramount justification in spokespeople’s declarations in all the protest episodes of recent years. This is obviously something that the polity is to blame for, but it also is something that should make us think about the potential to articulate demands “from below.”

For the sake of clarity, there are of course almost always differences between the vocabulary of the “rank and file” and that of the politicians. And, of course, divergences and mistrust often characterize the relation. More concretely, 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 state of law, and the like. They value responsiveness and gains (even if they have come about in a favoritist and particularist way) above abstract universalism and “civil and political liberties.” Only a few protesters, if asked about it, would be able to explain the technicalities of the bills they reject. But in Bolivia the abyss between polity and society is deeper than elsewhere. Many believe that “powerful economic and political elites have bent laws to their bidding, enfeebled courts, violated rights, corrupted politicians, and run roughshod over constitutions and contracts” (Karl, 2003: 148).<sup>17</sup>

The Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement Toward Socialism—MAS) and the Movimiento Indígena Pachakuti (Pachakuti Indigenous Movement—MIP) were two of the most prominent opposition parties. Their leaders, Evo Morales and Felipe Quispe, played prominent roles in many protests. Both parties were “indigenist” parties, but the MIP was much more exclusive in character. Both parties have been depicted as “anti-systemic” (Assies and Salman, 2003b), and there has been much debate about their capacity to set another standard in political representation. In a way, there is no doubt that they converted fragmented and dispersed anger and protest into more continuous, more stable, and politically more sophisticated organizations. Episodes such as the water war and the gas war confirmed their role as spokespeople for discontented and politically frustrated Bolivians and turned them into political parties that challenge not only specific policies but also the working of the system itself. This is the reason we suggested that “the dysfunctionality of Bolivian democracy [was] the main issue in the 2002 elections” (Assies and Salman, 2003a: 152). The question thus arises whether the examples of the success of the MAS and—to a much lesser degree—the MIP indicate that Bolivian civil

society has been overcoming its “impotence” vis-à-vis political manipulation and failing representation. To a certain extent, this seems to be the case: before the 2005 election protest leaders systematically insisted upon the culpability of racially structured exploitation and discrimination but even more of international capital, structural adjustment policies, and privatization, the NEP package, and neoliberalism (Kruyt, 2006). And, although fragmented, protest was not random. Reviewing motives, themes, and occasions, it becomes clear that protest has concretized the anger and anxiety triggered by the consequences of restructuring and adjustment policies in a setting of institutional ineptitude and political squabbling. Only because of these converging processes was Evo Morales able to win in 2005.

But this is no indication yet of societal opposition’s having come of age politically. United in support for Morales, the protest movement’s supporters are still looking for a new way to relate to the polity—even if this polity is now radically different. The still moot point of creating new mores of dialogue between societal sectors and the polity is surely heavily influenced by the past. Because of the government policies of recent years, for instance, the once undisputed position of the Central Obrera Boliviana (Bolivian Worker’s Central—COB) as the defender of the Bolivian workers, miners, and the poor has deteriorated dramatically; currently it is unable to formulate demands of the government that majorities consider realistic and “reasonable.” Today even the poor in Bolivia are convinced that, in the short run, many justified demands from a whole range of groups and movements simply cannot be met. But this, too, remains an unarticulated voice. Many realize that, although Bolivia’s “social debt” is huge, the means to remedy poverty, deficient health care, unemployment, infrastructure problems, education problems, and such are extremely limited. On the whole, beneath the support for Morales, there is still an enormous difficulty in recognizing and articulating shared interests. This difficulty is, to a great extent, a result of the historic incapacity of the polity to articulate views and differences that would express intelligible alternatives with regard to forthcoming politico-economic decisions. Such “intelligible alternatives” do not necessarily mean that intellectual language is called for: research on the popular classes’ views on politics and ideology has revealed 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 the most minimal reference to views about politics and to the consequences of particular measures for the various sectors of the population. This lack of any hint at a representation effort has resulted in the unrecognizability and the interchangeability of the parties. Morales’s challenge is not only to implement new policies but also to become an intelligible and trustworthy interlocutor of society. Only then can democracy in Bolivia regain prestige.

