

# *'All of us are presidents': radical democracy and citizenship in the Chapare Province, Bolivia*

Article

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### 'ALL OF US ARE PRESIDENTS': RADICAL DEMOCRACY AND CITIZENSHIP IN THE CHAPARE PROVINCE, BOLIVIA<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** "All of us are presidents" examines the promise and disappointments of direct democracy that followed Evo Morales' election as president of Bolivia. Working with the literature on politics, the state, and social movements in Latin America, the author contrasts ideas of normative democracy with radical democracy. The article pursues two ideas. First, in the wake of Morales' election his core political base in the Chapare region perceived and engaged in politics as if they exercised direct, structural authority over the president's policies. Second, while Morales initially embraced direct democracy he quickly distanced himself from this practice. As the coca growers observe, Morales abandon their political practices they have ceased to refer to themselves as presidents. Therefore, the author suggest that the model of direct democracy that Morales and his aides have promoted is in fact nothing more than a stark utopian claim designed to ensure the legitimacy of the MAS party.

In December 2005 Evo Morales, an Indigenous Aymara and the leader of the Chapare coca growers union, won a landslide victory in Bolivia's presidential election. The day before his official inauguration as president, Morales was honored with a ceremony of investiture at Tiwanaku, the ruins of an ancient Aymara temple located seventy kilometers from the capital city, La Paz. During the act, **[Page 48 →]** Morales was dressed in a replica of a 1000-year-old tunic worn by pre-Incan priests. He accepted a traditional staff of authority and the blessing from an Aymara *Yatiri* (ritual specialist). Standing in front of the Kalasasaya temple, Morales addressed tens of thousands of supporters. He explained that he would found the nation anew, but this time with and for the indigenous peoples. He told the crowd '...for the first time in Bolivian history, Aymaras, Quechuas, and Mojeños, we are presidents. Not only Evo is the president, *all of us are presidents*' (Morales, 2006: 13, my translation).

The accession of Evo Morales to the presidency marks a watershed in Bolivian history. Until that point politics in this predominantly Indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed, apart from those of public figures.

Andean country<sup>2</sup> had been dominated by a small group of white-*mestizos*, and was widely regarded as a closed, prearranged system, operated for the benefit of elite groups (De Munter and Salman, 2009). In contrast Morales's Movement Towards Socialism (*Movimiento al Socialismo-MAS*) led government appears to reflect a new pattern of relationships between state and society.

At the time of Evo's inauguration I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork with the coca growers' Unions in the Chapare, a tropical colonization zone located in the centre of Bolivia (also referred to as the Tropics of Cochabamba). In the months following the MAS victory, members of the Coca Unions (known as Cocaleros or coca growers) frequently echoed Evo's words, they told me, '*all of us are presidents here*', and '*there are lots of Evos here*'. At first I did not treat these claims with the kind of attention that they deserved. I thought that the people were telling me that the party they voted for had won. It was only later I came to realise that when they claimed to be presidents, they were not speaking figuratively, but rather, they were being deadly serious.

The objective of this article is to describe what the coca growers meant when they declared that they were presidents and to assess the validity of this claim. In order to tackle this issue I pose two questions; what does democracy mean to the coca growers? And how does this understanding frame their perception of the Morales administration? Drawing on twenty months of ethnographic research<sup>3</sup> I describe how the coca growers hold an entirely different conception of democracy to what David Nugent (2008) refers to as *normative democracy*. For the coca growers, democracy has nothing to do with competitive elections, individual liberties, universal suffrage, or the secret ballot. Rather the coca growers pursue a form of what Cohen and Fung (2004) have labelled *radical democracy*, in which all members of the community meet to debate, decide, and enact their laws. The fact that the coca growers practice a form of democracy, which clashes with the Western liberal ideal, is not in itself extraordinary, indeed the anthropological literature indicates that alternative expressions of democracy are actually quite

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<sup>2</sup> In the 2001 census 62% of the population reported that they were indigenous (INE 2003).

