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Evo's Highway
Development in
Socialist South America

December 22, 2010

It sounds like something the IMF would have funded during the regime of General Banzer: a super highway cutting across Bolivia, linking Brazil with Peru and Chile—and thus with East Asian markets, and in the process plowing straight through a vitally important nature reserve that also happens to be the home of three indigenous nations.

Since 2006, Bolivia has been governed by MAS, a progressive political party that grew directly out of the movements that opposed neoliberalism and the oppression of indigenous cultures. Its president is Evo Morales, an indigenous man whose background is in the coca-growers union. Under these circumstances, Bolivian social struggles have made the news much less, compared with 2005 and earlier, when major clashes paralyzed the entire country, as in the Gas War of 2003 and the Water War of 2000, both of which halted key attempts to privatize natural resources.

Internationally, the Morales regime has curried substantial favor from the current manifestations of the antiglobalization movement, and it is no coincidence that in April, 2010, activists and NGOs from around the world met in Tiquipaya, Bolivia, for the People's Climate Change Conference.

Within the progressive narrative, a project like the highway described above belongs to Bolivia's past. But in fact, it is a new initiative, the love child of Evo and Brazil's socialist president, Lula, another darling of the opponents of neoliberalism. And the capital is coming not from the IMF but from a Brazilian development bank, and the construction companies are all Brazilian.

The indigenous nations whose home will be destroyed by the highway—the Moxeños, Chimanés, and Yuracares—were not consulted before the agreement for the highway was signed. The nature reserve where they live, called TIPNIS, is unique in that the indigenous inhabitants are included in creating the management plan for the park, unlike other reserves that simply clear out the prior inhabitants, under the eurocentric assumption that human communities cannot live sustainably in nature. And on paper at least, TIPNIS's constitution prohibits any projects that will have a high environmental or social impact.

TIPNIS used to be the National Park Isiboro Secure. It was converted into the Indigenous Territory of the National Park Isiboro Secure (TIPNIS) as a direct result of strong pressure from below, most immediately a major indigenous march that crossed the country in 1990. In other words TIPNIS represents a victory of social struggle, from a time when Bolivia was ruled by a government everyone recognized as exploitative and militaristic. It is also one of the most important reserves of biodiversity on the planet, home to 108 mammal species, 470 different types of birds, 38 reptile and 53 amphibian species, and 188 types of fish, on 12,363 square kilometers of land. Thirty-eight of the vertebrate animal species that live there are in danger of extinction.

Adolfo Moye, an indigenous leader from the affected area, explains the importance of the park: “This place is our Eden, because here we have everything and precisely through the heart of our sacred land the government now wants to construct a highway. It’s the zone of refuge from the constant flooding of the [river] Beni. It’s the high ground where all of us, animals and people, find refuge.”

If the highway is built, it won’t only destroy the land immediately in its path. It will also divide animal habitats in half and cut across the migration routes of many species that move from the lowlands to the highlands during the rainy season; it will facilitate the illegal logging of protected trees that survive now only because there is no infrastructure to support logging; it will pollute the rivers; and encourage slash-and-burn agriculturalists to move in and cut down the forest for export-driven coca production (Andean communities grow coca as an important ritual and medicinal plant, whereas large scale cultivation for export goes to cocaine production).

The resolution of a gathering of indigenous inhabitants of the park states: “We are tired of sending cards and resolutions with our rejection of the initiative to construct a highway uniting Villa Tunari with San Ignacio de Moxos, which have never been attended or listened to by the prior or present government.”

In sum, Morales’ populist government proves no different from any other government, both in choosing destructive projects and ignoring those who protest them. The most novel thing about this project, in fact, has been the relative lack of opposition. So far, the only people moving against the highway are the inhabitants of the park and a few small indigenous and anarchist groups in other parts of the country. Before 2006, a project like this might have sparked road blockades and street battles up and down Bolivia.

And in the end, that is Evo’s real triumph: he has made Bolivia’s impoverished people identify with their government, so that it can go on doing what governments have always done. The highway is by no means the only development project of its kind. When there was a growing opposition to a lithium mine that will dessicate an already arid region of the country, Evo quelled the protests by promising the farmers’ organization leading them a share of the profits. By co-opting social movements rather than repress them, Bolivia’s progressive government has accomplished what the earlier military dictatorships never could—it has pacified the country’s rebellious tendencies. The various organizations that forced out multiple governments in recent years have now all been brought into the fold. Many movement leaders have been given government posts, and money (from the development projects) is shared with once rebellious organizations.

With generous payouts, radical rhetoric, an increase in welfare that hasn’t come close to alleviating the country’s poverty, and a chauvinistic development plan that

will ostensibly make Bolivia as powerful as its neighbors, the social movements themselves have been turned into the government's first line of defense.