## CONCLUSION

Mesa was unable to reverse Bolivian’s inherited distrust of politics. Morales faces the challenge to do better in this regard; his landslide victory alone will not do. If we look back at Mesa’s record, we see that, at the outset, the lack of



confidence in a "fair democracy" was mitigated by confidence in his integrity and honesty, but it began to crumble during the "gas referendum." In July 2004 Mesa delivered on his promise to have the question of the exploitation and commercialization of the natural gas reserves put to a vote of the people. In the debate on the matter in the months preceding the election, many argued that the questions of the referendum were unnecessary complicated, that Mesa had refused to put the possibility of renationalization to the test because he feared claims by the companies that had signed treaties with former administrations, and that the whole event was too well orchestrated to be representative. On the whole, the orchestration of the referendum was seen by many as a confirmation of "democracy's vile tricks." Many protested against the referendum itself because they refused to trust *any* government initiative on the matter (even Mesa's) and preferred to rally. Journalists and international observers often coincided in criticizing these protests for being "for the sake of protest" and for mobilizing people who could not say what was at stake in the referendum. What they missed hearing in the people's angry outbursts were expressions of *systematic* distrust of all governmental propositions with regard to something that had become the poor Bolivians' hope for a better future, namely, the enormous reserves of natural gas. Their fear of being deceived outweighed their awareness that they could not "sophisticatedly" answer the question about what alternatives would be possible. It was *this* that many Bolivians had learned in their dealings with their fatherland's politics. According to a poll carried out by Ruizmier Consulting & Research in La Paz, El Alto, Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, and Tarija in March (the month of the first referendum proposals), the government obtained only 4.32 out of 10 points on the confidence-in-government scale. In a month it had fallen 0.93 points (17.8 percent), the largest such decline of the Mesa administration (*La Patria* [Oruro], April 13, 2004), and this was the beginning of the end.

In March 2005, President Carlos Mesa, having incessantly negotiated with, by his own count, many of the 820 protests he had been confronted with since he assumed office, no longer saw a way out. He offered his resignation to Congress (*La Prensa*, March 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11, 2005). Congress initially rejected it, but in June his presidency nevertheless came to an end.

Recalling the argument about the interdependence of a polity's attitudes and actions, on the one hand, and societal trust and confidence in the capacity "to make a difference" in politics, on the other, Bolivia is an example of a worst-case scenario: the persistent deafness, exclusiveness, and impenetrability of the party system and governmental institutions, combined with their incapacity to voice the worries, perceptions, and intuitions about alternatives from below and with a representational deficit that becomes manifest in a void with regard to the polity's capability to acknowledge and respond to societal interests, all contributed to the loss of trust in democracy. The potential for a process of democratic consolidation was inverted: the country experienced a democratic deconsolidation. This deconsolidation even affected the president, who had the moral stature to overturn the process but not the political solutions or convictions to satisfy the majority of protesters and even less the capacity to become a convincing a trustworthy interlocutor for them.

Bolivia has *had* democracy but has been unable to *do* democracy. There has been no framework in which conflicts and collisions of interests could confront

democratic mores. Therefore, Morales has to do more than to nationalize gas and implement new policies. He also has to strengthen the people's trust in the utility of the democratic way. Only then can the country's democratic deconsolidation be reversed.

## NOTES

1. On February 9, 2005, Varnoux Garay commented in the Bolivian newspaper *Los Tiempos*, "If anything at all can be salvaged from the chaotic situation into which civilians, coca farmers, neighborhood councils, etc., have guided us, it is the observation that in broad sectors of Bolivian society an inflexible democratic vocation prevails—that people have priorities other than those pointed to by the intolerable leaders from everywhere who are attempting to divide the country."

