Democracy or Dictatorship? Illiberal governance in Bolivia’s coca growers’ unions

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Drawing on long term ethnographic fieldwork with Bolivia’s Chapare coca growers’ unions, this article shows that coca growers do not see democracy and anti-liberal attitudes as mutually exclusive, but rather as interlinked projects. The use of sanctions and coercion within the union are accepted because the union’s goals are said to reflect those of each and every member, collapsing the distinction between executive power and legislative will. But, it is precisely this link that has broken since Morales and the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) came to power, and this has led to complaints of betrayal at the grassroots. Conflicts over local political ethics are explored with reference to drug control policy.

Keywords: Bolivia; coca; democracy; peasant unions; cocaine; authoritarianism,

Introduction

October 2006. Sergio Cayo, a reporter for the coca growers’ radio station, recorded an interview with union leader Luis Vásquez about how life in the Chapare had transformed since Evo Morales and the Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS) had been elected to government only ten months previously. Luis explained how over the preceding twenty years coca farmers like him, had been repressed by the militarised police. ‘We were chased down, abducted, locked up, beaten; we lost our brothers and sisters’ he said. But he went on to say that today things were looking up. Thanks to Morales calling an end to the US backed
war on drugs there was now peace, freedom and money to be made in the Chapare: ‘without Evo there would be no coca here, they wanted zero coca in the Tropics, without Evo we would be screwed!’

Fast-forward almost ten years to 2015. I was back in the Chapare and once again met up with Luis. We chatted about the MAS administration; only this time his narrative was full of anger and feelings of betrayal. Luis complained that Morales had let the unions down. That despite claiming to be the leader of the coca growers and Bolivia’s first ever-indigenous president, Morales had forgotten about where he came from. He said that the democracy Morales had instituted felt more like a ‘dictatorship’ with everything ‘…coming from above’. ‘These are not the principles of the political instrument [the MAS], this is not what we set out to do.’

The Cochabamba Tropics or the Chapare as it is more commonly known, is a vast humid lowland forest located in the centre of Bolivia. Here a population of just shy of 200,000 people are dedicated to the production of the coca plant. Indigenous peoples have consumed coca for millennia; they either chew it or prepare it as a tea, and it is present at every ritual from birth to death (Carter and Mamani 1986). But while many people regard the leaf to be special, if not sacred, a great deal of the local crop is used to manufacture cocaine - and some farmers are directly involved in the processing and smuggling of cocaine paste - a first step to refining pure cocaine (Grisaffi forthcoming). For decades, successive governments denounced the agricultural unions of the Chapare as narco-terrorists (Rivera 2011, 24), but since 2006 they have had a government in power, one that claims to represent their interests.

Immediately following MAS’s accession to power coca growers were enthused by Morales who they saw as their saviour, and yet today some describe the union as akin to a dictatorship. I take Luis’s talk of Morales, not as a comment on the party, so much as an observation on the unions, because it is the union that mediates the coca growers relationship with government, and as President, Morales has continued in his role as general secretary of the coca unions. Here I ask: why is it that some coca growers have come to view the union as authoritarian? And what do they even mean by authoritarian in the first place?
Commentators have long denounced Bolivia’s social movements for being autocratic, citing repressive forms of community justice, use of sanctions, and the way they impose rules on private activities (Basset 2005: 193, Campero 2011: 26, Jackson et al. 2003: 6). The Chapare unions, which form the backbone of the ruling MAS party, have come in for the most criticism (Cordova et al. 2006: 93), provoking headlines such as ‘MAS-ista dictatorship in the Chapare’ (Los Tiempos 2015) ‘We live in a sindical dictatorship’ (Clarín 2008) and ‘The kingdom of the Chapare’ (Seleme Antelo 2013). The debate about the authoritarian qualities of grassroots movements has also been used to indicate concern about the MAS’s adoption of indigenous models for politics, for example, in the 2009 Constitution (Laserna 2010, Mayorga 2017, Weyland 2013, Gamarra 2007, Farah 2009).

It is true that grassroots unions in Bolivia use sanctions including corporeal punishment, to control their members. But, as I soon came to learn, the reasons coca growers like Luis Vásquez complain of dictatorship are not the same as those given by outsiders. Democracy, as it is commonly understood, is rooted in the idea of competitive elections, individual liberties, universal suffrage and the secret ballot. We could add to that list other liberal principals such as the supremacy of the people, the consent of the governed, political equality and equal civil rights for all individuals. These make up what David Nugent (2008) refers to as ‘normative democracy’. But these are not the qualities that coca growers recognize as salient features of the democracy they practice in their grassroots organizations.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in the Chapare since 2005, I show how coca growers do not see democracy and anti-liberal attitudes as mutually exclusive, but rather as inter-linked projects. In what follows, I describe how each grassroots union has the ambition to be like a state and to control its members, but at the same time there is a drive towards maintaining a connection to the grassroots by promoting equivalence and participation. There is thus spontaneous participation by those who call themselves members, but also coercion levelled against anyone who transgresses communal values. The use of sanctions is accepted because the union’s goals are said to reflect those of each and every member, thus collapsing executive power and legislative will.
But, it is precisely this bottom up control that was subverted once the MAS entered into power.

