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The Bolivian Revolution of 1952

On April 9, 1952 the forces of the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR) which was primarily composed of the lower classes rose up in revolt in Bolivia against the oligarchic state and the national military that traditionally supported it. After just three days of intense fighting they had captured most of the urban centers of power, but the revolution was far from over. Over the course of the next twelve years until the government was once again overthrown in a military coup, the MNR implemented a striking series of social and economic reforms, the most important of which were land reform, the enfranchisement of all women and the urban and rural lower classes (including Indian peasants), and the nationalization of the tin mines. In many ways Bolivia proved itself to more progressive than many of its South American neighbors, but it also showed a profound sense of pragmatism in balancing domestic demands with the international realities of the post-war environment—all of this was done despite the lack of unified leadership or a consistent political agenda in the MNR. This paper will examine the factors that contributed to the formation of such an ideologically vague (but vastly popular) revolutionary movement and argue that the failure of the MNR to articulate a clear political program led both to the flexibility of the movement in the years immediately following the revolution and to its ultimate demise. This investigation will be a synthesis of secondary sources that focus on specific aspects of the Bolivian revolution, namely the social and economic effects of the event.

Historically the Indian peasants of Bolivia have been the subjects of a one empire after another beginning with the Tiwanaku, then the Inca, and finally the Spanish. Freedom from the Spanish did not, however, improve their condition. As a matter of fact the result was quite the opposite. According to James Kohl, when viewed together the periods of Spanish and Republican history represent “a process of increasing subordination.”¹ In addition to the process of subordination Fernando García Argañarás argues that “the coexistence of small subsistence plots with the *hacienda* (or large landed estate), in the context of high demographic density and limited supply of land, made for increasing conflict between *colonos* (or share croppers) and landowners.”² This conflict or “vertical cleavage” of Bolivian society represented only one of the problems that prevented the development of the Indians as a society. Another important division was the “horizontal cleavage” that divided Indians along linguistic and regional lines.³

As Argañarás indicates, “the Bolivian social formation was dominated by tin-mining interests and a landed oligarchy with roots in the colonial past.”⁴ He further states that “in the prevailing international division of labor preceding World War II, Bolivia had become a mineral-exporting country which, in turn, was the recipient of foodstuffs, manufactures, and technology from dominant countries.”⁵ The “Tin Barons” that controlled Bolivia’s mining interests formed a *superestado* that was not just above the authority of the state, but actually possessed the majority of the political and economic power. Thus, even though Bolivia was nominally a republic, the real power was

¹ James V. Kohl, “The Cliza and Urcurena War: Syndical Violence and National Revolution in Bolivia,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 62, no. 4 (1982): 609.

² Fernando García Argañarás, “Bolivia’s Transoformist Revolution,” *Latin American Perspectives* 19, no. 2 (1992): 46.

³ Fred C. Bergsten, “Social Mobility and Economic Development: The Vital Parameters of the Bolivian Revolution,” *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 6, no. 3 (1964): 367.

⁴ Argañarás, “Bolivia’s Transoformist Revolution,” 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

controlled by a small number of unelected individuals by virtue of their economic influence in a state completely dependant upon its mineral exports. Before the revolution, social mobility was severely limited. Opportunities for upward mobility were limited to the military, the acquisition of wealth, a formal education or perhaps politics.⁶

The Chaco War is widely considered by scholars to be the primary event that aroused the political consciousness on Bolivian peasants. Some 100,000 Indian peasants left their traditional villages in order to participate directly in the War. This experience, as Bergsten indicates, led the Bolivian peasant to “view more liberally his prospective role in the national society.”⁷ Kohl, however, believes that the 1945 Indian Congress was “perhaps of equal consequence.”⁸ This event marked the height of Indian efforts to pursue peaceful reform within the confines of the pre-revolutionary republic. Such peasant leaders as Francisco Chipana Ramos, Luis Ramos Quevado, Santos Marca Tola, Dionisio Miranda and Antonio Mamani Alvarez participated in this historical event. Kohl argues that to neglect the recognition of this event is to fail to appreciate the role of the peasantry as a revolutionary force.⁹

In addition to politicizing the peasant masses, the Chaco War is also responsible for discrediting the traditional leadership. As Argañarás states, “the defeat by Paraguay showed at once the profound incapacity of the oligarchic state to protect the integrity of national territory, giving rise to a nationalist movement that spilled over ethnicocultural, regional, and—to some degree—class boundaries.”¹⁰ The power of the elites had always

⁶ Fred Bergsten, “Social Mobility and Economic Development,” 368.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 368.

