

Bolivia: The Resurgence of Indo America

The Bolivian insurgency is but a part of the upsurge in the region. What is at stake is not merely the survival of the progressive movement in Latin America, but the survival of the creole oligarchy protected as it has been by US. The insurgency is the historical upshot of a far-reaching and sustained class struggle that has raged for months and would have been inconceivable without an ideologically coherent mass organised political base.

FREDERIC F CLAIRMONT

The bolting of Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, ousted president of Bolivia, to Miami on October 18 marks an epochal date in the political metamorphosis of the landlocked Andean nation; the blazing of what could well be a new highway in the mass political liberation of Indo America and the organised victory of the more than 2,00,000 workers, trade unionists, peasants and students. This was a proletarian uprising against the established order. This is not the promised land; but it's more than the start of an arduously protracted struggle flings its shadow over Latin America's ruling elite; and accentuating the class struggles that have begun to bite in intensity.

The battle is now joined for what is at stake is not merely the survival of the progressive movement in Latin America, but the survival of the creole oligarchy and its patron saint and protector – US imperialism. This is what the Aymara communist leader Roberto de la Cruz meant when he vowed: "We've won an important battle but what we must understand is that the war has only just begun and there'll be no respite. Don't count on easy victories. What history in this country and elsewhere teaches us is that the enemy will and is already regrouping for a counter-offensive. His preferred instruments of war are sanctions, blockades and sabotage." According to the latest tally of the ministry of public health more than 110 protesters were killed in October and more than 500 wounded. That's not the end of the murder toll for many of the wounded will not survive.

It was the historical upshot of the most far-reaching and sustained class struggle that raged for months, inconceivable without an ideologically coherent mass organised political base in which the

Andean Indians Aymara and Quechua surged to the centre stage of history in the federal capital of La Paz and El Alto. A movement that owed nothing to chance. In this nation of nine million, 75 per cent are Indian or what I shall designate as Indo American, 15 per cent are meztizos, 10 per cent of European origin, although this last ethnic category is highly differentiated socially, economically and politically. The 150 families are the hard core of the white creole oligarchy incubated in the centuries of the Conquista, and whose wealth are consolidated by inter-marriages. They were and remain the political and economic masters of this land before and after it acquired its formal independence in 1825.

Lozada's origin and socio-political trajectories are symptomatic of the patterns of domination and inequities that bedevils Latin America with the singular exception of Cuba. He was one of the richest men in Latin America, a scion of one of the biggest mining, banking and insurance dynasties in the country. His net worth swelled with the World Bank/IMF neoliberal privatisations of the 1980s and 1990s. A profile of his caste gives us a clue of the sheer ramifications of his wider cultural and economic networks. He was educated in the US, possesses an American passport as does the rest of his family. He speaks Spanish with an American accent.

The military branch of his family was educated at West Point and the Escuela de las Americas in the Panama Canal Zone. Weep not for Lozada for he will not be a penniless exile. He's the owner of citrus fruit plantations in both southern California and Florida. His capital assets like most his breed have already fled the country. It wasn't surprising that in all cities and villages demanding his mid-term resignation one saw the two word ultimatum scrawled in English: 'Get Out'.

The ruling oligarchy understood the wider political reverberations of this order. How reminiscent of another slogan of no less potency that was also scrawled everywhere in the Indian subcontinent in 1942: 'Quit India'.

Despite the frantic pleadings of the Spanish and US embassies that he should hang on and crush the insurgency the march of proletarian resistance dictated his ouster. The peaceful protesters had set up road-blocks and called for a general strike that was followed. Lozada, the ever loyal domestic to the policies of US imperialism, was driven to the airport in an armoured US vehicle, flown in a US military aircraft to Miami. Symbolically, it bore the imprimatur of the rapport between the master class and the servant class. It was pathetic to listen to the parting words of this degouted politician gushing with sentimental nostalgia. "I leave my beloved country knowing that the dangers hanging over it remain intact." They do indeed for they spell the extinction of his class rule. He had spelt out his own political obituary for he and his masters no doubt understood that he had come to the end of the road. He was no longer serviceable. But his class, his masters and the state apparatus although shaken are still basically intact.