In what follows I show how, on a local level, the coca unions had pursued a ‘politics of bread and butter’ (Koch 2016) that appealed to the coca growers’ material and everyday demands. Decisions were made amongst kin and neighbours at the level of the sindicato and were premised on a shared economic and social experience. But when the MAS was voted into government, it was no longer only beholden to its social movement base, rather it had to govern for all citizens and to abide by international frameworks - constraining the Morales regime’s abilities to enact the social movement’s agenda - specifically demands relating to coca production.

Historically, there was an unspoken understanding that everyone was (directly or indirectly) involved in the illicit cocaine trade, that it was permissible and not morally reprehensible, less so 'legally' ('legal' referring to the union’s own policing mechanisms) enforceable (see Author). The sense of betrayal then, stems from the fact that the same union leaders who had previously tacitly accepted cocaine paste production and unlimited coca cultivation as the 'bread and butter' of coca growers' lives, now have to officially reject it, as enshrined by the ‘cato agreement’ and the enforcement apparatus that comes with it. It is not the violation of individual rights and liberal principals that leads to claims of authoritarianism then, but rather the union leader’s inability to safeguard the member’s economic interests.

In telling this story, this article responds to a recent call to explore how rural transformations have contributed to and are shaped by what outsiders have seen as authoritarian movements (Scoones et al. 2018). It shows how people view a movement from within can change over time. Authoritarianism is not an inherent feature of a movement or a political position, an essentialising attribute of the anti-democratic will of the coca growers and their unions, as some Bolivian media and political commentators would have it. Rather, it has to be thought of as an attribute of the relationship between those who govern and the governed and hence is more precarious, shifting and nuanced than often assumed. In this case, the coca growers political ethics were corrupted as the executive power disengaged from the legislative will of the grassroots unions. As
of November 2019 Bolivia faces a moment of social and political crisis - Morales was forced out of office and is now in exile in Mexico. Against this background it is essential to understand how the MAS’s core support base will react.

The Movement for Socialism

Evo Morales and the MAS party won a resounding victory in the 2005 Presidential election, and was re-elected twice with a clear majority. Under Morales and the MAS, Bolivia experienced a decade of strong economic performance and relative political stability (Molina 2019). But in November 2019 the MAS political project was derailed when, following elections marred by (contested) claims of electoral fraud (Long et al. 2019), a massive social protest supported by the military and police, forced Evo Morales into exile. Debates have raged over the meaning of these events, on the one hand some commentators argue that a popular uprising has restored democracy, while on the other, Morales’s supporters say that it was a coup orchestrated by the USA (McNelly 2019a, Cusicanqui 2019, Zibechi 2019).

The political vehicle which eventually would become the MAS, was established by a confederation of peasant unions in 1995, with the coca growers taking a leading role. Ex-union leader, Don Celso Lima remembers cycling to Santa Cruz with several hundred other delegates, all dressed in green to represent coca, to attend the founding meeting of the party. He explained: ‘we decided to make a party because we realised that through union action we couldn’t achieve anything. So we thought we need another tactic to make ourselves heard.’ Initially the MAS was more a federation of social organisations than a political party (Zuazo 2010: 122). Members came from workers’ and small farmers’ unions, village committees, popular urban movements and indigenous communities (see Anria 2018: 61-97).

In a 2014 interview Alejandro Peredo, the President of the MAS for the department of Cochabamba, explained that the MAS is not a party but a ‘...political project of the social movements.’ He said that the traditional political parties were owned by individuals who dispensed cash and hand picked candidates, but the MAS was different, it has no owner, rather ‘each militant is an
owner; all of the organisations (social movements) are owners’ and he stressed that ‘...nobody can override the bases (rank and file).’ The stated aim of the party then, was to take social movement demands to the political arena but also to get union leaders elected into positions of state power (do Alto 2007).

Coca union members often signalled that the party should be subsumed by the unions: they referred to the MAS as ‘our political instrument’ or they spoke about it in terms of ‘we built it’ and ‘we suffered for it’ and ‘it belongs to us’ (see also García Yapur et al. 2015). Put another way, the party is thought of as an extension of grassroots collective action, collapsing the union into the government (Grisaffi 2013). This view is echoed in the writing of sociologist and Vice-president Alvaro Garcia Linera (2014) who describes the MAS as a political tool which serves the interests of popular organisations. Fabiola Escárzaga (2012) described the MAS as a ‘government of social movements’.