<sup>3</sup> This research was carried out over several visits to Bolivia between 2005 and 2011.

widespread (Rivera, 1990; Feuchtwang, 2003; Nash, 2007; Paley, 2008). What is unique about this case is that the coca growers' political party has transformed into an organization responsible for building a government and therefore for ruling a country.

## **[Page 49 →]**

In what follows I illustrate how the coca growers make no distinction between the movement and the party, rather they view the MAS as an extension of the Union organisation. As a result the Cocaleros consider that the style of politics found at the grassroots should also apply to the President and his aides. I argue that when the coca growers declared '*we are all presidents*' they were saying that they, as members of the union organisation, now exercise direct, structural authority over the government's policies. In other words they were staking a claim to a new form of citizenship, one, which is built on the perceived fusion of state, social movement and party.

In the second part of the article I illustrate how precarious the claim to presidential citizenship actually is. While Morales initially embraced direct democracy, by continuing to serve as general secretary of the Coca Federations, he quickly distanced himself from these practices. It appears as if Morales has slipped into old fashion patronage politics, rewarding friends and punishing opponents. As the coca growers observe Morales abandon their political practices they have ceased to refer to themselves as presidents. Therefore, I suggest that the model of direct democracy that Evo Morales and his political aides promote is in fact nothing more than a stark utopian claim, designed to ensure the legitimacy of the party.

## **Disjunctive Democracy in Bolivia**

Bolivia entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century burdened by a grotesque 'disjunctive democracy' (Holston, 2006). Since the return to civilian rule in 1982 formal democratic procedures have been in place, which allow all Bolivians to participate in the exercise of political power through voting. However the existence of unrepresentative and unresponsive parties has meant that many

ordinary people have historically felt as if their interests are not adequately represented in parliamentary debate (Assies and Salman, 2003; Mayorga, 2005; Lazar, 2004). Beyond voting, other rights, which T.H. Marshall (1964) identified as essential for the full exercise of citizenship, have been either thinly distributed or else are non-existent. For example civil rights have been undermined by urban segregation, racism, corruption, weak rule of law and police violence (Gill, 2000; Goldstein, 2004). Meanwhile social rights have been eviscerated by twenty-five years of neoliberal economic policies, which have contributed to rising levels of inequality and undignified living conditions for many (Kohl and Farthing, 2006).

By 2000 Bolivia's 'disjunctive democracy' had produced a serious crisis in the party system (Mainwaring et al., 2006; García Linera, 2006a). Over the following five years dissatisfaction with the government was expressed in frequent and intense protests, which resulted in the forced resignation of two presidents. The protestors represented a broad alliance including labour and peasant unions, students, indigenous organisations and neighbourhood associations. Along with calling for an end to neoliberal economic policies, the popular social forces were also involved in a battle over the meaning of citizenship and the forms of doing politics. Movement leaders classified actually existing democracy as a sham. They called **[Page 50 →]** instead for a new model of governance built on indigenous traditions including subservient authorities, continuous deliberation and group rights as opposed to individual rights. The goal of the mobilizations that brought Morales to power then, was not to annul democracy (as critics of the MAS often claim), but rather to deepen and to extend it (García Linera et al., 2000/2007; Albro, 2006)

Academics have argued that the 2005 MAS victory marks the end of the liberal mestizo consensus (Hylton and Thomson, 2007; Dunkerley, 2007). In contrast to politicians from the 'traditional ruling parties', Morales emerged as the leader of an agricultural Federation in the Chapare and his leadership style reflects this heritage. On entering office President Morales set out to

reinvent the intuitions that had excluded indigenous peoples for centuries<sup>4</sup> (Postero, 2010). Morales invited a handful of social movement leaders to occupy important positions in his cabinet, he held regular popular consultations, and he frequently travelled all over the country to attend grassroots meetings. What is more while Morales is now the president of the nation he has nevertheless continued to act as the General Secretary of the Six Federations of Coca Growers in the Chapare. Reflecting on these changes Vice President Alvaro García Linera argues that the MAS represents a new form of government, one which is run by and for Bolivia's social movements. He argues that through the MAS the social movements are now in direct control of the state apparatus (García Linera, 2006b: 25).

