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Bolivia's Second Gas War

Hopes and Limitations of the Popular Forces

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Description:

The first round of Bolivia's second gas war has concluded with the resignation of President Carlos Mesa and the promise of new elections. For the moment the mobilisations have been called off. There is everything still to play for.

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Editors' introduction

Jeffery R Webber's article published below was written on the eve of the resignation of President Carlos Mesa and the promise to call new elections. Since May 23 the popular movement spearheaded by indigenous people from the Alto Plano and especially the vast shanty town of El Alto, had blockaded La Paz and other major cities, in protest at the new gas law. While many of the rank and file demanded nothing less than the nationalization of the gas industry, Evo Morales - indigenous leader and the leader of the MAS (Movement towards Socialism) - called instead for royalties and taxes to be substantially raised to 50%.

With the country paralysed, a decisive move had to be made by the political representatives of the bourgeoisie in Congress.

For a short time, between the resignation of Carlos Mesa on 8 June and the Congress meeting in Sucre on the evening of 9 June, it seemed that the Senators around the right wing parties, in particularly the now spectacularly mis-named MIR (Movement of the Revolutionary Left) and MNR (National Revolutionary Movement) might choose Congress president and right-wing businessman Hormando Vaca Diez as the new state President.

Since this would have been totally unacceptable to the insurgent popular movement, it would probably have signified an attempt to use generalised repression to smash the popular forces off the streets. In the event the much more intelligent choice (from the view of the ruling class) of Eduardo Sanchez, president of the Supreme Court and apparently a political "neutral."



Photo: Bolivia Indymedia

The reaction of the El Alto militant leaders was to say that only nationalization of the gas and oil would be sufficient. However this line was impossible to hold. Within 24 hours there was a recognition that after two and a half weeks of constant mobilization, the first round of the second gas war was over.

Attention will probably now shift to the electoral front, and the MAS will attempt a final push to elect Evo Morales as president - something that they failed to do by only 1.5% in 2002.

For the Bolivian ruling class, hopelessly wedded to the multinationals and neoliberalism, the election of Evo Morales would pose great dangers. Would he become another Hugo Chavez, or perhaps another Lula?

In any case it seems likely that the Bolivian right wing will try to find a credible candidate around whom they can unite against Morales. The foreign policy and security professionals in Washington are certainly debating such concerns.

Hopes and Limitations of the Popular Forces

At the same time it should be remembered that relations between Evo Morales and the most militant sections of the popular movement are strained over the nationalization question - Morales was booed at some of the popular assemblies in La Paz at the height of the movement.

The first phase of this second gas war is part of a rising curve of struggle, which has seen movements of the coca farmers rising up against the violence of the American-backed 'war on drugs' in the late 1990s; the spectacular mobilisation in 2001-2 over the attempt to privatise the water supply in Cochabamba into the hands of the multinational corporations; the bringing down of Sánchez de Lozada during the first gas war; and now this tremendous mobilization which has brought down a second president.

In the past seven years the poor coca farmers, the ultra-exploited workers and above all the poverty-stricken indigenous people of the freezing Alto Plano have stood up, found their voice and fought back against neoliberalism in one of the most unequal countries in the most unequal of continents. They will not be easily defeated, nor give up their basic demands that the natural wealth of the country should be in the hands of the people, not in the hands of wealthy foreign corporations and their collaborators in the ultra-wealthy Bolivian elite.

Hopes and Limitations of the Popular Forces

By Jeffery R Webber

In what has become near ritualistic behavior, President Carlos Mesa Gisbert appeared on television at 9:30pm Monday, June 6, 2005 to address the nation with his latest dramatic gesture. He is apparently resigning.

On March 6, 2005 he announced his first revocable "resignation" on television, denouncing various social movements that were blockading the country, and citing the necessity of following every dictate of imperial power, from the World Bank, to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), to the United States Embassy, among many others. There was no other choice according to Mesa's logic. His role as President was to take their orders, and if some crazy Indians had different notions about how Bolivia ought to be run, well they didn't understand the way "democracy" works these days.