There is debate over just how much influence social movements really have in government, however. It has been argued that since 2002, when the MAS became the main opposition, it transformed into a more traditional political party and became characterised by vertical decision making and centralist tendencies (Harten 2011, Zegada, Torrez, and Camara 2008). Gaya Makran (2016) and Moira Zuazo (2010) have argued that the MAS has taken a top-down approach to governing, relying on the distribution of patronage to buy political support and the co-optation of social movement leaders (see also do Alto and Stefanoni 2010, Zegada and Komandina 2017, Molina 2013, Farthing 2019). Angus McNelly (2019b) provides a vivid illustration of just these processes at work within Bolivia’s national labour movement, the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB). He argues that since 2005 the MAS has built ‘...corporatist relationships with the COB, aligning the personal interests of the union leaders with those of the MAS, creating a MASista labour officialdom’ which he argues has undermined the labour movements ability to represent the working classes (McNelly 2019: 897). Nancy Postero (2017: 17) argues that the centralization of power has led to feelings of dissatisfaction at the grassroots. This article engages with these debates by examining how democracy, as it is imagined and practiced by the coca growers, has changed during the time the MAS was in power.
**Alternative Visions of Democracy**

Anthropologists have shown that if we only look at the procedural elements, voting, elections, and so on, then we fail to understand the cultural specificity of democratic practices. Citizens’ employ their own criteria for evaluating democratic practice and these ideas are rooted in deeper social processes (Michelutti 2008, Lazar 2017, Nugent 2010). Take for example, Insa Koch’s (2017) work on voter apathy in the UK. She argues that we can only make sense of low rates of voter turn-out if we first understand how people view politicians as the antithesis of ordinary sociality. In this context voter withdrawal becomes a normal, if not socially expected response. In a similar vein, research on brokerage shows how elections are not just formal procedures, but rather are a space for voters to establish personalised relationships with politicians (Auyero 2000, Lazar 2004).

The form of social organisation in the Andes in the pre-conquest era - and still functioning in some parts of Bolivia - is the Ayllu, which is defined as ‘...a group of persons related to each other by kinship ties, and collectively inhabiting a territory which they also own.’ (de la Cadena 2013: 59). Ayllu members pursue their own vision of democracy which includes the requirement of service, rotating leadership positions, extensive consultation, and horizontal forms of governance (Rivera 1990: 102-3). There is no private property or market relations; rather, the inhabitants rely on *ayni*, defined as ‘a symmetrical exchange of delayed reciprocity between equals’ (Allen 1981: 165). Marisol de la Cadnea (2013: 59) stresses the interdependence of ayllu members, describing the ayllu as a ‘relational practice’.

Anthropologists have traced the continuity and rupture between the ayllu form of organisation and contemporary social movement practice (Fabricant 2012, Lazar 2008, Weismantel 2006). While noting that there is a certain romance to the way contemporary activists have mobilised ideas about the ayllu, this literature suggests that we cannot draw out hard and fast distinctions between the ayllu and union forms of organisation. Further, it shows that when it comes to analysing political life in indigenous peasant and popular urban communities, we cannot start from the assumption of the pre-eminence of
the self-reliant individual. Rather grassroots political ethics are grounded in
kinship and particular understandings of sociality that value care,
complementarity, solidarity, and place over self-interested behaviour (see also
Canessa 2012, Harris 2000).

This is not to say, however, that people are predisposed to act collectively.
Andean rural and popular urban communities have always been characterised
by a tendency toward factionalism, alongside a strong communitarian ethic
(Albó 1977). To tame individualist tendencies popular movements often employ
repressive tactics, such as closed meetings, compulsory participation, fines, and
conditioning union-controlled assets on involvement in collective actions (Rivera
1990; Lazar 2008; Zibechi 2010). Nicole Fabricant (2010: 95) has described the
illiberal forms that grassroots democracy can take in Bolivia’s landless
movement. Members use violent punishments, such as whipping, to ensure
compliance with the established moral order. But while such measures might be
effective in the short term, they also run the risk of alienating some members.
The point is that, even amongst grassroots members, there is no singular vision
of what constitutes appropriate political ethics. As Susan Ellison (2018: 13)
writes from her research in El Alto, ‘...the same political tactics some activists
described to me as undeniably and even radically democratic, others
characterised as grossly antidemocratic, authoritarian, and a violation of
individual rights’. It is just this tension that I want to investigate here, by asking -
how and when does a system of governance loose its legitimacy? Lets now travel
to the Chapare, to build a better understanding of daily life and what it means to
be a union member.

Coca, Cocaine and Colonization

‘Well... we just fell here, really!’ said Doña Mercedes, a coca grower in her late
60s. Her parents died when she was just fourteen years old and so she
abandoned her rural village in the Cochabamba Valleys, to find work as a maid in
Oruro; a mining town located in the highlands. There, she met Don Jose, then a
young man who had recently given up working in the mines to drive a taxi. In the
early 1970s the couple ran a small business, travelling to the mining camps that
surrounded the city, were they would fix-up peoples clothes and sell plastic buckets and boxes. One day Jose suggested that they should try to find new opportunities in the Chapare. Mercedes recalls: ‘he said... “They talk so much about Chapare. ...Why don’t we go there? Lets go one day to see what its like, to see if we can make some money”.

