

The Role of Civil Resistance in Bolivia's 1977-1982 Pro-Democracy Struggle

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Despite being the poorest and least developed country in South America, Bolivia was the first to emerge from the period of military dictatorships that dominated the continent from the mid-1960s into the 1980s. This article examines the role of civil resistance in that country's seemingly improbable early end to military rule, noting how a broad coalition of unions, intellectuals, the Catholic Church, and opposition parties succeeded in bringing down a series of military leaders, eventually ushering in elected civilian governance. Despite the pro-democracy movement's successful defeat of the dictatorship of Hugo Banzer in 1978, it took more than four years, three general elections, five presidents and several coups d'état before full electoral democracy was restored. This article responds to questions of how the movement was able to persist, grow, and maintain largely nonviolent discipline in the face of severe repression, shifting alliances, and internal divisions, and how the movement helped lay the groundwork for more recent radical changes in Bolivian politics. The article illustrates other critical factors in the movement's success: the willingness to avoid armed struggle, the country's rich tradition of mass-based civil resistance and defiance of central authority, and grassroots democratic relations.

Keywords: Bolivia; nonviolent action; civil resistance; democratization; authoritarianism; social movements

Introduction

With South America's lowest levels of economic development and literacy, along with relatively strong indicators of inequality and pronounced divisions among social groups, Bolivia lacks many of the structural characteristics that are designated by Robert A. Dahl (1971) and other theorists as prerequisites for democracy. Moreover, Bolivia has experienced relatively frequent campaigns of nonroutine contention that create political instability and challenge democratic consolidation. In view of the repressive military rule, censorship of the media, and suppression of dissident organizing, few observers in the mid-1970s expected that the dictatorships that had ruled the country for most of its history would be replaced in the near future. The anticipated revolutionary upheaval to overthrow the right-wing junta was likely to result from armed struggle or perhaps a coup by reform-minded military

officers. However, building upon Bolivia's rich tradition of mass-based civil resistance¹ and grassroots democratic relations, popular forces were indeed able to end the series of military regimes and establish civilian governance.

This article provides an account of the 1977-1982 period of democratic transition, with emphasis on the role of unarmed civil resistance, followed by analysis of the factors that enabled Bolivians to succeed by largely nonviolent means against their heavily militarized State. The central thesis is that, thanks in part to the country's history of civil resistance and democratic relations, Bolivians were able to force the junta to relinquish power through their willingness to avoid armed struggle and mobilize a broad cross-section of the population to make the country effectively ungovernable by military leaders.

Most military regimes in Latin America gave way to civilian rule between the late 1970s and 1980s. The first of these democratic transitions occurred in Bolivia, though it was not easy or even. Civil resistance in the late 1970s forced dictator Hugo Banzer to restore democratic institutions and step down in 1978. However, elections in 1978, 1979, and 1980 were inconclusive and plagued by fraud on the part of the military, which generated a number of coups, countercoups, and military caretaker governments. In 1980, General Luis García Meza assumed power through a coup and oversaw a period of widespread arbitrary arrests, torture, and disappearances. In 1981, as corruption and international isolation intensified, the military pressured García Meza to resign. Over the next fourteen months, three separate military governments attempted to deal with Bolivia's increasing economic problems and public discontent. In September 1982, a general strike and other protests finally forced the military out. The Congress assumed power and selected as president Hernán Siles Zuazo, who had previously served from 1956 to 1960. Although riddled by poverty, economic inequality, political violence, and sharp divisions over economic policy, Bolivia has remained relatively democratic since 1982, eventually electing the popular union leader Evo Morales in 2006, the first president from that country's indigenous majority, and ushering in a period of dramatic social and economic reform.

The Uprising Against Banzer

A public action led by four women beginning at very end of 1977 launched Bolivia's rocky four-and-a-half-year transition to democracy. Since 1971, Bolivia had been under the grip of a right-wing authoritarian regime led by Hugo Banzer, originally installed in a U.S.-backed coup. His dictatorship survived as long as it did because of relatively good economic times made possible by high prices for tin and products of other nationalized industries and by generous loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Most of the economic benefits, however, went to Banzer's home

¹ Bolivia has a long history of civil resistance going back as far as 1725, when Túpac Katari led thousands of Indians in a blockade of La Paz

region of Santa Cruz, where he gave away vast expanses of government land to political allies allegedly for “development” (Crabtree and Chaplin 2013, 95–96).²

In response to growing protests in 1974, Banzer suspended political parties and unions and imposed a compulsory civil service law that allowed assignment of any Bolivian to any job (Conaghan and Malloy 1994, 66). Miners went on strike in 1976 demanding the restoration of their union rights and were met by severe repression, with most of their leaders exiled or imprisoned. This increased repression sparked a wave of resistance across the country that included the formation of a popular Human Rights Assembly. A genuine movement that would serve as a laboratory for cultural change had begun to form by 1977. For the first time in years, mass demonstrations took place, particularly in the Altiplano region of western Bolivia. In response, Banzer proposed national elections in which the junta would restrict the political debate primarily to mainstream conservative elements, a plan that even some center-left parties—which had been completely frozen out of political participation—were apparently willing to accept despite strict limits to their actual power. Bolivia’s workers and miners did not accept such conditions, however, with the miners particularly vehement in their agitation. In response, hundreds of miners were fired from their jobs, and many others were arrested (Dunkerley 1984, 236-238).

