

## FROM THE GRASSROOTS TO THE PRESIDENTIAL PALACE: EVO MORALES AND THE COCA GROWERS' UNION IN BOLIVIA

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Evo Morales and the *Movimiento Al Socialismo* (MAS) party captured the Bolivian presidency with a majority of the popular vote in 2005, and repeated that feat in 2009 and 2014. Morales and the MAS are part of a broader process that swept Latin America in the 2000s, often referred to as the 'pink tide', when a wave of leftist leaders, parties, and movements came to power in various Latin American countries. What is unique about the Bolivian case however is that the movements that put Morales in power have commonly been labelled 'Indigenous,' a depiction that Morales has encouraged. For example every year he returns to Tiwanaku (the ruins of an ancient Aymara temple located outside the capital city La Paz) where, dressed as an Inca priest he participates in indigenous rituals. In his public declarations Morales has decried the persistence of colonialism and pledged his commitment to protect and lead the Indigenous peoples of the Americas.

Morales's rhetoric has sparked the imagination of journalists who have invoked the polarization of Bolivian society, provoking headlines such as 'Columbus toppled as indigenous people rise up after five centuries' (Carroll and Almudevar, 2007) and 'Bolivian Indians hail the swearing in of one of their own as President' (Forero, 2006). The growing movement for indigenous rights in Bolivia (but also across the continent), has prompted a scholarly boom as academics focused on the timing, location and strategies of indigenous mobilization (Lucero, 2008). However, the embrace of an indigenous heritage is a relatively recent phenomenon for Bolivia's social movements. Many people previously identified as peasants or workers and

mobilized along class based lines. Evo Morales embodies this process, transforming from a left-wing leader of the coca growers' union to a national indigenous leader.

The objective of this chapter is to highlight the role played by the unions in Bolivia's historic 'turn to the Left'. In what follows I explain how the MAS developed from its roots in an agricultural union of coca producers (hereafter the coca union) that was criminalized under US drug war policies in the 1990s, to the contemporary moment, when it is responsible for building a government and running a country. The story of the coca union alerts us to the reconstitution of union power away from the traditional heartlands of the left in the mines and factories, towards new spaces, and invoking new strategies – including placing an emphasis on ethnic identity as a way to expand its struggles and to encompass broader social sectors. The case of the coca union also allows us to examine the contradictions and conflicts that emerge when a union transforms into a governing party - in particular the challenge of working within the pre-existing political system while trying to retain a radical identity.

### **A brief history of rebellion in Bolivia**

Bolivia is a landlocked country in the centre of South America. The high mountain ranges and Andean plateau lie to the west and the jungle and vast tropical savannah stretch eastwards towards Brazil and Paraguay. Bolivia is home to around ten million people, the majority of whom consider themselves to be indigenous, which is conceived of as a social as well as racial category (Canessa, 2012). Most are Aymara or Quechua speakers from the sierra and high valleys, but there is also a large Guarani population located in the south eastern lowlands.<sup>1</sup> Around a quarter of the population self-identify as mestizo. In the strictest sense of the term 'mestizo' refers to a person of mixed Spanish and Indigenous parentage, however in Bolivia it is often used to speak about people of indigenous heritage who live in urban areas but who

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<sup>1</sup> There are 35 indigenous minorities in Bolivia.

have abandoned their original culture. By far the smallest group (comprising around ten percent of the population) are the White '*criollo*' elite who have historically been the most powerful economic and political group in the country (Farthing and Kohl, 2014: 20-34).

People in Bolivia have repeatedly revolted; first against Spanish colonial rule and then the republic that succeeded it and these conflicts have left a deep imprint on Bolivian politics. The most notable national heroes are Bartolina Sisa and Tupaj Katari whose Aymara armies surrounded the city of La Paz and held it under siege for several months in the late eighteenth century. In 1952 a social revolution, fought largely by miners, peasant militias, and led by a small middle class, successfully overthrew the mining oligarchy. The Bolivian Workers Union or *Central Obrera Boliviana* (COB), which was created in its wake, brought together workers' unions from Bolivia's main industries including the mines and the manufacturing sector into a confederation. The COB worked with the new *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (Revolutionary Nationalist Movement, MNR) led government to institute sweeping changes including expanding citizenship rights to the indigenous majority (including the right to vote), the nationalization of the mines, land reform, and the reduction in the size of the army. The 1953 agrarian reform bill designated 'peasant unions' (as opposed to indigenous community structures known as *Ayllus*) as the legitimate organization for carrying out land distribution and for governing local affairs. Peasant unions subsequently spread throughout the Bolivian countryside .