Lozada had pulled the plug but he was able to leave before being charged with crimes against humanity, but the indictment will not be dropped. What would have happened if the security forces of Hugo Chavez had merely killed a couple of white protesters that were calling night and day for his overthrow? It leaves no effort of the imagination that the empire's media would have hollered to the heavens of grotesque 'violations of human rights'. The difference is that those that were murdered were Indo Americans.

Social Explosion

The social explosion was due to a multiplicity of factors but the most immediate causes were the eradication of coca cultivation on the order of the US government. Its ecological effects related to widespread deployment of chemical defoliants were devastating as were its revenue and employment impact on the peasant cultivators. The US moves slashed GDP by an estimated 4 per cent, savaging the livelihood of more than 1,20,000, farmers. So-called 'legal crops' provided jobs for only one in five of those who worked in coca. The flip side of the destruction was that it generated one of the world's most powerful and articulate

farmers' union which together with the industrial unions and miners and indigenous peoples, became the spearhead of the resistance to the oligarchy known as La Rosca.

The leader of the coca union was none other than Evo Morales one of the young (42) radical leaders and founder for the Movement of Socialism (MAS). Morales had made no bones from where he came and where he was going in a bold blueprint free from double talk. "There is no future for the theology neo-liberalism. This is the path of genocide. Either we advance to socialism and embrace the public ownership of resources and planning that is the drive wheel of socialism or we lurch backwards into slavery and genocide. In our blueprint for the reordering of our new order we have no truck for neo-liberalism, for the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and the mass privatisation and expropriation of our national heritage. This means there is no place for the World Bank and the IMF and the WTO. To believe that our cumulative misery can be halted and reversed by tinkering with market forces manipulated from abroad and fiscal and monetary gimmicks is the acme of madness."

The Economist and other ruling class propagandists are whining of the grim future that faces the established social order as "the successor government to Lozada will be facing reckless opposition by people who are skilled at whipping up protest but have few realistic solutions to offer".¹ Indeed, what were 'the realistic solutions' that the conquistadores, their successors and US paymasters realised over the last 500 years?

Profound social changes against entrenched interests will not be realised without the pursuit of class struggles. *The Financial Times* says: "The IMF, World Bank and the US will be pushing Javier Cuevas, the finance minister in the successor government, to keep the free market model intact". This requires that the present government of Carlos Mesa, fully anointed by the state department, should ensure that the continued domination of national and transnational capital remains inviolable. *The Economist* is in no doubt that in the current revolutionary maelstrom in Latin America the political choices should be unambiguous. "Put bluntly, Latin America needs more Lula da Silvas and fewer Chavezes or Morales. *This is where the United States could help.*" (Italics mine).

What had given the organised working class an enormous boost was the successful opposition to water privatisation in

Cochabamba by the Halliburton/Bechtel corporation. Vice president Cheney is one of the major shareholders. Victory would have been impossible without formidable working class unity seen in the self-defence committees at the urban and village levels that galvanised political consciousness at the local, national and regional levels. The bankers, capitalists and landowners have taken fright but they still occupy the commanding heights.

The second major front against the oligarchy and the US was opened up when the political resistance forces repudiated foreign ownership, control and marketing of the natural liquefied gas (the second largest deposits in Latin America) to the US via a pipeline to a Chilean port. This was a vast area that originally belonged to Bolivia, annexed by the Chileans in 1875. The organised masses had refused this deal seeing it, as Roberto de la Cruz says, as amounting to a blatant return to the days of unbridled capitalism when profits, dividends and interest payments were creamed off by international companies with accountability to none. Debt servicing and profit remittances gobble up 65-70 per cent of export earnings.

Chairman Mao's formula has not lost its relevance: "Where there is oppression there is always resistance". Here is a country on the move with the bulk of its people, according to World Bank data, grovelling on \$ 2 a day. Every social indicator is branded with the mark of social deprivation: endemic poverty, among the highest infant mortality rates in the world, chronic unemployment in which the numbers are no longer even counted. According to ECLA, 43 per cent of Latin America's people are living below the poverty line. In Bolivia it's around 55 per cent.

Where is the economic surplus of the nation going? Who are the expropriators of the nation's wealth? These are not questions that are being debated in academic and esoteric circles but the subject of widespread national debate, a source of burning indignation. Where is the talk of the Monterrey Declaration with its golden promise of economic aid? Over the last two years more than \$ 200 bn have flown out of the Latin American region. In short as we had always known the resources of the peoples of the region are filling the troughs of finance capital in the developed capitalist economies. The mask has slipped.