The original four women hunger strikers began their protest in December 1977 outside the archbishop’s residence in La Paz to bring attention to their husbands’ dismissals and imprisonment. Their demands were for the release of political prisoners, complete amnesty for political exiles, reinstatement of workers fired for union or political activities, restoration of independent unions with democratically-elected leaders, and removal of the armed forces from the mines. They were initially joined by fourteen of their children, but within two days, a small group of Jesuits volunteered to replace the children and a pregnant woman. Early reaction to the protest from the Human Rights Assembly and some other pro-democracy activists was negative, concerned about the timing of the action in the midst of the Christmas holidays and the misdirecting of demands to incorrect government ministries. Popular reaction in support of the women, however, soon led key members of the Human Rights Assembly and others to join. Within a week, the number of hunger strikers had grown to nearly 1,400 and included a former president and other prominent figures (Boots 1991, 51–55).

By the second week of January 1978, threats of violent government action against the hunger strikers—who had found sanctuary in churches and university buildings—was growing. Appeals went out to Christian groups in North America and Europe to rush official representatives to Bolivia as observers in order to publicize the situation internationally and possibly to facilitate negotiations with

² The political repercussions from this period continue to this day. The rightist landowners who benefited from the land giveaway now form the backbone of the separatist movement challenging the democratic socialist government of Evo Morales. Meanwhile, the land grabs by Banzer allies forced many thousands of indigenous peoples to choose between working essentially as serfs on these new haciendas or fleeing to the Chapare region where they took to growing coca as the only economically-viable option left, leading that region to become a center of the cocaine trade. For others among these once apolitical Indians, this became the spark that led to the formation of a unified indigenous movement with Indians of the highlands that eventually resulted in—for the first time since the Spanish conquest—the election of an indigenous president and a new constitution granting Indians an unprecedented degrees of autonomy.

the regime. Government security forces raided the strikers' sanctuaries and began mass arrests, but human rights groups and the newly-arrived international observers contacted foreign governments, church leaders, and human rights organizations that began filing formal protests to the regime. In Bolivia, Catholic Archbishop Jorge Manrique put forceful pressure on the government by issuing an ultimatum that either the strike be settled within twenty-four hours or the archdiocese would be placed under one of the most comprehensive interdicts the world had seen since the Middle Ages, whereby no religious services outside of those involving the gravely ill or dying would take place for a three-day period. Furthermore, the archbishop threatened to excommunicate anyone raiding church sanctuaries to arrest hunger strikers. The following day, January 18, Banzer declared a general amnesty for all political prisoners and exiles, which totaled some 19,000 people after his nearly seven years in power. He also agreed to reinstate miners who had been fired from their jobs for union or political activities, with full seniority (Boots 1991, 59–60).

Within weeks, democratically-elected officials assumed the leadership of unions, exiles started returning, progressive sectors of the Catholic Church began more boldly speaking out, and political parties reorganized. With the resulting strengthening of the right to organize politically, the Bolivian Workers Confederation (COB)—the federation of Bolivian trade unions—escalated its campaign in support of peasants challenging the military-*campesino* pact that the Banzer regime had put together earlier, in which the junta could effectively control leadership of the peasant union. A new union—the Unified Syndical Confederation of Rural Workers of Bolivia (CSUTCB)—formed as an alternative union from which new leaders emerged, along with a political movement known as *katarismo*. In a manner similar to the growing Black Consciousness movement in South Africa, it recognized that effective political mobilization would be difficult until the Indian majority was freed from internalized colonialism.³ During this period, nearly two-thirds of Bolivia's population was still rural, so the mobilization of the indigenous *campesinos*—particularly manifested in mass demonstrations in the Altiplano—was of even greater significance in many respects than demonstrations by miners, workers, and students.

A longstanding tradition of popular mobilization by the mostly-indigenous *campesinos* dated from colonial times. Civil resistance played an important role in resisting efforts by Liberal governments to allow the takeover of communal lands in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and in challenging the contradictions within Bolivian liberalism that expanded legal rights for mestizos while at the same time limiting those of indigenous peoples. Peasants had also played an important role in laying the groundwork for and consolidating the gains of the 1952 revolution (Gotkowitz 2008). A combination of cooptation and repression had limited such popular mobilization in subsequent years, however, until the newly-reestablished individual liberties and political space to organize made possible by the hunger strike prepared the conditions for massive civil insurrection, forcing Banzer to announce that he would step down following elections that July.