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the COB played an important role in the struggle for democracy against military dictatorships. The backbone of the COB were the miners' unions which represented one of the most politicized sectors of organized labour in the whole of Latin America. The miners paid dearly for their struggle, the army repeatedly crushed strike action, which resulted in various massacres. The peasants meanwhile were far more compliant - the military junta maintained peasant support by promising to uphold the Agrarian reform in return of their loyalty (Dunkerley, 1984). The pact between the military and peasantry contributed to the failure of Che Guevara's attempt to launch guerrilla war in Bolivia in the mid 1960s. However in 1974 the military broke this pact, mowing down protesting peasants in the Cochabamba valleys with machine guns, an event that contributed to renewed support for independent peasant unionism (Webber, 2011: 101).

As military rule gave way to democracy in the early 1980s a left leaning government found itself facing severe economic crisis, which opened the door to dramatic neoliberal economic reforms. The reforms called for fiscal austerity, the privatization of state owned enterprises, currency devaluation and the deregulation of the economy. These cuts were deepened throughout the 1990s with the fire sale of the few remaining state owned enterprises, the rapid expansion of NGOs and the de-centralization of the state. The IMF imposed measures did famously succeed at cutting the fiscal deficit and taming inflation, but this came at a heavy social and environmental cost. Bolivia experienced a dramatic fall in real wages and an increase in poverty and unemployment as trade liberalization wiped out local businesses and destroyed peasant livelihood strategies. Tens of thousands of state workers, including twenty-three thousand unionized miners, lost their jobs as a result of privatization and mine shut downs. Thus at the turn of the millennia the picture that emerged of Bolivia was one of enduring poverty, economic retardation and high levels of inequality (Kohl and Farthing, 2006).

The period from 1985 to 2000 represented a historic defeat of the left, traditional labor organizations declined in organizational strength and prominent leftist figures went to work for NGOs. Nevertheless popular social sectors succeeded in mounting resistance to contest what David Harvey (2003) calls "accumulation by dispossession." In 2000 discontent with the government and its market-oriented policies boiled over into full scale social protest. The insurgent cycle of events began with the Cochabamba Water War in 2000, which opposed the privatization of the city's water supply, and peaked in October 2003 when mass mobilizations sought to block the export of natural gas through Chile. The protestors represented a broad alliance of social movements including neighbourhood associations, students, pensioners, peasants, the landless movement, and trade unions. Significantly many of these movements organized along ethnic lines - stressing a shared history of exploitation at the hands of the dominant lighter skinned elite (Canessa, 2006). The protestors demanded a more socially oriented alternative to the prevailing neoliberal model of economic development, including state control over natural resources, land rights, the end to US backed coca eradication, and the drafting of a new constitution. These demands came to be known as the 'October Agenda' (Perreault, 2006).

In 2005, against the backdrop of social turmoil and economic crisis, Bolivia elected Evo Morales, the left wing leader of the Chapare coca growers union's, as president of Bolivia. The MAS succeeded precisely because it looked nothing like the traditional parties which were increasingly seen as corrupt, elitist and unrepresentative. The MAS was established by a confederation of unionized peasant organizations in 1995,<sup>2</sup> as such it was composed of political outsiders with few links to the political establishment. The election of the MAS then expressed the popular classes' will for political change and a clear illustration of their disgust with the neoliberal capitalist model. On coming to power Evo Morales and the MAS set out to fashion a new economy geared towards helping people to 'live well' (*vivir bien*) in harmony with nature, the nationalization of strategic industries (most significantly the hydro-carbon sector), and the reinvention of the state through the rewriting of the constitution by a popularly elected assembly.

