SUMMARY - CHAPTER 11

Bolivia’s Left Turn

In the contemporary Latin American political terrain there has been a noted resurgence of the political Left. This new Left is less concerned with doctrinaire politics and more concerned with integrating different strata of the population into its political project. Bolivia is a good example of this new Left and the challenges it faces.

Revolution, Markets, and Democracy

This narrative of Bolivia begins with the 1952 Revolution, as Bolivians overthrew the oligarchy and looked poised to usher in new democratic changes that would transform Bolivia into a productive equitable society. By the 1970s, however, these changes had failed to make the intended change, and had made the Bolivian economy virtually dependent on the growing of coca. Meanwhile in the media luna region of Bolivia the reforms had the opposite effect, as that region grew, disproportionately, in prosperity.

In 1964, when a military coup fell the MNR, not even the military, in the following eighteen years that it held power, could check the rapid economic decline in the altiplano region. As with the preceding governments, it left an ever-increasing debt, massive inflation, and negative economic growth.

On advice from the IMF, the following government made some changes to economic policy that began to show dividends. But it wasn’t until the arrival of President Gonzalo Sanchez (alias Goni) that the most far-reaching suggestion made by the IMF would be implemented: privatization of national assets. Other nations (France, Spain, Brazil) swept in to take over the natural gas industry in Bolivia. And they made a fortune when it was discovered that the already high projections for the natural gas reserves of Bolivia turned out to be even higher upon excavation. This left the Bolivians empty-handed and with bitter feelings about their government’s decision to sell national assets.

The Commodity Wars and the Popular Coup

On a completely other front, President Gonzalo Sanchez also passed a law which aimed at the decentralization of government power by opening up political positions for popular election. In a surprisingly short time, a large chunk of those positions were taken up by indigenous and politically progressive candidates, who were able to shore up support from a body of Bolivians increasingly disgruntled with decisions of a government that plunged them deeper into poverty. These new politicians used the masses to foment popular opposition against the government.

This popular opposition came to a head during the Gas Wars of 2003. In 2001 a decision was made to export natural gas to the US. However, logistically this was only profitable if Bolivia pumped their gas to Chile first, before it was sent to the US. A general Bolivian opposition emerged against this arrangement, first because they were no longer ready to tolerate even the slightest squandering of national assets, and second because they held a historical resentment against the Chileans, who had taken away their...
geographical sea access years earlier. Large protests amassed, prompting Gonzalo to declare Martial Law. After 63 deaths, he suspended the Gas Project, resigned, and fled. His successor, Carlos Mesa, more or less refused to implement or even consider the demands of the protesters. He was eventually forced to resign under redoubled pressure from the ever-growing body of protesters.

El Alto, then, became a major stage in the political theatre of Bolivia and as such was a locus of political power. Out of this region would emerge two important indigenous figures: Felipe Quispe and Evo Morales, one of which (the latter) rose to become the president of Bolivia. Morales immediately raised taxes and royalties on foreign companies digging into the Bolivian gas fields, and reestablished Bolivian ownership of the fields.

Morales’ next major step was to redraft the constitution in an effort to introduce foundational reforms to his national project without having to pass through the bureaucratic entanglements of the political process. This spurred many of Bolivia’s provinces to seek independence from Morales by conducting referendums on self-determination. He refused to acknowledge these efforts and instead condemned them as illegal. Violent conflict between the two sides erupted when Morales began to siphon money from natural gas revenue into government. To avert civil war, Morales agreed to a referendum on the constitution, which ended in a comfortable victory for his side.

**Autonomies**

The narrative of self-determination in Bolivia has been founded on two kinds of self-determination:

1. Oppressed ethnic minorities and
2. Culturally autonomous communities.

The case of the Crucenos, who refer to themselves as Cambos, is instructive in that it reveals a movement for autonomy based on an amalgam of the two kinds of self-determination mentioned above.

Often, as with the indigenous crucenos, the desire for a pure and complete cultural autonomy poses challenges to the notion of Human Rights within a legal structure that legislates, adjudicates, and executes both constitutional laws and customary laws within the same society.

**Towards an Uncertain Future**

There is a lurking risk in Bolivia of independent provinces demanding to repossess the natural resources sitting under their lands for their own communities, as is now the case in the Aymara region. Morales is fighting this by claiming that whatever resources reside in the subsoil of Bolivia belong, constitutionally, to the nation. Nonetheless, international pressure in favor of the poverty-stricken Aymara communities is looming large. Plus, the argument has been made that the continued nationalization of resources, in Bolivia and otherwise, has only deepened economic inequalities in Latin American societies.

**The Documents: Santa Cruz Versus Bolivia**

© 2011 Taylor and Francis
1. A Memorandum of the Nación Camba explaining how their demand for autonomy is rooted in a very real sense of cultural distinctness from the rest of Bolivian society.

2. A government-issued piece of reportage on the insidiousness of the Camba campaign for autonomy.

3. A report written by the Organic European Commission of the Pro-Bolivia Council.

4. A transcription of the controversial Branko Marinkovic’s words on the eve the new constitution was ratified, in which he challenges the policies of Morales and praises Cruceno values.

5. An article published by newspaper editor Tuffi Aré, in his newspaper El Deber. He argues that the newly ratified constitution has come no closer to resolving the Bolivian conflicts over autonomy.