³ Some more radical tendencies such as MITKA advocated an Indian separatism and were not willing to integrate into the system. By contrast, the MRTK was more moderate, more democratic, and ended up being far more influential as it successfully allied peasants with unions.

The 1978 elections were apparently won by the left, but widespread fraud resulted in the official provisional vote tally giving a slight edge to the armed forces' preferred candidate, Colonel Juan Pereda. Before the extent of the fraud could be verified, however, armed forces loyal to Pereda forcibly seized government offices in La Paz, where he was declared president. Popular nonviolent resistance to the election rigging and Pereda's usurpation of the presidency quickly grew and included a 48-hour strike by mineworkers. Pereda cracked down hard on such opposition, jailing more than 100 top oppositionists and ordering severe repression against public demonstrations, including the murder of twenty protestors in Coripata, a township in Yungas. While failing to force Pereda to step down, the continued civil protests forced the regime to end Banzer-era decrees restricting civil liberties and to liberalize press freedoms. Still demanding free elections, the leading left-wing coalition, the Popular Democratic Union (UDP), announced a massive mobilization for November 24. Concerned with such rising militancy, reformist officers led by General David Padilla overthrew Pereda just prior to the planned protests and announced a return to democracy and free elections to be held on July 1 of the following year. Still concerned about the potential of popular nonviolent resistance, Padilla resisted pressure from the IMF to cover repayments of the massive debts accumulated by the Banzer dictatorship by devaluing the currency or removing price subsidies, thereby postponing austerity measures and any negative public reaction to future democratic governments.

The elections of July 1979 ended in a virtual tie between two former colleagues from the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), which held power during the dozen years after the 1952 revolution: Hernán Siles Zuazo of the leftist UDP and Víctor Paz Estenssoro, still under the banner of the MNR. Congress broke the stalemate the following month by electing centrist Senate leader Wálter Guevara, another former MNR leader, as interim president.

The Natusch Busch Coup

The return to civilian rule was short-lived, however, as General Alberto Natusch Busch seized power in a coup on November 1. That night, thousands of Bolivians took to the streets in protest and erected barricades to protect working class neighborhoods in La Paz, challenging tanks with nothing more than cobblestones. A general strike—the first in nearly a decade—was declared as hundreds of thousands of Bolivians began marching on La Paz. Meanwhile, mostly youthful demonstrators rallied outside the parliament building to protect it from an anticipated military assault. When the legislature condemned the coup and pledged to not cooperate with the de facto regime, Natusch Busch declared the Congress illegal. He tried to placate the growing uprising by offering reforms and pay raises, but the protesters demanded nothing less than the restoration of democracy.

Unable to mollify the opposition, his troops went on the offensive, blowing up most of the headquarters of the COB, the country's chief trade union federation, machine gunning working class neighborhoods, where the resistance was centered, from a helicopter rented from a U.S. company, and moving armored vehicles to challenge the “moral barricades” of the pro-democracy demonstrators. Over 300 activists were killed during the regime's first two weeks, more than during

the entire seven years of the Banzer dictatorship. Still feeling pressure, Natusch Busch then proposed the establishment of a tripartite regime consisting of himself and representatives from Congress and from the COB. While some of the leading political parties appeared willing to consider such a compromise, the COB rejected any concessions. Passive noncooperation by the police increased and, despite generous bonuses key elements of the armed forces became less and less reliable. Despite the repression, by the end of the regime's second week in power, more than 600,000 people had descended on La Paz, a larger number than the entire population of the capital at that time.

At the beginning of the third week of the coup, COB leaders marched into the presidential palace to confront Natusch Busch in his office, initially demanding that he reveal his political program. With the country shut down by a general strike and his own palace besieged by pro-democracy activists, Natusch Busch acknowledged who actually wielded the most political power at that point by responding, "Yours!" Labor leaders, however, rejected the adoption of their program under military rule and instead insisted on Natusch Busch's resignation and the return to democracy. He stepped down after only sixteen days in office.

The restored Congress then elected the president of Chamber of Deputies, Lidia Gueiler, as president, making her only the second female head of state in Latin America following Argentina's Isabel Perón. Though from a left-of-center party, Gueiler's attempts at instilling deflationary policies resulted in mass protests that included her former left-wing allies from the National Leftist Revolutionary Party, led by the former MNR minister and mineworkers' leader Juan Lechín. Commerce in the country ground to a halt as peasants blockaded major roads across the country for a full week that November, the first major nationwide blockade since colonial times. The establishment of a new national *campesino* movement independent of any patronage from the military or political parties and with close links to the COB created a mobilizing force that constituted the largest and most radical rural campaign since the 1952 revolution. A successful one-day strike called by the COB that shut down the country on December 10 further revealed an underlying weakness of Gueiler's government. New elections were called for July 1980, in which the leftist UDP coalition received a solid plurality of the vote and was expected to be voted into power by the National Congress.