## The Chapare

To understand the politics of the MAS, it is necessary to understand the context from which it emerged among the Coca unions of the Chapare and the way they acquired hegemony in a region where the state was almost entirely absent. The Tropical area of Cochabamba is located at the eastern foot of the Bolivian Andes. It covers some six million acres of lowland humid tropical forests extending over three provinces, the Chapare, Tiraque and Carrasco. In the late 1970s this largely uninhabited frontier region became the focus of an intense process of migration as coca cultivation spread throughout the region in response to rising demand for cocaine in North America and Europe. The majority of the early migrants were Quechua-speaking peasants from the Cochabamba valleys but they were soon followed by tens of thousands of miners and factory workers who lost their jobs when the government closed down nationally owned enterprises in the mid 1980s. Thus today the Chapare is inhabited by an

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<sup>2</sup> The MAS was established by the National Peasants Confederation (CSUTCB), the Coca Growers Federations, the Union of Colonizers and the Peasant Women's movement 'Bartolina Sisa.'

uprooted multi-cultural population many of whom were previously engaged in urban life and trade unions. As one farmer put it 'the Chapare is cosmopolitan – we come from all over the country.'

The migrants established small family-run farms on plots ranging from between five to twenty hectares. Relying on manual labour they cultivate a range of crops including rice, bananas, pineapples, citrus fruit, and papaya, but more than anything they are dependent on coca. The farmers grow coca because it has several advantages as a cash crop; coca grows like a weed, it provides three to four harvests per year, it is light and easy to transport, but most importantly, it commands high prices and there is always a guaranteed market for it. Even so, the farmers do not get rich from cultivating coca. Rather it complements subsistence activities, and the majority of farmers live in poverty. Away from the main road many houses are constructed from wood with roofs of either tin or thatch, and do not count on basic services like running water, electricity or sanitation.

Coca has been used for millennia by indigenous Andeans, it can be chewed or prepared as a tea and is consumed in order to suppress feelings of hunger thirst and fatigue. The most prolific users are labourers, farmers and truckers who value coca's properties as a mild stimulant. The anthropological record shows how coca also serves a range of important social and cultural functions including divination, healing rituals and offerings to earth deities such as the *pachamama* and *supay* (Carter and Mamani, 1986). However, while coca might appear to be a miracle plant for producers and consumers it is also the raw material used to process cocaine paste (an impure form of cocaine), and a great deal of the Chapare crop is used for this purpose (Grisaffi, 2014).

## The Coca Unions

I spent almost three years living in Aurora<sup>3</sup> over several visits between 2005 and 2015. The village was established in the mid 1950s making it one of the oldest settlements in the region; it has around 150 households and almost all of them (bar three families who are dedicated to trade) are coca growers and members of the local union or '*sindicato*'. People do not have any real choice about whether to join the union because it controls access to land. Aurora put strict conditions on membership: the community would normally only allow family members or people already known to them to join, and even then only once they had proven their commitment to the organization. The upshot of this exclusive selection procedure is that the Aurora union is cross cut by kinship relations, old friendships and alliances between families expressed as *compadrazgo* (god-parenthood). Many people described the union as being tantamount to an extended family.

I soon came to realise that given the minimal state presence in the region the Union dominated almost all aspects of life. The union was responsible for opening out penetration roads, maintaining river defences, taxing the coca trade, organizing collective work parties, and regulating local trade including setting taxi and bus fares. One of the most important roles of the local union however, was to provide security and administer justice. For example the community elects a Sheriff who holds regular consultations and undertakes '*rondas*' (night patrols) with local volunteers to keep the population in check. Meanwhile on-going disputes within the community, including robbery, disagreements over boundaries or outstanding debts are dealt with at a monthly Union meeting, where the issue is debated and resolved with the participation of the entire community. The union's power extends right into the home, for instance an aggrieved spouse can bring a case against their partner for infidelity or battery. Only low level misdemeanours are supposed to be dealt with at the union level, more serious crimes like murder or rape should be referred to the police. However, in reality this seldom happens. Trust in the police is so low, and the justice system so slow and corrupt, that most people preferred to solve their problems internally. I was told 'the law is the law - but here we do things organically,' 'when you live in an organization you are subject to the organization.' and 'around here the Union is the law.' Moreover, the local

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<sup>3</sup> This is not the real name of the village.

police sergeant confirmed that the unions would not allow police officers to enter their communities without prior permission.