⁸ James V. Kohl, “Peasant and Revolution in Bolivia, April 9, 1952-August 2, 1953,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 58, no. 2 (1978): 240.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Argañarás, “Bolivia’s Transformist Revolution,” 46.

been tied to their control over the military. The loss of Bolivia to Paraguay, which had been considered to be militarily inferior, severely eroded the legitimacy on the government.

The revolution of 1952 was not the first attempt to seize power from the oligarchic government. In 1949, an insurgency attempted to capture the provincial capitols. This event, known as the Bolivian Civil War, served as a valuable instructive tool for the organizers of the 1952 rebellion. Kohl points out that the insurrection in 1949 failed to seek out the support of the peasant masses and the enlisted personnel of the armed forces. These faults were remedied in 1952, and largely accounted for the success of the initial phases of the revolution.¹¹ During this revolution the MNR became a banner under which the diverse opposition groups to the Bolivian state organized, but as Argañarás argues, this does not necessarily indicate that it possessed a clear agenda or that it was the expression of a “single state will.”¹² Regardless of its political ambiguities, the MNR was quite popular at the polls even considering the limited suffrage that existed in Bolivia prior to 1952. The MNR participated in the supposedly free elections of 1951, but despite winning a plurality it was denied the presidency.

Kohl points out that Richard Patch, who he calls “the most influential student of Bolivian rural politics during the national revolution,” argues that the revolution originated from the peasant *sindicatos* of the Cochabama Valley under the leadership of José Rojas.¹³ Whether or not this is where the revolution began or not, it is clear that the *campesinos* were acting on their own wills and not directly under the control of the

¹¹ Kohl, “Peasant and Revolution,” 242.

¹² Argañarás, “Bolivia’s Transformist Revolution,” 47.

¹³ Richard Patch, “Bolivia: U.S. Assistance in a Revolutionary Setting,” in Richard Adams, et al., *Social Change in Latin America Today* (New York, 1961) in Kohl, “Peasant and Revolution,” 242.

revolutionary government. They seized the large estates of their landlords completely of their own accord, and this largely accounts for the rationale behind the Declaration of Land Reform that followed. The MNR was not so much making a policy as recognizing the current state of affairs in rural Bolivia. Yet despite their sizable contributions to the revolution, namely the popular legitimacy that they gave to the program of the petty bourgeoisie and the urban proletariat, it must be acknowledged that the peasants were not capable of carrying out the revolution on their own because of their inability to state will of their own. Only in conjunction with the urban lower classes was this possible.¹⁴

The insurgency that actually overthrew the Bolivian oligarchy began on April 9, 1952. After three days of intense fighting it was clear that the revolutionaries had succeeded. "The postwar split between the defenders of the status quo and advocates of a new order was reproduced within the armed forces."¹⁵ Military was purged of the supporters of the traditional elite. In the process of the revolution it was dishonored, proving itself unable even to win a war against its own citizens. For a brief time the national army was even disbanded and the arms seized from it were distributed to the peasant militias.¹⁶ Peasants did not directly participate in the initial insurgency to overthrow the elites and their military backers, but the leaders of the insurgency were prepared to mobilize the peasant masses if the revolution did not proceed smoothly. In general, peasant mobilization came in the months and years following the revolution. "It is noteworthy that both landlord and peasant resorted to the utilization of pressure groups—landlord federations and peasant syndicates—to further their respective class

¹⁴ Argañarás, "Bolivia's Transoformist Revolution," 48.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁶ Kohl, "The Cliza and Urcurena War," 608.

interests.”¹⁷ Nevertheless the peasants ultimately achieved dominion over the countryside, all but destroying the landlord class in the process. The hesitancy of the leaders of the revolution to mobilize the peasant masses gives further evidence that, although the Bolivian Revolution is hailed as a classless revolution, the white minority that controlled the revolution (or at least the revolutionary government) was still concerned about the usurpation of their power by the peasants.¹⁸ This fits with Argañarás concept that this type of revolution, “one occurring in the context of peripheral societies, is mainly carried out by petty-bourgeois and proletarian forces because of their common antagonism toward the old semifeudal order.”¹⁹