2. See, e.g., the comments made by the former Bolivian senator Bachinelo on May 21, 2004, at [http://www.noticiasbolivianas.com/montre\\_col.php](http://www.noticiasbolivianas.com/montre_col.php). Mesa himself referred to an April 2004 poll that showed 75 percent of the population in favor of peace and social tranquility (see <http://www.cajpe.org.pe/cronolog/abril08.htm>). In press comments, many Bolivians expressed wariness of the social movement leaders' call for more pressure on the president.

3. This, of course, needs qualification. Not all Bolivians protest. For instance, some recent street rallies have met with the disagreement of many bystanders, and in a November 2003 survey by *Apoyo, Opinión, and Mercado Bolivia*, Mesa obtained an 82 percent vote. At the same time, overwhelming majorities suspect the "democracy" that is advocated by official voices (see Gamboa, 2001: 101). Also worth mentioning is that contempt for political parties in Bolivia increased between 1996 and 2002, parties scoring only 10 out of 40 possible points. (*Economist*, August 17, 2002). From 1996 to 2004, the affirmation of the phrase "Democracy is preferable to any other governing system" decreased from 64 to 45 percent in Bolivia (Latinobarómetro, 2004). Bolivia was also among the countries with the lowest trust in compliance with the law (44 percent), and 49 percent of Bolivians agreed with the assertion that a authoritarian government would be all right if it could solve economic problems (Latinobarómetro, 2004). In comparison with other countries in the region, however, Bolivia's inclination toward authoritarian rule was relatively feeble.

4. Between 1996 and 2004, the continent "has not managed to consolidate its democracy" (Latinobarómetro, 2004: 59).

5. From an outsider's point of view, the MNR and the ADN were unlikely coalition parties. The MNR was the party responsible for the 1952 revolution, which formally ended aristocratic and ethnically biased rule in the country. In those days, it was inspired by socialism and an egalitarian strategy, downplaying ethnicity, for transforming the country, but later it became more conservative. Also, it never managed to put an end to the exclusion of the indigenous population from positions of power or influence. Still, it had suffered from authoritarian repression in the 1970s, and Banzer's ADN was therefore an implausible alliance partner. However, in practice the differences between the ADN's conservatism and elitism and the MNR's conservatism and elitism had faded by the mid-1980s.

6. In 1952 a revolution in Bolivia had brought the MNR and Víctor Paz Estenssoro to power, ended oligarchical rule, and launched "nationalist developmentalism." According to Gamboa (2001: 96), in the 1985–1989 period Paz Estenssoro undid almost everything he had helped to build in the years after the 1952 revolution.

7. Some initiatives were taken to alleviate the "social costs" of the harsh stabilization package. The Fondo de Inversión Social was established in 1991. Its impact, however, remained diminutive. Gross national product per capita increased only slightly between 1990 and 2000 (UNDP, 2002).

8. According to the 2004 Latinobarómetro results (summarized by *The Economist* at <http://www.economist.co.uk/world/la> [accessed October 29, 2004]), "71% of respondents think that their country 'is governed for the benefit of a few powerful interests rather than the good of everyone.'" In Bolivia, similar results were obtained in the 1990s; according to Latinobarómetro (2004) "satisfaction with democracy" in 1996–1997 was hardly above 30 percent. In the 20-some random street interviews I conducted in La Paz in 1997–2000, it was one of the most frequent responses to the question about the characteristics of politicians.

9. In the 1960s and 1970s, this Katarista movement had made a strong case for a reawakened indigenous self-consciousness. In that sense, it went against the policy of denial of ethnic difference with which the MNR had been trying to emancipate the indigenous population since the 1952 revolution. The movement's radical stand had frightened the *blanco-mestizo* population of the country. By the early 1990s, however, the Katarista movement had dispersed and partly moderated, and the MNR had become influenced by the discourse on the multicultural make-up of the nation. For an overview of indigenous peoples' movements in Bolivia, see Assies, van der Haar and Hoekema (2000) and Van Cott (2000).