Don Jose’s enthusiasm was stoked by the fact that the Chapare was in the throws of an economic boom driven by rising demand for cocaine in the US and Europe, which caused the price of coca leaf to soar (Painter 1994, 15). The so-called ‘coca boom’ (1979-1985) could not have come at a better time, the Bolivian economy was battered by the combination of a severe drought, hyperinflation, and a draconian government-engineered deflation that pushed unemployment to over 20 per cent (Dunkerley 1990). At the same time as people were pushed people out of the highlands, US backed agrarian modernisation projects opened up the Amazon to development, making lowland colonisation and ultimately drugs production a foregone conclusion (Gootenberg 2018). In the early 1980s the state turned a blind eye to drug production and for a period actively encouraged it (Gillies 2018). Local shop owner, Don Eduardo recalls watching military conscripts processing drugs by the side of the road and then packing them up to be flown out on military planes.

Throughout the 1980s tens of thousands of unemployed workers and hard-pressed farmers, flocked to the Chapare to claim land and seek work in the illicit industry (see Leons and Sanabria 1997). Paid work was abundant including planting, harvesting and drying coca leaf or processing cocaine in the artisanal workshops located close to the coca fields. Workers, known locally as pichicateros, macerate coca leaf in a mixture of acid, kerosene (or gasoline) and water to extract the cocaine alkaloid. Kevin Healy (1986) reports that wages for pisadores, who were hired to mix up the toxic mulch by stomping on it, were greater than wages earned in urban areas.

In 1978, Don Jose and Doña Mercedes loaded up their pick-up truck and set out on the long journey down the eastern slopes of the Andes to start a new life in the lowlands. They ended up in a small village called Aurora. ‘Back then in Aurora, there were no more than ten houses, and all of them were made of wood. There was no electricity, none at all. We went around with torches and kerosene
lamps’ Mercedes told me. The couple sold products from the back of their truck to the people who would emerge from the jungle each Sunday. Mercedes said: ‘They made good money those pichicateros (drug workers) and we did too, my pockets were full of money.’ Jose told me fantastic stories of the boom years: he said that peasants would turn up from the highlands dirty and wearing rubber sandals but within the month ‘he turned into a gringo already’, wearing leather boots and two gold watches. ‘Peasants with perfume!’ he joked.

To this day the illicit cocaine trade continues to be a cornerstone of the local economy, and farmers’ involvement is a routine aspect of everyday life (Grisaffi forthcoming). Many people find work either directly processing cocaine, or else in support roles such as smuggling precursor chemicals (like gasoline or sulphuric acid) or acting as a lookout for the drug workers. Others benefit indirectly: the cocaine dollars keep local hardware stores, builders, bars and transport firms afloat. In the words of one grower, ‘...everyone is involved in the white factory (coca production) ... somehow.’ But while there is money to be made, the coca growers and paste processors are not the major beneficiaries of this illicit trade. In 2014 people who worked in coca production earned around 30 dollars per entrada (session) for intermittent and dangerous work, and even the owners of the artisanal production units only netted around 1000 dollars a month (Grisaffi 2014). During fieldwork in 2019 local drug traffickers told me that the refining of pure cocaine is increasingly common in the region. This much was confirmed by the acting and ex-national directors of the special anti-drugs police force.¹

Defending Coca

Not long after Doña Mercedes and Don Jose came to live in the Chapare the USA launched an offensive against drug producers and traffickers South of the border. Militarized interventions with names like ‘Operation Blast Furnace’, ‘The Andean Initiative’ and the ‘Triennial Plan’ sowed chaos in the Andes, while having little impact on the flow of drugs reaching the USA (Youngers and Rosin 2005). In 1988, the Bolivian congress passed anti-drug Law 1008 (in force until 2017), under significant US pressure. Law 1008 outlawed coca cultivation in the
Chapare and in so doing turned the peasant farmers into the ‘enemy’ of the drug war (Albó 2002, 75). The Chapare was declared a ‘red zone’ subject to special policing measures (Gutierrez Aguilar 2014, 86).

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s military conscripts accompanied by heavily armed members of the police force (UMOPAR), entered small farmsteads to manually uproot crops in the Chapare. Eradication teams killed, abused, and seriously wounded scores of coca farmers, torched homesteads, and incarcerated thousands of people (Ledebur 2005). This is exactly what Luis Vásquez was referring to when he said that he was ‘chased down, abducted, locked up’ (see above). Women spoke of the sexual assaults they suffered at the hands of the police force. In a 2005 interview, Natalia Rojas explained ‘Here, more than anything, the women suffer violent sexual assaults from the Leos (Militarized Police).’ The irony of the US funding Bolivia’s security forces to eradicate coca was not lost on Don Jose, who pointed out that the US attacked them for growing coca while at the same time demanding cocaine, “... the Gringos go crazy for this shit!” he said.