Radical democratic movements have had to make the transition to governing elsewhere in Latin America. In Ecuador, with the election of Lucio Gutierrez in 2002, indigenous leaders who had been involved in the general strike and coup that removed Mahuad from office in 2000 were able to join the national government as cabinet ministers. The indigenous movement then saw its moment of triumph fade away into accusations of corruption and patronage as they struggled to make the transition from outsiders to insiders (Zamosc, 2005). Similar processes have been observed in Brazil, on its accession to power in 2003 the Brazilian Workers Party established a well-differentiated political organization that worked autonomously from its social base (Rockefeller, 2007: 177-178). In both cases the challenge these movements faced when they entered public office can be traced back to the different operating logics of movements and governing parties. Social movements are generally single issue, they are characterised by permanent mobilisation against named adversaries and they often disband once their goals have been met. Governing political parties meanwhile are supposed to be durable, representative of all citizens, and work towards the common good (Van Cott, 2008: 95-97).

Today the MAS party is an alternative voice, but it is not as fully representative as it could be when it only stood for the coca growers. Morales

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<sup>4</sup> Morales followed through with his campaign promise to set up an assembly to re-write the constitution. Delegates included sectors of the population that were left out of previous processes of institution building such as indigenous peasants and workers.

had to make alliances with diverse sectors (even those once considered to be enemies) and he toned down his radical rhetoric. Further, given the lack of expertise in the social movement ranks, most people who hold key positions in Evo's cabinet are not indigenous leaders at all, but rather have urban middle class backgrounds and only joined MAS during the campaign. Finally the MAS has had to function within a pre-existing liberal political system which imposes restraints on how and when [Page 51 →] popular sovereignty can be exercised, thus restricting the possibilities for radical democratic practice (Rockefeller, 2007: 165).

Observers have pointed out that as a result of the pressure to form a government the MAS has increasingly disengaged from the social movements to which it was once aligned. In effect the bottom up mobilization is giving way to top down control (Mayorga, 2009; Gamarra, 2007; Zegada et al., 2008; Laserna, 2010). The ethnographic detail outlined here contradicts the claim made by MAS leaders that the party is subsumed to the movement. On the contrary, I argue that the party is gradually severing the ties with its' social base, challenging the coca growers self image as 'presidents'.

### **The Chapare Coca Growers**

The roots of the MAS party lie in the agricultural federations of the Chapare. The majority of the Chapare population is composed of Quechua speaking peasants from the Cochabamba valleys but there are also many Aymaras and Quechuas from the highland departments of Oruro, Potosi and La Paz. Migration to the region began in the mid-1950s when the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR) government promoted the directed colonisation of the tropical lowlands as a way to ameliorate the social problems that persisted after the national revolution. The majority of the migrants avoided getting involved with government programs but they did take advantage of the penetration roads and spontaneously settled the land. The migrants established an agricultural system characterised by small family run farms using manual labour. They cultivated coca leaf along with other crops including rice, bananas, yucca and citrus fruit for their own consumption and to sell on the market (Flores and Blanes, 1984).



The Chapare settlers drew on their experience of agricultural syndicalism in the highlands and organized themselves into self-governing units known as sindicatos, which soon came to represent the maximum expression of community based organizing in the region. Given the virtual absence of the state it was the sindicatos, which assumed the role of local governance and exercised many state like powers. To this day the Chapare sindicatos are responsible for the allocation of land in parcels of ten to twenty hectares, collecting taxes from the coca trade, organising collective work parties, resolving disputes, setting transport fares and investing in public works (Healy, 1991: 89)

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the pace of migration to the tropical lowlands remained low and there were high rates of abandonment. However this all changed in the late 1970s when the Chapare became the center of Bolivia's illegal cocaine trade. Over the following decade tens of thousands of ex-miners, factory workers and highland peasants flooded into the Chapare in response to the new economic opportunities presented by the cocaine economy. The new settlers dedicated themselves to planting coca leaf, processing cocaine paste and in jobs related to servicing the coca-cocaine industry. The colonizers still recount fantastic tales of the boom years when money was easy to come by and the Chapare was the place to go. **[Page 52 →]** One ex-miner told me 'the peasants used to wipe their ass with dollar bills; they thought that the money would never stop!'