The social explosion in La Paz and El Alto were part of a much broader canvas that saw in a relatively short time scale the ouster of three presidents in Argentina, Ecuador and Peru. Poverty, corruption and

the sheer inability of capitalism's ruling class to deliver anything was part of the picture. The victory of Chavez in Venezuela that smashed the two-party system of the dominant oligarchy survived despite the domestic and foreign intervention. These changes moved in tandem with the mass upsurge of the landless movements in Brazil and elsewhere. It's at this juncture that the achievements of Porto Alegre is seen in clearer perspective. It was here that Indo America came in great numbers to exchange experiences and build up a sustained organisational resistance network in which the internet proved an invaluable tool. The anti-capitalist globalisation front kicked off in Seattle had grown over the years culminating in imperialism's debacle in Cancun, the crippling of the WTO, and the hammer blows against the US sponsored FTAA and all too glaring cracks and fissures of international capitalism.

The Promethean strides of Indo America was nothing short of breathtaking for those of us who witnessed this tidal wave of militancy over several decades. 'The comatose Indian', that stinking little Spanish buzzword has been thrown in to the dustbin of history. Subcommandante Marcos, a Chiapas Indian, philosopher, leader of the Zapatista Liberation Army reminded us of how the Indio was described by the Spanish conquistadores as "a people with the colour of mud". My larger *Oxford Dictionary* enlightened me on its pejorative usage: "something regarded as worthless or polluting...the worst part of anything, the dregs". This was the designation of a people that had given humanity the incomparable civilisations of the Aztecs, Mayas and Incas and whose blood, sinews and muscle laid the foundations of globalised capitalism. The great political renaissance of the Indo Americans in the 1980s and 1990s coincided with the mass awareness of the richness of their cultural heritage; and above all of the scope and nature of the greatest sustained holocaust to which any people had ever been subjected.

Let's recall briefly the nature of this infamous crime that was to become one of the cradles of capitalism. True, the extermination and exploitation of the Indo Americans had begun with the advent of the Conquista in 1492 but it was almost five decades later, in that never to be forgotten date, 1545, that the holocaust was born. It remains an epochal date not only in the blood-drenched history of 'primitive accumulation' (or what Adam Smith called 'prior accumulation'), but also in the mass

genocide through labour servitude of the Andean Indian. It was the year of the discovery of the inexhaustible silver mines in Potosi, in what is now Bolivia but was then part of the viceroyalty of Peru, in the mountain range of Cerro Rico. "The mud faced peoples" that worked in those mines were dragooned from the entire Andean region and beyond. This was slave labour that for centuries was the bedrock of primitive accumulation so dramatically depicted in that imperishable formulation of Marx in chapter 31 on 'The Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist' in *Capital*.

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of the blackskins, are all things which characterise the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation.

The life expectancy of the enslaved miners was six years. Those unable to work because of accidents were dumped in the villages; the luckless ones were slaughtered. More than six millions died over four centuries in this fabulous rush to riches for a few, and the premature death of millions when the last drop of blood of their labour power had been squeezed from their half-starved bodies. Independence changed nothing because slavery did not end with independence nor did exploitation. It was only at the start of the 20th century that a subsistence wage system emerged similar to that in South Africa's gold mines. No less important than the unspeakable suffering imposed on the enslaved miners was the deleterious ecological impact, massive depopulation of the region and the annihilation of traditional agriculture. These were the tears of blood that were scrubbed from the history books.

The historical record of these crimes cannot be obliterated. The victims have risen from the ashes and a spectre now haunts the region's ruling classes. The Indo American will neither forgive nor forget. Felipe Quispe, founder and theorist of the Pachakuti Indigenous Movement, also branded as Morales an irrepressible racist by the oligarchy and certain scribblers of the US corporate media, responds in the following way: "We cannot accept and indeed we reject the murderous and tyrannical legacies of the Conquista. Bolivia and Latin America will be forged in the fires of a different kind. We are not racists, but let those who momentarily rule

understand that the people have to be conscious of our right to govern ourselves according to the models of governance that we have chosen. We shall take our seats in parliament because we are the original owners of this land. But that's only a transitory stage in our journey."