Forced eradication caused economic hardship and fuelled discontent. In the face of on-going repression, the Chapare coca growers’ built a powerful movement to resist the states’ anti-coca policies. The first agricultural federation emerged in the mid-1960s to represent the interests of the area’s peasant farmers before the state, but also within the Bolivian labor movement more broadly. Today there are six coca federations in the Chapare and, with over 45,000 members, it is one of the most powerful social movements in the country (Salazar Ortuño 2008: 137-238). In the words of one leader: ‘necessity forces us to plant coca ...that’s why we built the union - to stop the politics of zero coca.’ The union’s repertoire of protest included blocking the main road that runs through the Chapare, long marches to the capital city La Paz, and national level protests: events that catapulted coca union leader, Evo Morales, onto the national stage. The union also established lightly armed self-defence committees with the aim to prevent the military from eradicating coca plantations (Oikonomakis 2019:154-5).

The criminalized status of the coca leaf meant that the arguments inherited from the displaced miners regarding class and the right to dignified
work were no longer valid. The farmers needed a new discourse, one that would legitimate why they should be given the right to grow coca that extended beyond their immediate economic concerns: indigeneity was one way this could be achieved. Given the mounting success of identity-based movements elsewhere in Bolivia and Latin America more broadly (Canessa 2006), not to mention the diminishing power of the left as a result of the neoliberal onslaught on labour, the coca unions shifted their previous class-based rhetoric to one about indigenous traditions and pride rooted in the idea of sacred coca (Yashar 2005, 189-90).

**The Sindicato State**

There has always been more territory than state in Bolivia (Barragán 2009). As such the state has been described as having a ‘fragmented presence’ (Quiles 2019), or as a ‘state with holes’ (PNUD 2007: 83). That is not to say the holes represent a vacuum, rather these spaces have been filled by non-state actors, such as regional elites, social movements, trade unions, or indigenous organisations, and they have come to exert governing functions (PNUD 2007: 99). Nowhere is this more evident than in the Chapare, where the unions constitute ‘the region’s primary civil authority, practicing a de-facto autonomy’ (Gutierrez Aguilar 2014: 80).

The first wave of settlers who arrived in the 1950s and 60s established agricultural unions as a way to distribute and control land. However, given the almost complete absence of a state presence, they soon became an organ of community self-government and a vehicle to address the community’s development needs. Don Silvio Zavala, a man in his late 70s who was a self-declared pioneer (one of the first settlers), said: ‘back then, there was plenty of land, it was free. All you had to do was to say that you would farm it and join the union’. He went on. ‘...We cut out our own roads, built our own schools, made our own laws .... there was no help from anyone outside, it was us... we made the state present!’ To this day the unions maintain the role of local governance, each base level union is responsible for regulating relations between members, administering justice, taxing local businesses, environmental protection
(including managing waste and preventing people from fishing with dynamite) and investing in and building small-scale public works. But while the unions play an important role in local-governance, they have to constantly negotiate the terms of their autonomy with an encroaching state. Don Silvio explained that: ‘…with compañero Evo in power, now the state is more present … but we still respect our own laws’.

The sindicatos control access to land. As such, anyone who wants land is obliged to join, but the coca growers put strict conditions on membership. They normally only allow people who they already know or who are related to a current member. So for example, Mercedes and Jose lived and worked in Aurora for almost two years before they were invited to join the union and claim an eight hectare plot. This strict selection procedure is deemed to be important because, in the words of Don Jose: ‘here we are like a family, we don't want anyone who will cause us a problem.’ Consequently, family members, fictive kin such as godparents, and neighbours also meet as union members. Coca farmers often describe the grassroots union as being like an extended family and people are very loyal to their organisation.

Membership of the union comes with a range of obligations; everything from attending regular meetings and taking part in communal work parties to being present at protests and even voting for the same political party. These duties must be fulfilled, and the grassroots unions have a range of sanctions to ensure compliance, these include, fines, and community work. If people act against the interests of the community then the sindicato’s retribution can be severe, including corporal punishment (hanging, beating, whipping) and expulsion and loss of land. Don Walter Caceres, the director of the coca union’s radio station explained under what circumstances a person might be expelled: ‘well if you commit a murder, rape, or if you become a person who is politically against the political instrument (MAS), if you are person who is trying to divide the community - in these circumstances that’s when they might decide to use stronger sanctions.’

For their part the coca farmers describe their grassroots union as being like a state. Doña Mercedes put it this way. ‘It’s as if it is a state, a mini state … we have certain laws to try to solve our problems … we try not to involve the police,
people do not trust the police.’ It’s true, the unions deliberately exclude state actors, the regular (municipal) police cannot enter into the coca growers’ territory without first asking permission from a union leader, which is often not granted. If they enter without permission, then they run the risk of violent assault. A local police commander told me ‘here the police, well we have the law on our side, but they have more power, they don’t just control the unions, but the communities too… they decide who comes and who goes.” He went on to say ‘…we just stay at the margins.’ For exactly this reason, the municipal police refer to the Chapare as la tierra de nadie, a no man’s land. Historically, the exclusion of state actors benefitted people who worked in drug production and the union turned a blind eye to these activities. But with the MAS in power this has changed.