Once a month, each base level union holds a meeting where issues of public importance are debated. The organization of the union is based on Andean self-governing principals such as reciprocity, consensus building and high levels of community participation, mixed with Marxist traditions inherited from the displaced miners, such as electing authorities formally rather than rotating them by age and prior experience. One of the most important elements of grassroots democracy is the emphasis that the rank and file put on holding their leaders directly accountable (Grisaffi, 2013). The key to the union's strength and the way that members seem to think with one mind, is rooted in the union's control over land tenure. Any coca grower who does not honour his or her commitments to the group (for instance by not turning up to a meeting or mobilization) faces a range of sanctions, including fines or community work (such as litter picking, cutting the grass, painting or other general maintenance work) and this is backed up by the threat of the confiscation of land. Farmers often grumble that because of the fines they are 'obliged' to participate in '*vida organica*' (the organic life of the organization). Nevertheless they also understand that sanctions are necessary to ensure that members pursue collective as opposed to individual goals; it solves the so called 'free-rider problem' (see Lazar, 2008).

Aurora is one of more than one thousand base level unions in the Chapare. These unions are organized into Six Federations representing over 45,000 families. Each federation is organizationally linked to national level workers and peasant unions. The democratic ideals of the grassroots inform the practice of the union as a whole, in theory at least the rank and file are in control.

## **Radicalization**

In the mid-1980s the US launched a crop eradication campaign to tackle escalating coca and cocaine production in the Chapare; in so doing they turned the farmers into the 'enemy of the war on drugs' (Albó, 2002: 75). Eradication was carried out by US trained and funded security forces who entered small farmsteads to manually uproot coca plantations. The immediate impact of eradication was to wipe out the farmers' main source of income, leaving them destitute and struggling to survive. Worse still, the decision to orientate the security forces towards 'internal enemies' opened the space for the violation of human rights including rape, theft, intimidation, beatings, arbitrary detention and murder (Ledebur, 2005). In spite of (or some might say because of) military repression, the coca growers built a powerful union to contest the Bolivian government's anti-coca policy.

Initially the US embassy in La Paz was slow to pick up on the political significance of the Chapare Coca Unions. In 1982 a research mission for the US congress concluded 'It is difficult to believe that the coca producers of the Chapare could constitute a political force; these new colonizers, the majority of whom are indigenous, are apparently humble and passive' (Gamarra, 1994: 27). Indeed, in the late 1970s the colonizers were making money from the coca boom (when coca prices leapt dramatically in response to US demand for cocaine) and were content. Moreover the union was a mechanism for governmental control through corporatism (the ex-dictator Hugo Banzer was even the godfather to the children of the coca union's general secretary). One local coca farmer described the relationship between the government and unions in these terms, 'there were Coca unions back then, but they were tied to the government, managed by the government. The leaders were not chosen by the bases (rank and file)– they were chosen by the government! Back then there really was union dictatorship (*dictadura sindical!*)' Thus the traditional left, represented by the miners union, considered the coca producers to be a petit bourgeois anti-revolutionary element (Escobar, 2008: 194).

The political apathy reversed in the late 1980s with the arrival of the miners (displaced as a result of the mine closures) who brought with them their traditions of solidarity, organizational skill and revolutionary consciousness. As one miner explained 'I was a miner, I didn't have fear, I knew how to light dynamite, I knew the union life' he went on to say that because of people like him 'more leaders were formed here in the tropics, we strengthened the unions.' The miners were also famous for their union owned and operated radio stations and, on entering the tropics they made it a priority to set up a station with the idea that 'it has to be the same in the Tropics just like in the mines.' A pro-radio committee was formed in 1993, which included Evo Morales as its executive. Four years later - with assistance from technicians and radio producers from the miners' stations - the coca union established the FM station, Radio Sovereignty. Ever since Radio Sovereignty has played an essential role supporting union activity including raising awareness, spreading messages and co-ordinating protest (Grisaffi, 2009).