However, the good times in this 'get rich quick' zone did not last for long. In 1988 the Bolivian congress passed anti-drug Law 1008, which classified all coca in the Chapare as illegal and slated it for eradication. Throughout the 1990s U.S. trained and funded security forces were deployed in the region to forcibly uproot coca crops. Between 1997 and 2002 the Banzer administration ratcheted up the War on Drugs by implementing a no-holds barred accelerated eradication policy, known as the Dignity Plan (*Plan Dignidad*). Plan Dignidad resulted in the killing and wounding of dozens of peasant coca growers and the incarceration of many union leaders on charges of 'narco-terrorism' (Ledebur, 2005).

One of the main pillars of Plan Dignidad was to provide families effected by eradication with alternative sources of income, however, crop substitution

projects never had much success at providing realistic alternative livelihoods (Farthing and Kohl, 2010: 201-203). The Chapare peasants' rely on coca because it represents a miracle crop. Coca grows like a weed, is light and easy to transport, generates far higher returns per hectare than any other crop, and most importantly there is always a guaranteed market for it. The same cannot be said about citrus fruit, pineapple, palm-heart or any of the other cash crops promoted by European and North American development agencies (Spedding, 2004).

Given its economic importance the coca growers fought to maintain the right to grow coca in the Chapare. The defence of coca gave the Chapare peasants a common cause, enemies were easy to define, including anybody who tried to prevent them from making a living with coca, be it the government, the military or the US embassy. The overarching ideology was that growing coca was good and not growing coca was bad. Coca was not just a crop that peasants grew but also a way of life that reflected the moral worth of the cultivator (Grisaffi, 2010).

In spite of (or some might say because of) military repression, the coca growers built a powerful agricultural union to contest the government's anti-coca policy. The Sindicatos coalesced into peasant Centrals, which in turn formed Federations. Today the 45,000-coca grower families are organised into Six Federations, which in turn are organizationally linked together by the Six Federations Co-ordination Committee<sup>5</sup>. In 1995 the Coca Union established its own political party, which eventually ran under the banner of the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS). In 2005 the MAS won the presidential election, making Chapare Coca Union leader, Evo Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous head of state.

## **Vida Organica**

During fieldwork I lived in a small village called Estrella. Estrella is the home to about fifty families. With the exception of three families who are dedicated

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<sup>5</sup> The coca growers federations are affiliated to national peasant union organizations including the *Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia* (CSUTCB), the *Confederación Sindical de Colinizadores de Bolivia* (CSCB) and the *Federación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas de Bolivia - 'Bartolina Sisa'* (FNMC-BS).

to trade, all households in the village are members of the *sindicato*. Only people already known to the community are allowed to join the *sindicato*, and even then, [Page 53 → ] only once they have proven their commitment by participating in communal work parties and attending meetings. The consequence of this exclusive selection procedure is that today the *sindicato* is cross cut by kinship relations, longstanding friendships, and alliances between families, expressed as *compadrazgo* (god-parenthood). The depth of commitment to the *sindicato* is reflected in the fact that the residents of Estrella would often describe it as being a bit like an extended family.

The *sindicato* holds its meeting on the first Friday of every month. The assembly takes place in a barn on the outskirts of the village. At least one member from each affiliated household (including men and women) is expected to attend the monthly meeting and participate in what the coca growers refer to as *vida organica* (the organic life of the organisation). Absentees incur a significant fine, while persistent malingerers run the risk of facing sterner sanctions such as being prevented from growing coca or even having their land confiscated. In order to verify that all affiliates are present a register is called at the beginning and at the end of each meeting. If the meeting turns out to be particularly long then the General Secretary is likely to call for the door to be locked. This is done to ensure that nobody leaves half way through. The concern with attendance reflects the coca growers' belief that resolutions are only valid if the decision has been made through the direct participation of all members of the community.