Soon after the MNR had taken control of the government, all women, Indians, and illiterates were extended suffrage. Previously only some 200,000 propertied males had the vote.²⁰ The evolution of a rural government structure based on the peasant *sindicatos* also had a significant effect on Indians. In their traditional way of life leadership was granted in accordance to what is sometimes known as the cargo system—a system of “formal and informal positions ranked according to age, service, and prestige.”²¹ Following the revolution however, positions of leadership in the *sindicatos* were assigned according to political competence (or at least ambition). For this reason a more youthful generation came to hold such leadership positions within their communities as the *dirigente*, the leader of the local *sindicato*. As a result the MNR continued to enjoy widespread support from the rural masses both because of the creation of universal

¹⁷ Kohl, “Peasant and Revolution,” 259.

¹⁸ Kohl, “The Cliza and Urcurena War,” 608.

¹⁹ Argañarás, “Bolivia’s Transofrmist Revolution,” 44.

²⁰ Kohl, “Peasant and Revolution,” 239.

²¹ Kohl, “The Cliza and Urcurena War,” 609.

suffrage and because of the creation of a “rural bureaucracy of *dirigentes* loyal to the MNR leadership.”²²

The revolution suffered from its political ambiguities, or as Argañarás puts it, “the new order teetered between two opposing visions of the future (one bourgeois, the other proletarian), neither of which was compelling enough to achieve a lasting fusion between their respective underlying social forces.”²³ One of the reasons that accounts for this stalemate is that the Bolivian revolution did not have an influential writer like Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre to inspire a coherent revolutionary spirit. As Charles Arnade points out, “Bolivia’s revolution was more practical and realistic.”²⁴ The necessity of social and economic change was sufficiently self-evident that convincing political arguments were not necessary.

Bergsten presents the logical argument that “the progress made in political socialization by the development of open social mobility [was] retarded, to a large degree, by the failures...in the economic field of economic development.”²⁵ The decreasing productivity in the agricultural sector as well as a similar trend in the mining sector led the already under-developed Bolivia to have probably the worst performing economy in Latin America in the 1950s.²⁶ This decrease in agricultural production as a result of the revolution was a cause of much concern for the MNR government. Increasing rural stability is probably one of the primary reasons for the formalization of

²² Ibid.

²³ Argañarás, “Bolivia’s Transoformist Revolution,” 48.

²⁴ Charles Arnade, “Bolivia’s Social Revolution, 1952-1959: A discussion of Sources,” *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 1, no 3 (1959): 342.

²⁵ Fred Bergsten, “Social Mobility and Economic Development,” 371.

²⁶ Ibid.

land reform. With this in mind the Agrarian Reform Degree of August 2, 1953 should be seen as an attempt to “legislate order into the expropriative process.”²⁷

Kohl indicates that additional economic concerns included “studying the needs of agricultural workers, improving rural health and hygiene, promoting colonization, and developing credit in agricultural cooperatives.” These tasks were to be overseen and accomplished by the Ministry of Indian and Peasant Affairs, which actually predated the revolution (and contributed to peasant mobilization during the same). Overall the position of the MNR “reflected the national leadership’s position middle-class attitudes and values—fear of violence, emphasis on stability and moderation, respect for private property (except of course large estates).”²⁸ The matter of agrarian reform had long been a point of contention in Bolivia—as it was in most Latin American societies—and accordingly it was one of paramount importance to the revolutionary government. Popular pressures for agrarian reform surfaced as soon as April 16, 1952—just a week after the beginning of the revolution. Unfortunately, however, as Kohl points out, the “new government was sadly lacking in trained personnel to administer the reform.”²⁹

Argañarás states that the “three largest Bolivian mining companies...were direct trusts of U.S., British, and Swiss capital which controlled the production, elaboration, and distribution of tin and other minerals.”³⁰ Ultimately, the “Tin Barons” were unseated and the tin mines were nationalized. This undermined the traditional socioeconomic foundations of Bolivian society. Scholars such as Arnade argue that the U.S. approved or was at least indifferent to the nationalization of the mines because “the interests that

²⁷ Kohl, “Peasant and Revolution,” 259.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 248.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 245.