**Sindicato Democracy**

For coca growers, full membership in a political community is dependent upon the exercise of rights and social obligations that far exceed the right to vote. The unions’ assembly culture is informed by Andean self-governing principles mixed with Marxist traditions inherited from the miners, most of who migrated to the region after the closure of mines in 1986. The unions are characterised by a strong communitarian ethic: their decisions are taken at regular face-to-face meetings that involve the entire community and the emphasis is put on reaching consensus. The assembly culture of the unions does not allow for the possibility of contrasting positions, and from the perspective of many farmers, when the organisation is working well, ‘all are in agreement.’ Anyone who transgresses commonly held values risks being ostracised, sanctioned, and even expelled from the organisation. But while coca growers put an emphasis on reaching consensus, not everyone participates equally in debate. Men’s voices carry more weight than those of women. Union leader, Doña Segundina Orellana told me that in the context of a meeting: ‘there is always this feeling that women are somehow inferior, that the woman is inferior to the man’. She also said that the women are organized and are advancing their position within the union structure, however.
Leaders are selected via a popular vote. Union Leader, Ruth Sejas explains: ‘we are always chosen by our organisations, we are not named by our highest leaders ... no it is the bases that have to choose.’ The most important feature of grassroots democracy is that leaders must respect the will of the bases, they must lead by obeying. Jose explained: ‘nobody can override the decisions of the bases. The majority has to decide, and the leader has to follow - there is no imposition, leaders cannot give orders, they only ever act as a guide’. The notion that authorities should take leadership from below is not an abstract ideal, but deadly serious: leaders have to do what the bases say. At monthly union meetings the doors are locked, a register is taken, and members might spend up to ten hours debating important issues. Because everyone is related through shared residence or kinship, it is very difficult for leaders to negate their duty.

The rank and file have several mechanisms to keep their leaders in check, this might take the form of chastisement, or recalling a leader, but the union can also employ more punitive measures. Union members do not shy away from using physical punishment to force leaders into compliance. Ruth Sejas explains ‘if they [the bases] have given you their trust, that you will work as their representative and you break that trust ... well they can kick you out ... you can even loose your land’. The operating logic of the grassroots unions is scaled up from the lowest level of the organisation (the sindicato), to the central, federation and confederation level. This creates lines of accountability by which leaders can be judged and if needs be, recalled.

The use of sanctions and the fact there is little space for dissent might justify the outsiders’ view that the coca unions are authoritarian. But being a member of a sindicato is about more than simply abiding by its rules and turning up to meetings for fear of being punished. People actively participate in what they refer to as the organic life of the organisation - or vida organica. Coca grower ideas about how democracy should be enacted are not enshrined in abstract codes and procedures, but rather are anchored in deeply held understandings of what it means to be a good person—what the coca growers refer to as being bien cumplido, that is to say fulfilling one’s duties. Coca growers use the Quechua word ayni to describe the system of mutual aid that prevails in
the region. Ayni can be practiced in many ways, from low-level daily exchanges of food, drinks, or invitations to sit and chew coca, to working in a neighbours fields for no pay, or gifting crates of beer for a celebration such as a wedding. Even attending union meetings can be referred to as ayni as it is about contributing to the collective wellbeing of the community. The point is each person has to be entangled in the lives of others, offering support when called on, but also asking for assistance in turn. By engaging in these daily Maussian exchanges coca growers express care and commitment to one another. These relationships become central to boundary-drawing processes between insiders and outsiders. Only those who live up to locally defined expectations of care and commitment are considered to be true members of the sindicato deserving of its protection.

The features that outsiders might view as anti-democratic such as the use of fines, sanctions and corporal punishment are understood differently from within. When I put the question ‘are the sindicatos a form of dictatorship?’ to Don Alvino Pinto, a coca grower in his late 30s, he insisted that they are not. ‘The decisions, we make them in a democratic way, any decision that we are going to make, well its always a group decision.’ He went on ‘The leader cannot use his authority, rather he is always asking the bases what he is going to do. The decision is always collective.’ From the coca growers’ perspective then, a decision is only valid if it has been made with the direct participation of all community members. The coca growers put an intrinsic value on political participation, which they describe as a moral duty that everyone must fulfill. This leaves a final question though, why have some coca growers, like Luis Vásquez (introduced above), come to call into question the union’s assembly culture?