At the meeting the men sit on benches to one side of the room and the women sit on the floor opposite. Members of the executive committee, including the General Secretary, Treasurer and Sub-Secretaries, sit in front of a chalkboard at the far end of the barn. The meeting begins with a reading of the minutes of the previous month followed by reports from the various Secretaries who head up diverse commissions including, justice, land, health, coca, education, and so on. At any point during the meeting members can ask for '*la palabra*' (the word) and speak for as long as they wish. Interlocutors speak in a mixture of Spanish and Quechua. They normally begin by introducing themselves and affirming the positions of all previous speakers on a similar topic, often repeating earlier arguments verbatim. The aim of this

discursive style is to emphasise respect for others and also to build consensus. Building consensus takes a long time; meetings last for a minimum of six hours but occasionally drag on into the night. If a decision cannot be reached then the topic will be returned to at a following meeting. During the intervening period issues of public importance are discussed within the family and in public spaces such as at markets, restaurants and bars. Generally by the time the next meeting comes around, the dispute has been settled and consensus achieved.

When it comes to making a decision the coca growers do not hold a secret ballot, rather they have a public demonstration of support. The methods employed by the sindicato include raised hands or the *Fila* system. The latter requires sindicato members to line up in a file behind their chosen candidate. The candidate with the longest line wins. The reasons why the coca growers prefer public voting systems to private ones are twofold. First, it prevents fraud as everyone can bear witness to the process. Second, public voting makes people accountable for the [Page 54 →] decisions that they make. This second point reflects the coca growers' overriding concern that decisions should be sovereign.

Reaching consensus is undoubtedly an objective of the coca growers' assembly culture however I do not want to overstate the matter. In private some coca growers explained that the reason the Sindicato appears to think with one mind is a result of what they referred to as 'enforced conformity'. Some of my informants worried that if they did not conform to the status quo then they risked facing sanctions. What is more, while interactions are overwhelmingly characterized by an ethic of respect, not all members participate equally in debate. Many people, particularly women, avoided speaking out at Sindicato meetings. This can be accounted for by the fact that sexist attitudes in the Sindicato mean that the views of women are not accorded the same weight as those of men. On several occasions I witnessed women being ignored and even jeered at when they addressed Sindicato meetings. Women were not the only people who were marginalized during debate. Other people who tended to say very little included Aymara men who were not confident speakers of either Spanish or Quechua, and people who

did not own land but attended meetings on behalf of the landowner (this includes *partidarias*, share-croppers, and *peons*, farm laborers).

In sum the coca growers pursue a form of radical democracy, which looks more like the civic republicanism associated with the ancient Greeks than a variant of modern liberal democracy (Kymlicka and Norman, 1994: 361). However, despite the emphasis on participation, Sindicato politics should not be thought of as a public sphere in the Habermasian (1989) sense of the term, whereby participation is equal and reason triumphs over power in the elaboration of 'public opinion'. Rather just like in the Greek polis, it is male property owners who appear to have a full say in the administration of public affairs. Further, there is a drive towards conformity and anyone who challenges the status quo can be intimidated with sanctions.

### **Sindicato Leadership**

Elections for Sindicato leadership positions are held annually while Central and Federation level leadership posts are put to the vote once every two years. There is no limit on the number of times an individual can hold a post. Leadership positions are graded, from low level offices such as the secretary of sports right up to 'Dirigente' (General Secretary of a Sindicato). A Dirigente who has proven his worth can then climb the ladder to become a leader of a Central, Federation or even the executive committee of the Six Federations. A leadership role is generally considered to be an onerous responsibility, which involves a lot of hard work for no pay. However Dirigentes gain intellectual and organizational skills and as a result they command a high level of respect within the community. Most Dirigentes assume an advisory role once their tenure has expired.