New Junta Heightens Repression

Before they could take office however, another coup took place, bringing in the most repressive dictatorship of this period, led by General Luis García Meza. The coup, which apparently had been in the planning for a full eight months, was launched early in the morning of July 17 from the north-central city of Trinidad. In response, a group of around thirty people from the National Committee for the Defense of Democracy (CONADE)—composed of various popular organizations and left-leaning political parties formed earlier that year—came together in an emergency meeting at the COB headquarters in La Paz at mid-morning, where they announced a general strike and a blockade of all major roads in the country. Less than a half hour later, as they began to organize their detailed plan of action, García Meza brought in paramilitary units hiding in a fleet of recently-donated

ambulances stolen from the airport complex that launched an attack on the building, immediately killing mineworkers union leader Gualberto Vega along with leftist deputy Carlos Flores. The survivors peacefully surrendered to face imprisonment, but Socialist Party leader Marcelo Quiroga was singled out from the group for assassination.⁴ That García Meza chose to attack the meeting of these popular leaders before even initiating his assault on the presidential palace that afternoon indicates that he saw organized popular resistance rather than established political institutions as the greatest potential impediment to his seizure of power.

Similarly, even prior to the army taking to the streets mid-afternoon to suppress the growing protests, paramilitary squads were raiding the homes of other leaders of unions, political parties, and civil society organizations. These preemptive attacks demonstrate that García Meza was aware of the power of mass protests against military rule in the recent past and was more prepared than his predecessors to crush the opposition. Cobblestone barricades had been erected to seal off popular neighborhoods from tanks, but the new dictator quickly seized urban areas and moved his forces across the country to break any attempt to blockade roads, bridges, or railroad tracks, rounding up hundreds of peasants and workers even for being in the proximity to such potential disruptions.

Five days after the coup, Lechín—who had visibly been subjected to physical and psychological abuse—was forced to go on national television to exhort the population “to abandon blockades and civil resistance.” Though most of the popular resistance had been crushed within the first week, not until the beginning of August were the mines in the south recovered due to roadblocks that were particularly resilient around Potosí. In the mining camp at Santa Ana, the army was forced to withdraw on two occasions. Once breaking through, they found themselves confronted by hundreds of women and children guarding the union building in which the miners’ radio station, which had played a key role in organizing the ongoing resistance throughout the mining belt, was based. This and other resistance led to widespread demoralization among troops and even some acts of mutiny, as in an incident near La Paz where three truckloads of conscripts deserted after killing their officers. Near Huanuni in the south and Corocoro in the north, officers ended up shooting their own troops for refusing to fire into crowds of protestors.

Faced with a lack of fresh supplies and depletion in their ranks due to increased repression, including the kidnapping and murder of leading activists, the initial resistance to the coup collapsed by August 4. The scattered acts of armed resistance fared even worse, particularly in the isolated camps of Caracoles and Viloco, where hundreds of men, women, and children were massacred in the army’s final assault.

García Meza’s ruthlessness was characterized by the use of paramilitary groups led by Argentine and Chilean officers and other forms of collaboration with Bolivia’s dictatorial neighbors as part of Operation Condor, a U.S.-backed effort to establish a network of National Security States

⁴ Quiroga, who came from a prominent Bolivian family, had opted to spend his life working for social justice. A popular novelist, intellectual and dynamic speaker, he had served as minister of mines in an earlier government and had overseen the nationalization of Gulf Oil. His assassination was apparently triggered by the belief that he would be a particularly influential leader in a sustained nonviolent resistance struggle.

to suppress popular leftist movements (McSherry 2005). This enabled the regime to maintain its relative autonomy from Bolivia's traditional military establishment which, while certainly repressive, had rarely stooped to the level of brutality of other regimes in the Southern Cone.

Though the larger, more confrontational resistance had subsided, slowdowns in mines and factories continued, as did occasional acts of small-scale sabotage. Unlike the previous Natusch Busch dictatorship, García Meza appeared for a time to be firmly in control. However, his severe repression against a largely nonviolent resistance movement led to mass resignations of Bolivian ambassadors, including those to the United States, Great Britain, France, Belgium, and several Latin American countries. In Washington, the Carter administration, which had demonstrated a somewhat more supportive, if inconsistent, policy toward human rights than its predecessors, cut off all foreign aid to the regime. Hopes by the junta that the inauguration of Ronald Reagan as U.S. president in January 1981 would result in renewed support were quashed as a result of the new administration's concern about the failure of the regime, which was worried about popular reaction, to more fully adopt a neoliberal model, as well as its ties to drug traffickers, which—despite providing a short-term boost for the regime—ended up hastening its demise. (Dunkerley 1984)