A few weeks later, faced with further mobilizations by popular forces and demands from the far Right to crush heads, Mesa called for moving the presidential elections forward, then set for 2007. In both cases, the necessary approval of Congress was not forthcoming, as Mesa predicted. "The Colonial President," as Luis Tapia recently referred to him as, was able to continue in power, increasingly governing from the Right.

However, popular forces wouldn't let their agenda slide from the face of politics after over seventy were killed in the "Gas War" of October 2003. In that struggle Gonzalo ("Goni") Sánchez de Lozada was removed from power, leaving Mesa - then vice-president - in his place.



Evo Morales

Hopes and Limitations of the Popular Forces

Mesa's mandate derived from his promise to carry through the "October Agenda," understood by the mobilized masses to mean (i) the nationalization of hydrocarbons (especially natural gas), (ii) the convocation of a Constituent Assembly to remake the Bolivian state in the interests of the poor indigenous majority, and (iii) a trial of responsibilities for Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada for the crimes he and his closest cronies committed during October 2003.

Mesa failed to carry through the October Agenda, and 2005 has thus far been a year of steadily increasing popular mobilization. Most recently, the "Second Gas War" began on May 16, 2005 with a large march of organizations descending from El Alto to La Paz, led by the Federation of United Neighbors of El Alto (FEJUVE-El Alto). On the same day, a number of peasant-indigenous organizations joined a four-day march from Caracollo to La Paz under the banner of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) party, led by Evo Morales.

The demands from El Alto were clearly more radical: nationalization of gas; closing of the Parliament; and the resignation of Carlos Mesa for selling out the October Agenda. The MAS-led march demanded fifty percent well-head royalties to be paid by the transnational petroleum companies to the Bolivian state, instead of the law that passed on March 17 with Mesa's de facto approval, which stipulates only eighteen percent royalties and a thirty-two percent direct hydrocarbons tax. The latter will be easily manipulated by the transnationals, according to critics.

The MAS-led marchers, the various popular organizations from El Alto, the Aymara peasants from the twenty provinces of the department of La Paz, and the miners all began to converge on the capital by May 23, 2005. Since then, the capital has been the scene of dynamite clashes with the states police, and eventually military, forces, and the continual dosing of downtown with copious amounts of tear gas and rubber bullets. In the final days leading up to Mesa's latest "resignation," that capital was crippled by gas shortages, inflationary prices on basic food products, and water shortages in some neighborhoods.

On June 5, 2005 between four and five hundred thousand protesters took to the streets in La Paz. Standing in the Plaza of Heroes, one could not see the end of the masses in any direction, in any of the surrounding streets. La Paz was occupied, and Mesa was forced to make his televised appearance that evening.

According to the Constitution, because Mesa did not explicitly state that his resignation was "irrevocable," it needs to be approved by Congress, which unlike in March is likely to happen. The hated Right-wing President of Congress, Hormando Vaca Díez, is next in line constitutionally to assume the presidency. If he were to refuse, the President of Deputies, Mario Cossío (a member of Goni's old party the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario, MNR) could accept the position. Finally, the President of the Supreme Court of Justice, Eduardo Rodríguez Veltzé would be the third option if the first two refused.



Funeral of the miner assassinated by the army in Sucre, 9 June. Photo: Bolivia Indymedia.

The latter scenario is that favoured by both the MAS and many of the social movement organizations at the heart of the Second Gas War. An emerging demand is that both Vaca Díez and Cossío decline the presidency, allowing for Rodríguez to assume power and push forward elections. Still, the field of contention remains unclear, the demands

Hopes and Limitations of the Popular Forces

of nationalization and the convening of a Constituent Assembly remain aflame, and the protests continue in the face of Mesa's "resignation."

It is far too early to determine what will transpire. The movement bases are mobilized in incredibly impressive numbers, but lack a coherent political project for state power. The neoliberal state is in crisis, but has persisted against the odds thus far. How the military will respond to each development is also unclear. If the popular-bloc manages to articulate a unified political project beyond mobilization, the consequences will be of massive significance both for Bolivia and Latin America as a whole.

An earlier version of this article appeared in [Against the Current](#)

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