All members of the Sindicato are required to serve their community at least once by taking on a leadership role. It is not always an individual's choice to become **[Page 55 →]** a leader, rather the community can 'name' someone and it is very difficult to turn down a nomination. Quite apart from losing face, if a person is named for a post and turns it down, they incur a fine of one hundred Bolivianos. When the Chapare was militarized in the 1990s and early 2000s people were reluctant to assume leadership positions

because being a leader meant putting oneself in harm's way. In those days Dirigentes were expected to be at the front of the marches and to man road blockades. Leaders were often hunted down and arrested by the militarized police on suspicion of 'narco-terrorism'. Today being a leader is a far more attractive role. Now the MAS is in government many young people see Sindicato leadership positions as a path to getting a government job (although they rarely succeed in this).

One of the most important elements of Sindicato democracy is the emphasis that the bases put on the social control of their leaders. Social control refers to the fact that all Sindicato members have the power and indeed the responsibility to hold their leaders directly accountable. If a Dirigente is deemed to be acting inappropriately, then the bases have the right to impose a punishment or even force them out of office. So for example, the leader of Sindicato Estrella was replaced before the end of his term because people thought he drank too much and was setting a bad example. I heard of Dirigentes in other communities facing sanctions for the embezzlement of funds, the corrupt allocation of land, and for not adequately following the will of the bases. The overriding principle is that leaders enact the decisions made by the bases –*they follow they do not lead*.

This form of 'social control' informs the organization of the entire Coca Union. As a result, despite the hierarchical structure of the Six Federations, the location of the decision-making power resides with the Sindicato members. In theory it is they who deliberate, come up with proposals, which then rise through the tiers to the executive committee. Here the proposals are clarified and turned into policy, they then filter back down again to be either approved or rejected by the Sindicato members. The close links and accountability between the leadership and the bases means that people understand the resolutions made by the Six Federations Committee to be a direct result of their commitment to attending local level meetings. The Cocaleros have a very strong identification with the goals of the Six Federations as a whole.

## **The Sindicatos, MAS, and Municipal Government**

In 1994 the MNR government of Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada implemented the Law of Popular Participation and decentralization. The Popular Participation law formalized the election and structure of municipal government bodies, legalised grassroots civil society organizations and decentralized twenty per cent of national revenues to municipal governments<sup>6</sup>. The outcome of popular participation and decentralization has been mixed. Academics have noted that in some regions the reforms entrenched long-standing inequalities as mestizo-elites came to dominate municipal politics. However, the picture is quite different in regions such as the [Page 56 →] Chapare, where there are well-organized indigenous-peasant based movements (Albó, 2002; Kohl, 2003).

The Chapare coca growers seized the opportunity to participate in local elections and in 1995 the Coca Federations set up their own electoral vehicle, which later ran under the registered title of the Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS). The coca growers' party had astounding electoral success and by 1997 it controlled most of the town halls in the Cochabamba Tropics. Given that the party was forged in the Chapare it should come as no surprise that the MAS was modelled on the same democratic principles as those found in the Sindicatos. In order to consider the nature of the relationship between the Coca Federation and its political party I now take a closer look at municipal government in the region.

In the Chapare there is a total overlap between membership of the Union and membership of the MAS party and this has a profound impact on the way municipal politics works in the region. The Coca Union chooses candidates from within its ranks to stand as mayors or councillors. The candidate is generally a person who already has significant leadership experience within the Coca Federations. So for example Don Lorenzo was a councilor at the time I carried out fieldwork. He explained to me that he had been a Dirigente of a Peasant Central and was selected to stand for public office at a Coca Federation meeting. He told me that he then still had to win the position by participating in the municipal election, which he referred to as the '*segunda*

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<sup>6</sup> Some academics have been critical of such non-market programs which they maintain are simply the most recent elements of a neo-liberal governing project with the intention to accommodate specific demands and thereby divert attention away from national policy (see Peck and Tickell 2002).

*elección*' (second election). As far as Don Lorenzo was concerned the segunda elección was more of a formality than a serious competition. This is because the Coca Federations have so many votes at their disposal that the candidate they endorse will inevitably win.