**Mediating Government**

Radio Sovereignty, the coca grower owned and operated station, was broadcasting a speech by Fernando Ochoa then the general secretary of one of the six coca grower Federations. Fernando’s discourse was designed to gather support for a rally to be held in the city of Cochabamba, he called for 100% of the rank and file to participate. As he listened to the speech, Don Edgar Jiminez - a
coca grower in his 60s and an ex-union leader - became agitated. He complained that he would rather work in his fields, but reminded me that if he did not go to the rally then there would be a steep fine to pay. He complained that people used to mobilise because they wanted to, but now he says ‘its all politics’. ‘...They [union leaders] are useless; they just won’t let us get on with our work. What do they call it when they oblige you to go, when they haven’t even consulted the bases? ...They call it a dictatorship!’

Researchers working with social movements across Bolivia, have noted how grassroots members use critical rhetoric towards leaders as a means to counterbalance the centralisation of power (Lazar 2008: 262, Bjork-James 2018). But Don Edgar is not just making a criticism of a specific decision or leader, rather he calls into question the very essence of the union’s assembly culture. As we have seen, the union has a long history of sanctioning its members; coercion of this type was always deemed to be legitimate because the union’s goals were said to reflect those of each and every member. What is different, however, and what Edgar alludes to - is that today sanctions are said to come from above, thereby breaking the link between the leadership and the bases.

Rank and file union members lay the blame at the feet of the leaders. They say that leaders have been bought off with the offer of government jobs or access to resources. Grassroots members - particularly older ex-leaders used words like “ambitious,” “opportunistic,” and “self-interested” to describe the younger cohort of leaders who have rapidly climbed the union career ladder and now occupy important positions in the union strucutre. They say that the leadership system has ossified, with higher level union leaders no longer being selected by the bases at all, but rather ‘adedeo’ that is to say, personal appointments made by senior leaders, including Evo Morales himself. One farmer explained: ‘The leaders who get on [rise up the union career ladder] are those who are most aligned with the MAS.’ Another said: ‘The leaders, in reality they submit to Evo Morales. Evo says something and then they have to do it… if not, then they lose his favor, they are no longer his friends. That’s how he manages things.’ There is nothing ostensibly new about the centralization of power - what is different
however, is that the interests of the rank and file and leadership do not neatly align in the way they did when the coca growers were in opposition.

Despite the power of the coca growers within Bolivia, larger political and legal structures constrain the Morales regime’s abilities to enact the social movement’s agendas - particularly when it comes to drug control. Coca leaf remains a restricted substance under current UN treaties, thus, the MAS government has had to advance a policy that, while acknowledging the importance of coca to Andean culture and venerating the sacred leaf, simultaneously limits its cultivation as a measure to reduce cocaine production. Today registered farmers in specific zones are allowed to grow a small plot of coca - measuring 40 x 40 m - referred to as a cato, and the unions are empowered to self-police to ensure individual growers respect this limit. Higher level union leaders (many of whom have been hand picked by Morales) vigorously enforce the policy - organising annual revisions and organizing for the uprooting of any coca over the limit. People who do not respect the rules face harsh sanctions, including a two-year growing ban. Researchers have hailed this approach as a non-violent alternative to restricting coca cultivation. Along with keeping coca to the lowest levels in the Andean region, the policy, which prioritises development assistance to coca growing regions, has raised incomes, increased opportunities for off farm work and expanded access to services like education, health and potable water (Grisaffi, Farthing, and Ledebur 2017, 146-47). And yet, not everyone is sanguine.

The cato policy was originally developed with the participation of the coca unions, but it was only ever supposed to be a temporary arrangement until a study on national coca consumption could be completed, which would form the basis for a new policy. Many rank-and-file members described the sacrifices they were making to honor the policy - and told me that they hoped that Morales would lift the cap on cultivation to allow each member to plant two or three catos (if not a several hectares of coca). When this did not occur, some accused the government of selling out, arguing that the cato does not generate enough cash to support a family. Take the case of Don Fernando Lazo, a farmer who said that his plot only generated around 200 dollars a month, but this ‘... will not cover everything’. He made clear the disillusion he felt with the current policy.
Another grower told me ‘....all we got is this lousy cato! What did we bother fighting for?’

Those engaged with illicit activities also felt that their interests were under attack. Above, we saw that cocaine paste production and trafficking is an unremarkable aspect of everyday life involving a large portion of the population (see Author). In the past the Unions could largely ignore drug trafficking - the demand was simply to demilitarize the region and legalize coca cultivation - but with the MAS in power this is no longer the case. Morales and the MAS have leaned on the unions to put an end to illicit activity in the region. Today, union leaders call on the base level unions to set up road blocks to search vehicles for drugs and chemicals used to manufacture cocaine, they lead commissions to check that nobody has a drug workshop on their land, and they expel those who are involved in illicit activity. Union led actions like those outlined here, have forced drug workers to re-locate their activities deeper into the jungle away from union controlled areas - and this has negatively impacted people who are dependent on this industry for their livelihoods.