By the late 1980s discontent was brewing in the Chapare. Coca prices were falling and impending anti-narcotics legislation (the draconian law 1008) threatened to outlaw coca cultivation in the region altogether. What is more the state had started to show its teeth; in June 1988 government forces murdered 12 coca farmers during a violent confrontation on a bridge over the Chapare river, an event which is remembered to this day as the massacre of Villa Tunari. Don Benito, a middle aged coca farmer, was present that day. He recalled how he had to jump into the river to avoid the bullets, he was lucky, he knew how to swim, others did not and they drowned.

At the Federation's 1988 general assembly the '*Frente Amplio de Masas Anti-Imperialistas*' (led by Evo Morales) took control of Federation Tropico, the largest and most militant Chapare Union. Under Evo's control the Federation radicalized: the unions' demands included the right to land, the demilitarization of the Chapare, a break in coca eradication, the modification of anti-drug laws, and increased political participation. The Union's repertoire of protest included setting up camps in city plazas, blocking Bolivia's main trunk road (which runs through the Chapare), and undertaking long marches from the Tropics to the capital city, La Paz. The coca union also established limited self-defense committees with the aim to prevent the military from eradicating coca plantations. These groups were lightly armed with rifles dating back to

the 1930s Chaco War (*mausers*) and homemade land mines known as *cazabobos* (fool hunters); firefights with government troops, however were only ever isolated incidents.

### **Old Movement with a New Face**

In the 1990s the coca union redefined the parameters of the coca debate. While the governments of Bolivia and the United States associated coca leaf with illegality and drug trafficking, the coca unions emphasized the long history of traditional coca use, to argue that coca represents one of the most profound expressions of Andean indigenous culture, not to mention a strategic resource that could be used to promote national development. Defending coca leaf then, became synonymous with standing up for national dignity in the face of US intervention, which had taken on increasingly imperial characteristics.

The message about the sacred status of coca is continually reiterated at Union meetings and on the coca growers' radio station. Coca union leaders point out that Andean cultures have used coca for millennia and it has done them no harm whatsoever. They blame foreigners for adulterating their sacred leaf with chemicals to produce cocaine. I was told on numerous occasions 'we didn't know anything about *pichicata* (cocaine paste manufacturing) until those gringos (foreigners) came here to teach us.' The prevailing sentiment is captured in a mural painted on the wall of the coca grower owned and operated station - Radio Sovereignty, which states '...For us the coca leaf is the culture of our ancestors... to them (foreigners) it causes insanity and idiocy'. In order to make the sacred status of coca leaf explicit to the wider world the Chapare agricultural federations organise events such as coca chew-ins, fairs in the cities to celebrate coca, and the members of the union undertake public rituals in which coca plays a highly visible role. Today the coca union has a strong overarching ideology built on the defence of 'millennial' coca.

It was by no means inevitable that the Chapare farmers would mobilise around indigenous cultural difference in order to justify their oppositional politics. The majority of farmers hail from the Cochabamba Valleys - a region where *mestizaje* and class based identities took hold early on (Rivera, 1987: 150). More to the point many of the farmers are ex-miners, who famously embraced modernity in the form of Marxism and considered Indigenous demands to be irrelevant or worse still dangerous as they represented a form of 'false consciousness' (Harris and Albo, 1976). Contemporary coca growers meanwhile look down on the indigenous populations (comprised of Yuracare and Yuqui ethnic minorities) who have lived in the Chapare for centuries, who they consider to be backwards, dirty and uncivilised. For the coca farmers then indigeneity is not defined by a deep history of 'blood and soil', but, rather, it is rooted in postcolonial identities and a shared struggle against the domination of foreign and national elites (Grisaffi, 2010).

Mobilizing under the banner of 'sacred coca' proved useful as, by fusing the coca growers' economic demands with a broader ethno-nationalist dimension, the unions were able to reach out and form alliances with other social movements from across the country. Thus when the coca unions undertook their long marches from the tropics to the capital city La Paz, or blocked the main trunk road - they could count on the support of other social sectors. Community radio stations (including the coca growers station, Radio Sovereignty) also played an important role as disparate movements could hear and learn about one another and came to understand that they were all fighting the same battle against neoliberal imperialism (Grisaffi, 2009). Given the power vacuum left by the traditional left the coca growers became the most powerful social force in the country, with coca leaders taking on prominent roles in national level union organizations, and leading numerous national protests and blockades.