Despite the voting power of the Federations, the coca growers are not complacent. It is common for the Sindicatos to hold a practice vote before an election. At the monthly meeting mock ballot papers are circulated and members are required to cast their vote under conditions similar to those at the polling booth. Once this task has been completed the sindicato leader will then go through each ballot in turn to explain if it has been filled in correctly. A correct vote is a legible vote, but more importantly it is a vote for the MAS candidate. Practice voting is deemed necessary because many coca growers are illiterate and so leaders fear that members might accidentally vote for the wrong party. Unsurprisingly in the 2010 mayoral election in Villa Tunari (a town in the centre of the Chapare) the MAS candidate received one hundred per cent of the vote<sup>7</sup>.

Once in office the role of the Mayor and the Councilors is to carry out directives that come directly from the Coca Federations. The degree of control exerted over public officials is reflected in the fact that they are expected to provide regular oral reports on the progress of their administration and they even have to pay a percentage of their salary to the Federations. In the Chapare, the Town Halls double up as meeting places for the Coca Federations. This means that Sindicato affiliates are in constant contact with the Mayor and Councilors and can easily exert social control. If the bases detect misconduct or contempt for Sindicato authority, then they have the power to sanction their leaders. This could take the form of a fine, **[Page 57 →]** public humiliation, removal from office, or even the use of violent force including whipping (Van Cott, 2008: 195).

As a result of coca grower hegemony in the Chapare the Federations have been able to impose their own forms of decision-making onto Municipal Government. This can be viewed as a positive development as previously marginalized people are now in power and they are using municipal funds to

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cne.org.bo/CNEResultados/ProcesoElectoral2010.htm>



invest in neglected rural areas. However people who are not aligned with the Coca Federations, including small business owners in the towns (in particular the hotel owners), and lowland indigenous groups, complain that they are excluded from access to municipal resources. What is more, even public officials (who represent the MAS) point out that there is a clash between the community-based forms of governance and the national laws that regulate municipal governments. For example Don Lorenzo complained that the bases do not understand that the work of a public official is quite different to that of a Sindicato leader. Don Lorenzo told me that the bases often demand that public officials disregard existing laws or else invent new ones in order to achieve Federation goals.

The point I want to make is that when it comes to municipal politics in the Chapare the boundaries between state and society are absolutely blurred (Guimarães, 2009). I argue that when Morales won the 2005 election the coca growers imagined that the national government would function in a similar way to local government, in other words, the Cocaleros thought of the government officials as nothing more than spokespeople for decisions forged at their Union meetings.

### **From Grassroots Mobilization to Top Down Control**

The MAS victory in the 2005 Presidential elections brought into question long established modes of imagining the state. For the coca growers the state went from being something that was thought of as sitting above society (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002), negligent or worse still an enemy, to something that they could now reach and even control. The shift in political subjectivity is best demonstrated by the fact that immediately following the election many coca growers claimed that they too were presidents.

Of all the social sectors in Bolivia, President Morales has paid most attention to the concerns of his powerbase located in the Chapare. During the period that I carried out fieldwork Morales came to the Chapare on average once every four weeks to attend Federation meetings, sports events and parties. On these occasions Morales always began his speeches by reminding the bases that while he might be the President of the Republic he is

nevertheless still the General Secretary of the Coca Federations and he demanded that they should treat him as such. Morales would invite the bases to exert social control, using phrases such as 'tell me when I make a mistake', 'please guide me' and 'this is not the government of Evo Morales alone, this is our government'.

**[Page 58 →]**

To give his inclusive rhetoric a bit of substance Evo Morales invited the Chapare Federations to nominate the country's new drugs Czar, otherwise known as the '*Viceministro de Coca y Desarrollo Integral*'. The members of the Six Federations took this task very seriously and after an extended consultation with the bases they put forward the aptly named Oscar Coca (who had previously worked as an advisor to the movement). Shortly afterwards at a rally held in the Chapare President Morales announced that a close personal friend of his would fill the position, not Oscar Coca, but ex-Chapare mayor, Felipe Cáceres. Evo's disregard for the decision of the bases angered some local Federation leaders. One Dirigente commented '*Que Macana!* Evo hasn't respected our decision; the power has gone to his head!'