10. Its commitment to multiculturalism, however, may not have been that profound. In part it was electoral marketing, an attempt to attract voters who were inclined to vote for the *Movimiento de la Izquierda Revolucionaria* or *Conciencia del Pueblo*. The designation of Cárdenas was in good part the outcome of a political marketing study. The dedication of neoliberals to multiculturalism is embedded in their views on decentralization and a particular brand of participation, views that often are at odds with the aspirations of indigenous peoples' movements.

11. Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga, his vice president, finished Banzer's mandate when he resigned because of ill health and subsequently died in 2001.

12. The Bolivian variant of privatization was "capitalization policy," whereby public enterprises were turned into mixed enterprises and 50 percent of their assets were sold on the stock market. The revenues were to make up a fund for a pension system. The first nationwide payment ever of a pension took place shortly before the 1997 elections. Banzer suspended the payments soon after taking office. The new government argued that the scheme was unsustainable and, with the introduction of a popular credit and property law in June 1998, created the "Bolivida" to be paid from 2000 on. Since then, the pension has been reduced and payments have been irregular.

13. Evo Morales, the leader of the coca farmers of the Chapare region in central Bolivia, had become the main symbol and spokesperson of Bolivia's opposition and a key figure among the "anti-systemic parties" (Assies and Salman, 2003a). His constituency was largely indigenous and to the surprise of many his party (*Movimiento al Socialismo—MAS*) came in second in the 2002 elections with over 20 percent of the vote. His fellow "anti-systemic" (but hardly a "friend") Felipe Quispe obtained a surprising 6 percent. Quispe, also known by his Andean honorific title *El Mallku*, is an Aymara peasant leader with his base in particular regions of the mainly rural and highland department of La Paz. He often plays the "ethnic-identity card" in his assaults on the government and is a mobilizer of the highland peasants the government fears. His party is the *Movimiento Indígena Pachakuti* (*Pachakuti Indigenous Movement—MIP*). The success of both was seen by many as a final warning for the traditional parties, but the parties ignored it.

14. An overview of the protests of January 2003 shows that other, more "orderly" democratic channels had become irrelevant. <http://www.noticiasbolivianas.com/dossier/febrero/d2.php>.

15. Lewis (2003) claims that "the consortium [with which the contract has been signed], Pacific LNG, is made up of British, Spanish and Argentine corporations. The PNG contract legalizes the foreign pillage of Bolivia's most important natural resource. Under its provisions, Bolivia would keep only 18 per cent of the USD 1.5 billion in annual income expected to be generated by gas exports to the US—nowhere near the standard 50 per cent, say Bolivian economists. The gas sold to PNG, moreover, was fixed at a price well below current market value. The difference means a loss of additional billions of US dollars to Bolivia over the life of the contract."

16. According to *The Economist* (August 17, 2002), support for the way democracy worked in most individual countries in the region increased between 1996 and 2002 but in Bolivia did so only slightly. More than 70 percent of the respondents expressed partial or total dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, support for democracy as the preferable political system increased, leading *The Economist* to talk about "a ray of faint hope for democrats" (2002: 41). Worth mentioning, furthermore, is that contempt for political parties in Bolivia increased (parties scoring only 10 out of 40 possible points), as did the conviction that privatizations did not benefit the country. Regarding public hostility toward privatization, Bolivia is now beaten only by Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

17. According to *Latinobarómetro* (2004: 39) only 48 percent of Bolivians agreed with the statement "Private enterprise is indispensable for development." This was the lowest score on the continent and expresses categorical distrust of "cheating elites" much more than a real socialist inclination. Many Bolivians in fact have their own informal enterprises, but they despise the "sneaky stealing" they suspect to be endemic in government/economic elite negotiations.

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