By the mid 1990s the astronomic political ascent of the coca growers and the national presence they developed had become a matter of concern to US policy makers, who saw critics of neo-liberalism as a hemispheric security issue (Grandin, 2006: 213). Thus during the second Banzer administration (1997-2002) the Bolivian government effectively outlawed the coca union. In a

2001 Interview the ex-drugs Tsar Oswaldo Antezana argued that as coca was illegal there was really no need for a 'coca union' (Orduna and Guzman, 2001). Coca farmers told me that in the early 2000s 'politics was illegal in the Chapare.' The coca farmers were denied their civil rights; union leaders were forced to live on the run and base level unions often had to hold their meetings in secret locations, away from the main road and hidden from the helicopters that circled above. Between 1997 and 2002 over 700 union members were arrested and held indefinitely, often without charge (Ledebur, 2005). Radio Sovereignty also came under attack; in February 2002 heavily armed members of the police force confiscated the transmitter, which was only returned three months later, badly damaged.

The Bolivian government justified its heavy handed presence in the region by presenting the coca growers as criminals, drug traffickers and terrorists. For example in 2001, Jorge Quiroga, then president of Bolivia, drew comparisons between the coca growers in the Chapare and Al Qaeda saying that drug trafficking is the 'Siamese twin' of terrorism (La Patria, 2001), meanwhile the public prosecutor's office made efforts to link coca growers with illegal armed guerrilla groups - including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Vegas, 2002). Take the case of Doña Juana, a union leader who was arrested and charged in 2002 for 'armed uprising'. Doña Juana explained that the police framed her by planting dynamite and weapons at her house; she was then taken to the military camp where she says she was imprisoned and tortured. She told me 'They attacked us saying that the leaders are terrorists. They used bullets, they killed us, they humiliated us, (they left) orphans, they did everything to us - but still we fought back - it made us stronger.'

### **The Movement Towards Socialism (MAS)**

In response to new political spaces opened up under the 1994 Popular Participation law (which decentralized twenty per cent of national revenues to municipal governments), the coca growers set up their own electoral vehicle, which eventually ran under the registered title of

the MAS. Thus the decentralization of the state, which is often seen as a key element of neoliberal governance, actually opened the institutional space that allowed the MAS to emerge as a national political force (Postero, 2006, Kohl, 2006). Union leader, and one time MAS congressman, Don Rolando, explained the motivation for setting up the party;

‘We marched and thought that we could change things, but protests don’t have any impact. The neoliberal state had all the power... They (the elites) were playing on the football pitch, and we didn’t even have one player, we just watched from the side-lines! And that’s when we decided we needed our own political party. At first it was just a union fight but later it changed, we had two arms, union struggle and political struggle. That’s when we entered the pitch. Now the person who plays best wins.’

The MAS was indeed the best player. By 1997 the coca grower party controlled most of the town halls in the Tropics. Municipal government proved to be a good training ground for the nascent party, and by 2002 the MAS was a national political force. The path for Morales and the MAS was not always easy however - there was considerable infighting, internal division, and as a congressman Evo Morales was even expelled from parliament.<sup>4</sup> Further the MAS faced considerable opposition from the US embassy. When Morales ran for President in the 2002 elections, Manuel Rocha (the US ambassador) threatened that the US government would cut all funding to Bolivia if the electorate voted for Morales. This had the opposite effect to that intended, and actually gave Morales a last minute boost in the polls. Indeed the MAS came within a slim margin of winning the presidency. Morales later quipped that Rocha was his best campaign manager to date. Finally, in 2005, lifted by a wave of popular mobilization, Morales took the presidency with a majority of the vote, the first time any presidential candidate had won an electoral majority since 1982.