Recognizing that the struggle against García Meza could take some time, activists pulled back from more direct confrontation to focus on further education to empower ordinary Bolivians. For example, theater groups toured the country presenting plays that stressed popular conscientization—the perspective that real power came through popular organization and the people themselves, and that the fight to regain democratic freedoms would have to employ pacific means. On several occasions, García Meza, who recognized the threat to his rule from popular theater, ordered the venues raided. He was so stuck in his military mindset, that he was unable to perceive the actual nature of that threat and primarily had his troops tear through buildings in search of nonexistent weapons.⁵

Extrajudicial killings and the widespread torture of dissidents, including the son of a prominent general, upset many of the more traditional military leaders who believed the repression had gone too far. The erosion of the security Bolivians had traditionally sought through family ties, despite serious ideological differences within many extended families, led to widespread revulsion at García Meza's repression. Though his foreign backers may have believed such extraordinary measures were necessary, given the strength of popular resistance, the severity of the repression against nonviolent dissidents contributed significantly to the regime's downfall (see Kurtz and Smithey 2018). Jesuit priests and others directly confronted soldiers and even lower-ranking officers demanding that they refrain from shooting unarmed civilians. While certain paramilitary units continued to engage in atrocities, increasing numbers of soldiers began refusing orders to suppress demonstrations, openly disobeying orders to advance on demonstrators. Numerous peasants convinced their conscripted sons not to report to their barracks. In what became known as “defensive resistance,” urban neighborhoods and other communities were increasingly successful at blocking tanks and troop transporters with cobblestones and sometimes their own bodies. Despite strict government censorship of the media,

⁵ Interview with Jorge Sanjinés, La Paz, Bolivia, 2009.

details of the repression would become known through lists of those killed, wounded, and disappeared posted on urban walls.

While most opposition parties were either co-opted or suppressed, the well-organized base of the unions and popular organizations proved to be surprisingly resilient. Alternative media outlets provided information regarding those imprisoned and disappeared to Amnesty International and various UN agencies in order to mobilize international pressure. There were major strikes and other protests in February and March of 1982. While government workers were more tightly controlled, an increase in militancy by workers in the private sector resulted in temporary takeovers of factories and other workplaces. In July, there were 24-hour general strikes in Santa Cruz and Huanuni that demanded the reinstatement of union rights. Taking advantage of growing divisions within the military, an indefinite nationwide general strike was launched on August 4, shutting down the main mines and larger factories. When Banzer gave peasants and miners seventy-two hours to end their blockade of La Paz, protest leaders declared their own state of siege against the military. Finally, under pressure from rivals in the armed forces concerned about the growing unrest and its revolutionary potential, García Meza resigned and relinquished power to the triumvirate of General Waldo Bernal Pereira, General Celso Torrelio, and Óscar Jaime Pammo.

In an interview with a Chilean magazine soon after coming to power García Meza had insisted that he would “stay in power for twenty years,” declaring that “my government has no fixed limits and in this sense I am like General Pinochet” (Dunkerley 1984). However, due to the tenacity of the nonviolent resistance struggles, his regime lasted barely one year.

The Final Months of Military Rule

Constitutionalists within the military were dissatisfied with the new command that had replaced García Meza and demanded that the old guard make way for new leadership, leading to a tense face-off between the two factions. Meanwhile, the general strike spread to the point where fuel supplies to the capital were cut off, and markets and shops in La Paz were emptied and shuttered. Church leaders sought to negotiate an end to the standoff between the military groups, but the junta of Bernal, Torrelio, and Pammo held on to power. Neither the United States nor the IMF was willing to accept the new regime, however, particularly as García Meza remained ensconced in the presidential palace. Miners continued their strike for another five days. Desperate economic conditions led to the collapse of the strikes, but agitation by miners, workers, peasants, and other pro-democracy activists continued. A new strike centered at the mines at Huanani on November 12 lasted six days before the regime’s forces occupied the camp. This led to solidarity work stoppages in other mines across the country, and a group of women in La Paz launched a hunger strike, raising fears within the junta of a repeat of the popular reaction that led to Banzer’s overthrow three years earlier. By December 17, the miners at Huanani had resumed their work stoppage, and the number of hunger strikers in the capital reached 1,000. On the 19th, Torrelio agreed to recognize independent unions within the next few months and legalize the COB within a year. Resistance from hardliners in the military put in question

the implementation of these promises, however, and in the context of the rapidly deteriorating economic situation, the COB called a 48-hour general strike in March with near-total participation, though government repression continued, and six activists were shot dead in Cochabamba at the end of that month. On May Day, over 40,000 workers took to the streets without government interference, and major protests by students soon thereafter led to the restoration of autonomy at the country's universities. Despite opposition from hardliners, amnesty was granted for exiled political and union leaders, who began returning to the country late that spring.