Oscar Olivera, the author of **¡Cochabamba! Water War in Bolivia**, an influential figure in the labor movement, and a former comrade of Evo's, tells me: "There's no space to speak, to act, to mobilize, without being shut down, delegitimized, or maligned by the government [. . .] What they care most about is money, money to complete their promises of development. So what the government says is, where's the money? And it's in the mines, it's in the oil, it's in building highways. Nothing else interests them, just the money."

Carlos Crespo, an anarchist academic, describes the negative response from former comrades or people in the streets to anyone seen as anti-government. "One can't criticize the government because you'd be accused of playing into the Right, but the Right is destroyed in this country. It's Stalinist!"

There is a growing amount of resistance to the new government, although critics have little ground to stand on, with the entire organizational framework they used to form a part of being co-opted. The day after the interview with Oscar and Carlos, the streets of Cochabamba were blocked off by a protest against a new law that would allow the government to shut down critical media outlets.

Inside Bolivia, discontent with the regime is disadvantaged, but apparent. No one has been fooled more thoroughly than the progressives in other countries who have touted the rise progressive socialism in South America (Chavez in Bolivia, Correa in Ecuador, Lula in Brazil, and Morales in Bolivia) as a major victory for movements against corporate interests.

They were so easy to fool, one might call their triumphalism "willful ignorance." When all the delegates came to the Climate Change conference in Tiquipaya, the government simply had to cover up all the sawmills lining the main road from Cochabamba, and nobody asked what was behind the curtain.

In the pages of *The Progressive* or *Democracy Now!* one can find plenty of signs of the Left's infatuation with Evo. Even more bizarre is the adulation of arch South American progressive, Hugo Chavez, the model progressive who opted for an electoral victory after a military coup didn't work out. Rafael Uzcátegui, a member of the human rights organization Provea and journalist with the anarchist newspaper *El Libertario*, recently published a book that exposes the Chavez regime to its very core, *Venezuela: La Revolución como Espectáculo*.

In it, he describes how after Chavez took office, his "Bolivarian movement began a process of diluting the very social fabric that had brought it to power. [. . .] They achieved the rapid institutionalization of the social movements, out of which a body of leaders would be isolated and successively frozen, in the separation of leaders from followers."

Transforming the government into a populist one has not made it any less violent. On the contrary, in 2000 there were 104 police murders in Venezuela, and in 2008, after ten years under Chavez, the figure rose to 247. Between January 2008 and March 2009, Uzcátegui documents 10,103 investigations of police crimes such as abuse, assault, and torture, and only 22 cases in which police were arrested as a result.

But just like the Castro regime before it, and the USSR before that, Chavez can count on friendly publicity courtesy of the champions of social justice and human rights in other countries. In 2007, when pro-Chavez paramilitaries shot student and anarchist protestors during demonstrations against a public referendum that would have extended welfare and made Chavez president for life, *Democracy Now!* refused to run the story.

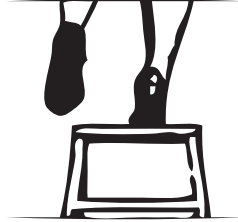
And, Uzcátegui reveals, when Michael Albert, author and editor with *Z Magazine*, came to Venezuela, he was put up in a five star hotel by the government, and on the very last day of his trip met with grassroots dissidents to tell them how great Chavez's program was. Noam Chomsky's visit went even further in legitimizing the Chavez regime.

Joshua Clover, writing in *The Nation* ("Busted: Stories of the Financial Crisis"), took the chorus of free-market apologists and pseudo-critics to task for their superficial and moralistic explanations of the financial crisis. He deftly argues how blaming lax regulation or human greed operates as a cover-up for the inherent boom and bust dynamics of capitalism, that quite aside from human greed, the imperative for capital to reproduce itself, requires investors to go out of business or to speculate against future earnings, no matter how irresponsible market conditions require them to be in the process.

Similarly, criticizing neoliberalism or yankee imperialism without criticizing capitalism itself creates a mythical past, in which the same sorts of destructive development projects and exploitative practices did not exist during the Keynesian period, and a mythical future, in which the same atrocities will not occur if new investments are backed by Brazilian or Bolivian capital. And failing to understand that a government, whether under the leadership of a progressive or a neoconservative, will continue to do what governments have done for all of history, is to condemn ourselves to the repetition of past failures, to set our sights low and become apologists for the resulting disappointments.

How pathetic it is to lose by winning. Fortunately, not everyone at the base of South American social struggles have given up the fight. In Bolivia, resistance is brewing at the grassroots, as indigenous and anarchist groups in TIPNIS, Cochabamba, and La Paz spread the word about the highway, and build opposition. Hopefully, activists in other countries won't aid those who are silencing them, just to preserve their own illusions.

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