Rising Political Consciousness

What we are seeing in Bolivia with such clarity is not only a sharply rising political consciousness of the revolutionary working class and peasantry, but an awareness that a successful social revolution – which Evo Morales calls the unbending road to socialism – can only bear fruit when it is joined to an ethnic pride of the race and its cultural links with the unscissored past. It is only in this sense that the question: from whence have we come and whither are we going assumes a truly new historic dimension. In his classic work, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1910, revised in 1920) the distinguished African American scholar WEB du Bois drove home the point that the problem of colour is a major factor in the historical process in the 20th century and the 21st as well. It is apposite to recall those pungent reflections as they impinge directly on the renaissance of Indo America in our time and of the class and racial dimensions of imperialism.

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line – the relation of the darker races to the lighter races of men and women in Asia, in Africa, in the Americas and the islands of the sea... How many of us today fully realise the current theory of colonial expansion, of the relation of Europe which is white, to the world which black and brown and yellow? Bluntly put, that theory is this: it is the duty of white Europe to divide up the darker world and administer it for Europe's good. However despicable 1914-1918 was it was nothing to compare with that fight for freedom which black and brown and yellow men must and will make unless their oppression and humiliation and insult at the hands of the White World cease. The Dark World is going to submit to its present treatment just as long as it must and not one moment longer.

As Evo Morales tells us the physical liquidation of the Arbenz reforms, or the triumphs of the United Fruit Company which is the other side of the coin, in Guatemala in 1954 was trailed by the massacre of more than 3,00,000 central American and Guatemalan Indians. It was part of the sustained apprenticeship of blood of the Indo Americans and others. It was

against the backdrop of the Cuban revolution that stood its ground against seemingly insuperable odds and the aura that it inspired that ushered in a new dawn in Bolivia's history. Che Guevara, a medical doctor, believed that the moment was propitious for a successful revolutionary onslaught against the Rosca. In contrast, there were his so-called 'progressive critics' who pilloried Guevara as an adventurer, ignorant of the material conditions under which he launched his legendary enterprise adding for good measure that he never constituted a threat.

It was an enterprise consisting of 49 men and one woman. These internationalists had battled on for two years (1966-67). At the end their numbers had dwindled to less than half. Guevara and his group believed, drawing on the Cuban experience in the Sierra Maestre that the campesinos and the workers would be pulled into the movement like iron filings to a magnet. This was not the case for Cuba and Andean America were at that time at different levels of historical consciousness and organisation.

It's timely to recall the blistering critique of Lenin against those social democrats that excoriated the Irish insurgents as John Connolly who led the spring uprising in Dublin in 1916. It was an onslaught by a small band of nationalists whose objective was the toppling of the British empire in its oldest colony. The first armed uprising against the mightiest of empires then bleeding in the Battle of the Somme. Both Nehru and Gandhi were aghast by its audacity. Lenin's thesis was the essence of lucidity: those superior strategists with their vaunted omniscience that babble of putschism and adventurism, he said, seem to be oblivious that we are experiencing the greatest imperialist massacre in history in which tens of millions are being butchered.

The victims of this butchery are the workers. Hence, it is the prime task of revolutionary social democrats, he emphasised, to crush and weaken the system by any and every conceivable strategy. That is precisely what the oppressed colonial peoples of Ireland and their vanguard are doing; theirs is not a putsch but a revolutionary act. Those who indulge in such preachments of omniscience, he concluded, must learn that there can never be an ideal moment for the launching of a revolutionary struggle. "Revolutions are not made with chronometers". To be sure, in one year's time this thesis would be tested in the assault on the commanding heights of power.

What Guevara and his internationalists in their messianic conception believed

was that the passions of revolutionary voluntarism could smash a fascist phalanx. The premise is admirable but they knew very little of their adversary's organisation and firepower. The country had been massively militarised thanks to the CIA and the Pentagon with highly-trained professional killers in the five years preceding 1966. These included the deployment of US Green Berets, training in The School of the Americas in the Panama Canal Zone, Fort Hood in Texas and others. Many had served in Vietnam in the early 1960s. Several Bolivian officers would pursue their postgraduate experience in Vietnam, in central America and specifically Nicaragua where their genocidal propensities were once again applauded in the corridors of the US Gulag.