Transit strikes and wildcat labor actions occurred over the next three months. Students engaged in daily blockades of La Paz thoroughfares, and other protests broke out during the first week of September, most of which were nonviolent but also included some rioting and attacks on military and government facilities. A protest organized by the Revolutionary Left Movement brought tens of thousands of protestors on the capital on September 7. On September 17, a COB-organized march brought more than 100,000 people to the streets for six hours and essentially drove the paramilitaries into hiding.

Protests continued until October 5, 1982, when the armed forces finally stepped down, yielding power to elected civilian leadership, and Hernán Siles Zuazo and his leftist UDP were able to assume the offices denied to them in the elections of August 1980.

Bolivia Under Liberal Democracy

After nearly five years of struggle, military rule had finally ended, and civilian rule returned to Bolivia for the long term. Subsequent elections were held in Bolivia in 1985, 1989, 1993, 1997, 2002, 2005, 2009, and 2014. Bolivian politics have not been smooth, even with the return of democracy. Large-scale nonviolent resistance movements continued, particularly in support of indigenous rights and in opposition to neoliberal economic policies and government overreach.

A major popular resistance struggle broke out in Cochabamba in 2000 in reaction to the government's decision, under IMF pressure, to turn the State-owned water works over to a U.S. corporation that more than doubled the price of water for poor families. The city was shut down for four days in January 2000 from a general strike, and protests continued over the next several months led by a grassroots movement known as *La Coordinadora*. In response, the government declared a state of siege, which included generalized police violence against demonstrators and the arrest of the movement's leaders. As protests spread throughout country, however, the government was forced to reverse its privatization and turn ownership of the utility over to *La Coordinadora*.

Massive protests in 2002 against President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada's privatization and export policies regarding natural gas and other resources led to massive protests including blockage of highways. Army troops killed sixty-five protesters and bystanders and wounded hundreds of others, resulting in further protests that forced Sánchez de Lozada to resign and flee into exile in October 2003. His vice-president, Carlos Mesa, who had publicly withdrawn his support for Sánchez de Lozada

because of the repression, then assumed office, but he too was forced to resign in June of 2005 as protests against the government's neoliberal policies continued. He was succeeded by Eduardo Rodríguez, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, who immediately called for new elections.

The growth in massive nonviolent movements in Bolivia, particularly within the indigenous community, contributed directly to the election that December of Evo Morales under the banner of the Movement for Socialism–Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples (*Movimiento al Socialismo–Instrumento Político por la Soberanía de los Pueblos*, or MAS). A union leader who had played a major role in popular struggles, Morales not only became the first indigenous president of this majority-Indian nation, but also the first president who emerged from neither the military nor established political parties. In addition to facing largely violent confrontations by right-wing separatists in the Media Luna region in the eastern part of the country, Morales continues to be challenged also by almost weekly disruptive, nonviolent protests by those on his left pressuring him to live up to his socialist rhetoric. Unlike his leftist counterparts in Venezuela, he has kept the economy moving forward and avoided imposing major limits on political freedom despite provocations.

Bolivian Assumptions about Power and Change

The use of largely nonviolent methods in the course of Bolivia's pro-democracy struggle was strategic and tactical rather than based on an ethical commitment to nonviolence. Civil resistance in Bolivia also has the reputation of being quite combative and confrontational in pushing for demands, and numerous campaigns during this period included rioting, sabotage, and other violent acts of resistance as well. Yet many of the actions followed a sequence similar to Gandhian campaigns in India and other nonviolent resistance movements: Start with negotiations. If they fail to make progress, launch strike actions while continuing to reach out to convert the opposition. If that fails, engage in direct confrontation, such as a blockade. If still no progress is made, gradually escalate by confronting targets more directly, such as all-day marching and chanting at public buildings, mines, or businesses to be seen and heard. If that fails as well, escalate further with sit-ins and occupations.

The nonviolent pro-democracy struggle of 1977-82 went through several phases of leadership. In late 1977 and 1978, after seven years of the Banzer dictatorship, the COB had to organize clandestinely, political parties had been suppressed, and civil society organizations were weak, so many of the pro-democracy initiatives were led by small groups, such as the mineworkers' wives. During the struggles in 1980, the movement was led primarily by CONADE, which included the pro-democratic political parties, the COB, Christian base communities, and other smaller groups. By 1982, the COB was playing a more central role in leading the struggle.

Throughout this period, the Bolivian military was divided on both ideological and institutional levels. Some proposed that it follow the model of other South American militaries in playing a direct role in governance, while others favored less political participation. A split also occurred between those who preferred a state capitalist model of economic development, as was taking place in Brazil,

and those who wanted to maintain at least some aspects of Bolivia's revolutionary nationalism. The largely nonviolent resistance was able to take advantage of these divisions, whereas an armed struggle probably would have forced these factions to unify.