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<sup>4</sup> Morales was expelled from congress in 2002 for the part he allegedly played inciting protests that led to the death of two police officers

The MAS was established not so much as a party, but rather as an extension of the union with the aim to take coca grower demands to the national arena but also to open out space so that coca union leaders could enter into positions of state power. In a 2013 interview, Rolando insisted 'the MAS is not a party - it's a social and syndicalist movement.' He went on to describe the relationship between the unions and the party as like 'husband and wife' because they 'work together' - echoing the resilience of Andean conceptions of complementarity (Harris, 2000). He said 'the unions are sat above the Ministers, it is a matrix institution - we (the unions) control the government.' This view is also echoed in the writing of Alvaro Garcia Linera (Morales's vice President) who has held up MAS as an example of 'popular democracy' that works, the ultimate proof that a grassroots alternative to neoliberal globalization is possible (García Linera, 2006, 2014). However, not everyone concurs with this interpretation. It has been argued that since 2002 (when the MAS became a national political force) it transformed into a more traditional political party and it is increasingly characterised by vertical decision making and centralist tendencies (Harten, 2011, Zegada et al., 2008, Grisaffi, 2013).

## Shortcomings

On coming to power in 2006 Morales made a radical break with the US-backed anti-drugs strategy, which focused on the forced eradication of coca leaf and the criminalisation of coca growers. His new policy, often referred to as 'coca yes cocaine no', permitted each union member in the Chapare to cultivate a small amount of coca leaf known as a *cato* (an area covering 1600 sq meters) destined for the licit market (for traditional consumption, or to be processed into coca tea, flour, and other legal coca based products). The new approach has shrunk coca cultivation and has had various positive impacts, including dramatically cutting human rights violations and allowing coca growers to diversify their sources of income (Grisaffi and Ledebur, 2016). Nevertheless not all coca growers are sanguine.

Expectations in the Chapare were unrealistically high when Morales entered the Presidency and so it was inevitable that Morales would fail to meet them. Morales has had to balance coca grower demands with those of other constituencies, including the international community and its desire to keep a cap on coca production. Thus today some farmers grumble that Morales has sold out. They say that the cato, which generates around 200 dollars per month (equivalent to the minimum wage) does not generate enough cash to support a family. One informant complained 'if all we get is a miserable cato, then what did we bother fighting for?' Others follow the union's original argument to its natural conclusion to argue that as coca is not cocaine, then they should be allowed to cultivate unlimited coca (or two catos at the very least).

This alerts us to the problem of winning and the difficulty of maintaining a radical identity once in power. Glorifying coca as an 'indigenous shrub' was a successful strategy for building a political platform and making alliances with other social sectors while the MAS was in opposition. But the reality is that coca is a cash crop that is essential to the local economy, moreover most of the Chapare's coca production is used to process cocaine. Thus Morales has had to back-track, and at times he rhetorically tears the coca leaf apart from Andean tradition in order to justify the uprooting of coca plantations by the military (Grisaffi, 2010). Restrictions on the amount of coca that can be grown and the use of troops to destroy excess coca have caused some sections of the rank and file to complain of betrayal. Some base level unions have even faced up to soldiers on eradication missions (see Grisaffi, 2016).

### **Top-down control**

Morales has consistently encouraged the coca union to rally in support of MAS-sponsored bills, which has involved staging mass protests and assemblies in distant cities at the coca growers' own expense. Understandably most coca growers are fed up with these sorts of activities, they want to be left in peace to farm and to rebuild their economy after years of constant

mobilization. However many base level members complain that they are obliged to attend pro-government marches and rallies, because if they do not then they risk heavy fines or even the loss of the right to grow coca. In this context some farmers have come to refer to the cato of coca as a form of blackmail or extortion (*chantaje*).

As we have seen the Union has always relied on fines to ensure compliance, what is different today is that the dictates and fines are seen to come from the top down. In other words, from the perspective of many rank and file members the MAS party is using the union's system of sanctions to ensure compliance with MAS (as opposed to Union) goals. This has angered some union members, Don Jose expressed his dissatisfaction in the following way 'what do you call it when they oblige you to go (on pro-government marches), and they have not even consulted the bases? They call it a dictatorship!'

Morales can count on the complicity of the union leadership to support MAS initiatives, because many aspire to a job in a state institution. It was often said that Morales hand picks people to occupy senior positions in the union and government, thus the most surefire way to get a good job was to please superiors. I was told by one middle level leader; 'the union leaders who get on (ascend the union career ladder) are those who are most aligned with the MAS.' Thus rank and file members frequently complain that these days 'everything comes from the top down' and 'there is no longer any debate at the meetings' and 'its all Evo, Evo, Evo, the leaders just do propaganda for Evo.'