What struck the world was not only the physical courage of Guevara's tiny band that stayed the course for almost two years before finally outgunned by an incomparably greater class enemy at home and abroad. He was captured on October 8, 1967, executed the next day on orders of the CIA, present at his execution, to ensure there be no traces either of his body or its final resting place. In one of his diary entries he lugubriously gave us an invaluable insight into the unfolding of an historical process.

The inhabitants of this region are as impenetrable as rocks. You speak to them [he spoke Quechua] but in the deepness of their eyes you can see that they do not believe you.² "You can waken men", taught Alexander Herzen the Russian Hegelian, "only by dreaming their dreams more clearly than they can dream themselves". Here was the fatal rub. This towering figure who made, as William Blum observed, social revolution his life's work did not grapple with the souls of the campesinos. Such a verdict plausible on the surface cannot ignore, however, the reverberations of his extermination that ignited Latin America not least Indo America. A murder most foul that became the wellspring of his resurrection.

Evo Morales, outstanding Indo American communist leader, recalls that he was only seven when he heard of his murder. As the young Hugo Chavez and countless others he raised questions as to who was this man and his companions that crossed the seas and the mountains and the wild forests to liberate his country and its peoples. "The death of El Che," he wrote, "meant that I began to ask questions. What was he fighting for? Why was he murdered and disposed of in such haste and in such a cruel way? I came to see, as I uncovered layer after layer of that great life, the poverty

and centuries' old oppression and humiliation of my peoples not as part of a divine dispensation as our people were brain-washed into believing, and the church which shoved it into their brains that they were born to be exploited. Breaking with the church and revolting against exploitation were for me part and parcel of the same battle. In the quest for enlightenment my first teachers were my own race. That was well before I read *The Communist Manifesto*, Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America*, before I read and reread the speeches of Fidel and learnt and studied the theory and practice of Cuba's road to socialism. Then I became a teacher, a public speaker and a trade union organiser. I was now part of the workers' movement. It wasn't surprising that the masters of this land and their gringo paymasters branded me a racist and a troublemaker. I expected them to. I translated my reading and study into concrete practice. That was the heritage of El Che." It reminds me of the metaphor of my teacher, the economic historian Paul Mantoux, who wisely observed that "only a negligible quantity of ferment is needed to affect a radical change in a considerable volume of matter".³ Guevara was that ferment. The Indo American had ceased to be "as impenetrable as rocks."

This is one of the most poignant autobiographical statements that I have ever read emanating from the entrails of the capitalist underdeveloped universe, and the unquenchable striving of Indo America for freedom that still remains elusive. Apart from being an exquisite homage to Guevara, it bears testimony to the spirit of combat and of the unbending determination to obliterate the obstacles of a decadent economic and social order that will not and must not survive. The killings of September and October, now immortalised as 'the October uprising' centred in La Paz and El Alto instigated by the masters of capital failed to achieve their objective which was

to crush the workers' resistance. Theirs was a combat against national exploitation and globalisation. It is appropriate that the Mexican Indian, Subcommandante Marcos in his reference to Cancun was also drawing the lessons from the triumphs of the Bolivian insurgency.

"It is a war. A war against humanity. The globalisation of those who are above us is nothing more than a global machine that feeds on blood and defecates in dollars. In the complex equation that turns death into money, there is a group of humans who command a very low price in the global slaughterhouse. We are the indigenous, the young, the elderly, the women, the children, all those who are different. That is to say the immense majority of humanity. This is a world war of the powerful who want to turn the planet into a private club that reserves the right to refuse admission. The exclusive luxury zone where they meet is a microcosm of their project for the planet: a complex of hotels, restaurants, and recreation zones protected by armies and police forces."

"All of us are given the option of being inside this zone, but only as servants. But we have no reason to obey and accept this choice between living as servants or dying. We can build a new path, one where living means life with dignity and freedom. To build this alternative is possible and imperative. It is imperative because on it depends the future of humanity."

Indubitably, the upsurge of Indo America of which the Bolivian insurgency is but one component are giant steps in the remaking of our planet. **EW**

Notes

- 1 *The Economist*, November 1-7, 2003.
- 2 William Blum, *Killing Hope: US Military and CIA Interventions since World War 2*, Monroe, Maine, 1992.
- 3 Paul Mantoux, *The Industrial Revolution in the Eighteenth Century: An Outline of the Beginnings of the Modern Factory System in England*, London, 1939.