The use of general strikes and other forms of nonviolent action played a major role in the downfall of dictatorial regimes in Latin America, including that of Carlos Ibáñez of Chile in 1931; Jorge Ubico of Guatemala in 1944; Maximiliano Hernández Martínez of El Salvador, also in 1944; Marcos Pérez Jiménez of Venezuela in 1958; and Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986. Nonviolent action was a critical force in demanding the referendum that led to the ouster of Augusto Pinochet of Chile in 1988 and in restoring democracy to Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay.

Yet a number of factors appear to have made popular nonviolent movements within Bolivia particularly influential and their specific circumstances unique. The broader Bolivian left, including elements that would be prone to splinter in many societies, has shown an impressive ability to remain unified in the course of popular struggles. In addition, women have taken a far more prominent role in Bolivian popular movements than in most of Latin America, from leadership in popular organizations to joining their male counterparts in facing down tanks in central plazas. The culture of the Bolivian people, a majority of whose language and spiritual beliefs are rooted in indigenous communities, gives rise to a unique quality of social struggle, including widespread belief in the goddess Pachamama, the Earth Mother.⁶ At root, a deep democratic conviction exists in Bolivian society, as does an impressive degree of participatory democracy within popular organizations. This was enhanced by the 1952 revolution, which resulted in universal suffrage, land reform, universal education, and a legislature in which ordinary people, not just elites, served.

It should be noted that the 1952 revolution that brought the MNR to power succeeded by force of arms. In many respects, though, this was more of a coup by pro-MNR elements of the military, supplemented by the distribution of arms to workers and other sympathetic elements of the civilian population, rather than a sustained armed revolution from below, and fighting lasted only three days (Klein 1971, 46). The ability of the MNR to consolidate power was a direct consequence of the mobilized peasantry, which had already been in revolt through large-scale protests and massive noncooperation for five years when the urban-based MNR seized power (Gotkowitz 2008), and is not inconsistent with the longstanding tendencies in Bolivian society for unarmed civil resistance rather than revolutionary armed struggle.

It is striking, whatever the motivations of the nonviolent protests and whoever was leading the struggle, that there has always been a widespread assumption in Bolivia that unions and social movements have more power than political parties and that union leaders are at least as powerful as holders of prominent governmental positions, and perhaps more powerful. It is they who can bring the country to a standstill, not those in government. Bolivians' everyday experience has taught them that power does not come from the top but from the willingness of people to acquiesce to those in formal positions of authority. In short, there is an awareness that no regime can stay in power if it has

⁶ Often Pachamama is mixed, in both imagery and among believers, with the Virgin Mary.

only guns. Though apparently very few Bolivians have ever read Gene Sharp (1973) or other nonviolent theorists, the popular understanding of the nature of power closely parallels that of the noted theoretician of strategic nonviolent action and others who argue that power ultimately rests on the consent of the population.

As a result, the belief in the ability of ordinary people to mobilize their own resistance has led to a reticence by Bolivians to embrace vanguardist armed revolutionary movements. This confidence in the masses, combined with an awareness of the historic failure of armed struggles in South America throughout modern history, explains why armed Marxist-Leninist groups remained small and never grew into a broad-based popular struggle. Even the inestimable Che Guevara could never build a large following in his effort to organize armed resistance in the country and lost his life for his efforts. Other armed revolutionary movements never grew beyond their core of student radicals whose understanding of revolution was largely intellectual and whose ability to pull it off, or even simply to survive as guerrillas in Bolivia's harsh mountains and jungles, was quite limited. When deciding whether and by what means to engage in a struggle, the various living communities that make up Bolivian society tend to bring people together to debate and decide the next course of action. The reluctance of most people to support a broader struggle without the consent of the community was another reason Marxist-Leninist guerrillas had a hard time enlisting support in the countryside. The communitarian tradition of these indigenous communities was far more compatible with nonviolent movements, which have tended to be far more decentralized and participatory than armed movements.

More fundamentally, there was a realization that taking up arms would involve confronting the State at its strongest point and that it was far more efficient to undermine its power through massive noncooperation. Predominantly indigenous communities embrace a sense of historical time that recognizes the long-term nature of struggle and therefore are resistant to those who believe that liberation can be achieved in short order primarily through the barrel of a gun. Nonviolent action has made it far more difficult for dictatorships to engage in the same level of violence as in South American countries where military regimes were faced with armed insurgencies, such as Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. It is this mixture of the visionary and the pragmatic that has given these movements such power and influence.

Unlike some of the better-known civil insurrections that toppled autocratic governments in countries such as Serbia, the Philippines, Tunisia, and Czechoslovakia, mass resistance did not lead to the ouster of a dictatorial regime in a matter of days, soon followed by the consolidation of democratic governance. In other respects, however, the pro-democracy movement in Bolivia during this period included many of the hallmarks associated with successful pro-democratic unarmed insurrections (Kurtz and Zunes, 1999). Indeed, the success deriving from the Bolivian struggle's ability to engage in primarily nonviolent forms of resistance and not take up arms reinforces research findings that stress the importance of encouraging defection by security forces (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011), tactical innovation (Schock 2005), building alternative institutions (Lahey 1987), and maximizing popular participation in the resistance (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011).