Given the power that the leadership have over union members, most people do not voice contrary opinions at meetings. They fear that if they do, then they will be labelled as a member of the 'opposition' or 'right wing' (common denunciations against anyone who does not tow the party line). Indeed when I undertook interviews with people about their views on the government many people either refused to speak with me, or would take me to the side and whisper discreetly in my ear. Meanwhile rank and file members who have taken a stand against Morales and the MAS have been punished. For example during the 2015 municipal elections Morales overruled the union's choice of candidate for the position of mayor of Shinahota (one of the main Chapare towns). This caused considerable dissatisfaction amongst the rank and file who characterized Morales as an 'autocrat.' Some base level activists who challenged the Union leadership and the MAS on this issue lost their right to grow coca and some were arrested and

charged with endangering the life of the president (for the part they played orchestrating a protest against Morales). Correspondingly support for the MAS party decreased significantly in Shinahota's 2015 municipal election.

## **Conclusion**

For anyone who is interested in contemporary Bolivian politics, the most important contribution of this chapter is to move the focus away from 'indigenous movements' to the role played by agricultural unions in Bolivia's shift to the left. In this chapter it has been argued that despite being composed of Quechua speakers, the coca union is not an ethnic movement per se, indeed the coca growers have never made 'ethnic' demands. Rather the union leadership has used indigeneity - captured in the image of 'millennial coca' - as a way to build a coherent political identity within the Chapare, but also to mobilize support from different constituencies to achieve the union's economic and social demands.

More broadly the case of Bolivia disrupts how we think about unions in the West. If a union was composed of extended kinship groups, who patrolled the streets at night, intervened in martial disputes, sanctioned its members, and was responsible for local governance, most Europeans would label it as nepotistic, vigilante, or corrupt. But these are exactly the characteristics of the coca union. From the coca growers' perspective anything less holistic just wouldn't be considered a 'union.' In this way the coca union poses a profound challenge to emergent movements like Occupy which promote the view that politics can, and should be conducted through spontaneously convened direct assemblies (Hickel, 2012). When I spoke about Occupy with my coca union informants they said they thought it was absurd, indicating a complete lack of organization, solidarity and commitment. The coca union then encourages us to think of radical politics anew - transcending the role of a union as a mere vehicle for workers demands to something much deeper and ingrained in daily life.

The case of the coca union further illustrates that we cannot assume unions are necessarily linked to traditional industries or agricultural sectors. In this case the union emerged from coca growing, which for many years was an illegal activity; moreover many members of the rank and file have at some point worked directly in the cocaine trade. This basic fact has posed distinct challenges and opportunities for the union organization by defining its relation to the state. The unions association with coca justified oppression in the name of the 'war on drugs' throughout the 1990s, but coca also allowed the union to gain a global profile as the self-styled defenders of the Nation's indigenous cultural patrimony.

This links to the following point regarding the challenges that arise when a union is successful at taking state power. The problem with winning is that it is almost impossible for Unions to maintain their radical identity once in power, particularly if they opt to work within the existing political system. This in turn alerts us to the different operating logics of unions and governing parties. Unions are focused on a specific sector and they are characterised by perpetual collective action. Political parties meanwhile are supposed to be durable, representative of all citizens and driven to seek the common good. This difference inevitably generates distance between the union and the party. So for example since entering public office Morales has had to make alliances and seek compromise with sectors who the coca growers once considered to be enemies, and attend to the needs of other constituencies (including the international community's anti coca agenda). In this context it is inevitable that the rank and file end up disillusioned with Morales. In short Morales and the MAS are no longer as fully representative as they could be when they only stood for the coca growers.

Finally, it seems as if Morales has taken control of the union through the co-optation of leaders and the use of sanctions to ensure the rank and file's compliance with MAS dictates. This observation alerts us to the fact that the model of bottom up 'direct democracy' that Morales and his aides claim characterises the MAS, is no more than a rhetorical trope to

legitimize the party, rather than something that they have actually operationalized in their current political practice.

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