³⁰ Argañarás, “Bolivia’s Transoformist Revolution,” 45.

suffered from the effects of the Bolivian revolution were practically all non-American.³¹ Yet, in a specialized study of American economic policy towards the MNR government Stephen Zunes finds that, in fact, the United States had significant economic interest in the manner in the nationalization of the mines.³² This concern is reflected in a quote from a letter from the U.S. counselor Edward Rowell to the U.S. state department declaring of the situation in Bolivia that “such a revolution cannot be accomplished without injuring, perhaps fatally, those economic and political sectors which previously controlled the destinies of the country.”³³ This communication contains an underlying concern regarding radical changes in a government in the western hemisphere, especially when that transition resembles the first steps toward communism. The U.S. observed, however, that direct intervention was not necessary to prevent the direct expropriation of the mines. Economic pressures proved to be more effective tools. Immediately following the revolution the U.S. provided humanitarian aid to Bolivia to offset the rampant food shortages as well as economic assistance to help curb inflation. Bolivia at this point was desperate to secure long-term contracts for the sale of its tin, but the U.S. refused to commit so long as the fate of the mines was in question. The implied threat, of course, was that if the MNR did not adopt a solution favorable to the interests of the United States that the essential aid would be withdrawn. This process described by Zunes in his article, “The United States and Bolivia: The Taming of a Revolution, 1952-1957” explains why the MNR ultimately chose to all but exhaust Bolivia’s capital assets

³¹ Arnade, “Bolivia’s Social Revolution,” 342.

³² Stephen Zunes, “The United States and Bolivia: The Taming of a Revolution, 1952-1957,” *Latin American Perspectives* 28, no. 5 (2001): 33.

³³ U.S. National Archives; General Records of the Department of State, Central Decimal File 724.00/1-1354 quoted in Zunes, “The United States and Bolivia,” 33.

compensating foreign investors for the expropriation of the mines instead of facing potential economic sanctions at the hands of their international trading partners.³⁴

In conclusion, it is clear that Bolivian peasants wielded substantial political power as a result of their large numbers under a policy of universal suffrage. The MNR legitimated itself through the pursuit of policies, especially policies such as land reform that appealed to this sizable component of the population. Immediately preceding the revolution Bolivia had entered into a period of unprecedented political instability. In the years between 1925 and 1952 no Bolivian president completed a term in office.³⁵ In this sense the revolution was a success since Dr. Victor Paz Estenssoro, elected but denied the presidency in 1951, served out his term as president and was peacefully replaced in 1956 through a legitimate electoral process. In other words, the Bolivian Revolution of 1952 managed to set two very important precedents for the country: the granting of full political rights to the entire society and the peaceful function of the democratic process. Bergsten, writing in 1964, noted that “in the twelve years which have followed [the Bolivian revolution], the Andean republic has made remarkable progress in breaking down centuries-old societal gaps and forging an integrated nation.”³⁶ Bolivia was also the first South American country to begin a gradual process of mutual acculturation with its Indian population—that is, not merely converting Indians to European traditions and lifestyles, but a genuine blending of Spanish and Indian traits.³⁷ Argañarás, considers the Bolivian Revolution of 1952 to be significant not because of any of its immediate effects, but because it represents “the first moment of a bourgeois civil society in the

³⁴ See: Zunes, “The United States and Bolivia.”

³⁵ Arnade, “Bolivia’s Social Revolution,” 341.

³⁶ Bergsten, “Social Mobility and Economic Development,” 367.

³⁷ Bergsten, “Social Mobility and Economic Development,” 370.

making.”³⁸ On the other hand, however, the Bolivian revolution created a multitude of problems such as run-away rates of inflation, food shortages, relative poverty for fixed income groups and the remnants of the old aristocracy, as well as the collapse of the profitable mining industry.³⁹ To these problems must also be added the wholesale destruction of the Bolivian upper class and a massive reduction of accumulated wealth (both private and state wealth).⁴⁰ Even so, Bolivia is not unique among South American nations to experience chronic economic hardships. With this in mind, it is the contention of this author that the Bolivian Revolution of 1952 represented a substantial step forward for Bolivians because it represents the beginning of the integration of indigenous and colonial cultures as well as the birth of civil society in Bolivia.

³⁸ Argañarás, “Bolivia’s Transoformist Revolution,” 67.

³⁹ Arnade, “Bolivia’s Social Revolution,” 342.

⁴⁰ Fred Bergsten, “Social Mobility and Economic Development,” 369.

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