Strong social networking among ordinary people, the deep sense of community, preference for decentralized structures, and consensus decision-making all have contributed to a Bolivian political culture that resists right-wing dictatorship and the ethos represented in neoliberalism or Marxist-Leninism. Indeed, Bolivia has never had a particularly strong State, largely restricted to serving the functional needs of the particular period. Bolivians, particularly the indigenous majority, have traditionally not identified very closely with the State; while willing to negotiate and compromise with government institutions as needed, they have not given it unconditional loyalty. Many Bolivians believed that the elites, which dominated the national government for most of the country's history, could never appreciate the national project and were ultimately dependent on foreign interests, so it was up to them to defend the interests of their country.

Related to this perspective has been the Bolivians' historical propensity to withstand acts of repression that would have intimidated pro-democracy movements in other countries. For example, in 1981, paramilitary groups bombed the offices of a number of newspapers and civil society organizations and drew up a list of 160 "subversives"—including prominent activists, journalists, academics, priests, and others—to be assassinated. One of their first targets was Father Luis Espinoza, a popular Jesuit priest who edited a newspaper that had, among other things, exposed abuses by high-ranking military officers. Instead of his murder forcing people into submission, however, it prompted massive protests, with more than 70,000 marching in the streets of La Paz within hours of his murder. This popular response sent a message to the military that, unlike in some other Latin American countries, such repression would not result in fearful quiescence, but rather stronger, more determined resistance. As a result, the planned series of assassinations was abandoned.

Though it is the poorest country in South America, Bolivia has manifested the continent's richest legacy in terms of civil resistance, much of it rooted in the indigenous culture of communal values. This has no doubt contributed to the country's impressive level of politicization among its citizens, among the highest in the world. In addition, its centuries-long tradition of civil resistance made the *foquismo* of Che and other vanguardist armed movements as much of a foreign import as neoliberalism. Furthermore, while the 1952 revolution was unable to completely institutionalize its reforms (Zunes 2001), it did help mobilize the populace, which became a formidable force against a repressive, but divided, military, further weakened by economic failures and less consistent U.S. support.

Bolivia's low levels of modernization and economic development would seemingly make democratization difficult, as would widespread social inequality and frequent disruptions from mass mobilization. However, political elites rarely give up their privileges without sustained mass mobilization from below (Schock 2005). Karatnycky and Ackerman (2005) examined sixty-seven democratic transitions from the 1970s through the 1990s and found that the occurrence of mass-based nonviolent resistance was a significant factor in most democratic transitions and that countries with strong, cohesive nonviolent civic coalitions were likely to be more democratic in the post-transition era. Similarly, Chenoweth & Stephan (2011) concluded that in countries that experienced successful mass-based, nonviolent resistance campaigns, a relatively higher level of democracy and

lower recurrence of violent civil conflict obtained in the years following the struggle, compared to the conditions in countries that experienced successful violent struggles.

Prevailing theories of democratization have assumed that mass attitudes are either a reflection of a society's structural properties or simply inconsequential relative to the attitudes of elites. It now appears, however, that mass attitudes, like nonviolent resistance, may be a driving force for democratization. Some scholars have emphasized the importance of communal attitudes, which tie people to each other and to their society at large. These attitudes provide social capital that facilitates solidarity, mobilization, and the translation of democratic values into collective action (Newton 2001; Paxton 2002; Putnam 1993). Other scholars have emphasized emancipative attitudes that reflect people power (Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Welzel 2006, 2007) and motivate citizens to support democratic goals and nonviolent means for attaining them. Regarding Bolivia, Gotkowitz (2008) has emphasized the critical role of the alliances between grassroots rural activists and urban allies during the first half of the twentieth century that paved the way for the gains of the 1952 revolution. This article has made the case that precisely such mobilization brought down the succession of military dictatorships, established electoral democracy in the early 1980s, and laid the groundwork for the rise of the MAS and the Morales presidency.

The constant questioning of authority and willingness to mobilize in large-scale acts of civil resistance have made Bolivia one of the most difficult societies to govern. Yet, despite ongoing challenges, Bolivia today is successfully resisting authoritarianism of both the right and the left, and the economy is growing while avoiding much of the economic injustice and social dislocation wrought by neoliberalism that has plagued many of its neighbors. Indeed, Bolivia's history of nonviolent action and civil insurrections—particularly during its struggle for democracy during the 1977-82 period—serves as an inspiration for those still struggling against authoritarianism and the denial of basic human rights.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict for providing funding for in-country research to produce this article; to Yvette Paz Soldan and Thomas Becker for helping with translations and logistics while in Bolivia; and to Professor Kurt Schock of Rutgers University-Newark for important suggestions on theoretical considerations.

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