Given the emphasis the coca growers put on bottom up control we might expect them to voice their concerns about the limitations of current policy at union meetings. But this generally is not the case. Speaking about coca and its connection to drugs is a taboo subject which is never discussed at Union meetings. Moreover, most people worried that if they voiced a criticism of the MAS then they risked being punished, including having their (now legal) coca plot taken away from them. One told me that with the cato they were ‘held to ransom’ by the government and that the government can use it as leverage to control the union. Don Carlos, a coca grower in his fifties, explained ‘...It’s [the cato] a double-edged sword; sure it gives us a bit of money, but it is used to control us’. There have been cases where the state coca monitoring institution (UDESTRO) has ripped up coca plantations of union members who have opposed union mandates (Grisaffi 2019, 170). The lack of accountability, has led some grassroots members to complain of betrayal. This is often narrated in terms of the corruption of grassroots democratic ideals, they know that their leaders now serve the MAS not the bases. It is for this reason that Luis Vásquez (introduced above) says that the union is no longer democratic - not because of the use of
sanctions or punishment to ensure compliance, but rather because they consider that union leaders are no longer directly accountable to the rank and file members.

**Conclusion**

Within the Chapare, the unions represent a de-facto state, but this is a very particular kind of state, one that is grounded in personalised connections, kinship and a common local knowledge. Most of all, it is premised on the commitment to shared livelihoods around the production of coca and the coca growers’ direct and indirect involvement in the cocaine trade, considered to be a ‘bread and butter’ issue. When measured against a liberal yardstick that values individual rights and freedoms, the Chapare agricultural unions do indeed appear to be anti-democratic. There is no secret ballot, individual rights are routinely undermined, and anyone who opposes the communal consensus risks being deprived of rights, fined, and even expelled from their community. From the outside then, it does look like the *dictadura sindical* so feared by liberal theorists. But this is not how it is experienced from within.

What makes the illiberal elements of sindicato democracy socially acceptable is that decisions are said to come from the bases -defined at assemblies and agreed via consensus. These principles of bottom up control have informed how rank and file members expect Morales and his ministers to act in government. But, there are challenges to scaling up grassroots models of democratic engagement and remaining true to these political ethics. Once voted into government the principle of subservient leaders becomes difficult to enforce as the idea of ‘the people’ becomes abstracted from the concrete into an ‘imagined community’ to be governed. According to grassroots members, union leaders have been bought off - and now serve the MAS’s agenda. The biggest challenge is policing coca and cocaine paste production, which shifted from being something that safeguarded peasant livelihoods to an issue that had to be controlled - from the top down. Union led action against drug production and excess coca cultivation has impacted on some peasant households.
In tracing out this story, the article makes a substantive contribution to debates on authoritarianism. The tendency to portray certain sectors of the population as authoritarian is not restricted to Bolivia. Political scientists analysing the growing popularity of anti-system right wing movements in the USA and Europe have written about ‘authoritarian voters’ (MacWilliams 2016, Hetherington and Weiler 2009). And scholars working on Latin America have noted high levels of democratic support for harsh criminal justice measures such as the use of minimum mandatory sentences, corporeal punishment and highly repressive policing (Caldeira and Holston 1999, Caldeira 2000, Denyer Willis 2015). In Europe and the USA, popular support for punitivism has led to calls to insulate policy making in the domain of criminal justice from the excesses of the public (Lacey 2008, Zimring and Johnson 2006, 273, Garland 2014).

Both, coca growers and right wing commentators use words like ‘dictatorship’ and ‘authoritarian’ to describe political systems that they do not agree with. But while they might use the same language the allegations at the heart of what they are trying to articulate are quite different. For the coca growers something or someone is authoritarian when they do not ‘lead by obeying’ - that is to say when they act autonomously, not respecting the collective decision. Authoritarianism then, is not an essential feature of a particular system or people but rather has to be understood as the result of a negotiated process: it is a quality that people can acknowledge in some circumstances and reject in others. This clashes with the prevailing wisdom outlined above, that ‘the people’ either are authoritarian or that they are not - that the system has authoritarian currents or not.

The case of coca growers’ growing disillusionment with the functioning of their unions, and their own shift from a language of solidarity to one of dictatorship, shows that people are rarely just one thing or another - rather the label of authoritarianism is a moral language that captures a changing and ultimately deeply fragile relationship with the leadership. Thus, in so far as the label has any analytical value, authoritarianism describes a disjuncture between political expectations and practices, one that is deeply felt in Bolivia and beyond. Finally, it is worth noting that over recent weeks the coca growers have mobilized in large numbers in defence of the government of Evo Morales. Thus,
while they might express disappointment with the way their union has changed, they remain committed to the MAS project and will fight to protect it.

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1 Local people directly involved in the illicit trade told me that they buy up cheaper Peruvian cocaine paste in the VRAEM, refine it in the Chapare and then transport it to Brazil for sale. The acting and ex-national director of the anti-narcotics police force confirmed that cocaine refining in the Chapare had expanded in recent years.