Radio Soberanía is the coca growers' radio station. It is owned, managed, staffed, and financed by members of Federation Trópico (the largest and most militant of the coca growers' Federations). Most people who are members of Federation Trópico tune into Radio Soberanía. This is because it puts out the strongest FM signal in the region, but also, as the colonizers frequently told me, 'its ours' 'we paid for it', what is more they simply don't trust any other source of information.

The principals that inform *vida organica* also underlie radio production. Everyone who worked at the station insisted that the radio broadcast should represent the consensus arrived at by the population. One of the reporters explained to me '...the doors are always open. The policy is to give *la palabra*' to everyone, no? ... It (the radio) is the voice of the Cocaleros. I would say that it is the voice of the people'.

In the wake of Evo's decision not to appoint the coca growers preferred choice of Oscar Coca, the director of Radio Soberanía aired the complaints on his daily news program. Live on air Don Edmundo (the director) called on Evo Morales to return to the Chapare in order to explain himself at an

assembly of the Coca Federations. Edmundo also criticised Evo for continuing in his role as General Secretary of the Six Federations. Given that Radio Soberanía is owned and operated by the Federation, Edmundo's call on Evo to respond to the bases was entirely legitimate; it represented a form of social control.

A few days after the broadcast Edmundo received a phone call instructing him to attend a meeting at the Presidential Palace. When Edmundo eventually got back from La Paz he acted out word for word what happened in his meeting with the President. In a taped interview Edmundo told me, 'Evo said to me, "here in the radio you can't say anything against the government ...and certainly nothing against me. You are only going to talk well about this government". In response Edmundo told the President that he was not a PR man but a journalist and had a commitment to the bases.

A few weeks later an extraordinary general meeting of Federation Tropico was called to discuss the future of the Radio station. The assembly was presided over by Don Julio, the general secretary of Federation Tropico and the departmental representative for MAS. Julio forwarded the motion that the Federation should sack [Page 59 →] Edmundo on the grounds that he was incompetent. This was clearly not the case as most people enjoyed Edmundo's programs and believed that he operated the radio for the benefit of the rank and file. Nevertheless, during the meeting nobody stood up for Edmundo. There are several reasons why this might be. It was clear that Edmundo's dismissal was a decision that had come directly from Evo Morales, and people were reluctant to contradict him. What is more, Julio implied that if the bases accepted Evo's personal choice for a replacement director, then the government might be able to find some funds to go towards setting up a television channel for the Federation (a project that had long been in the pipeline). After two hours the matter was settled, Edmundo was fired. The following day during his final broadcast on Radio Soberanía Edmundo classified his dismissal as '*an attack against the right to free speech*'.

Soon after Edmundo's departure President Morales visited the radio station to celebrate carnival. Travelling with the President in his white four by four was Rodrigo, the new director of Radio Soberanía. Rodrigo is an experienced broadcaster who was trained at the tin miners' stations and later

worked at NGOs in the city of Cochabamba. Despite Rodrigo's considerable broadcasting experience he nevertheless represented an odd choice for the position. Rodrigo was an outsider, nobody in the Chapare knew him, but more importantly, the Federation had played no part in selecting him (apart from to rubber stamp Evo's personal decision). It soon became clear why Evo had made Rodrigo his new director, while drunk at a party Rodrigo flung an arm around my shoulders and drawled 'do you know why the President chose me? ...He trusts me'.

Radio Soberanía had always been run on a shoestring budget, however within three months of Rodrigo's arrival, the station underwent a rapid modernisation, including the installation of a satellite link for the Internet, a brand new FM transmitter, computers, and studio equipment<sup>8</sup>. The money presumably came from the government, although Rodrigo always denied this. The reporters could now call on local government agencies for favours, including lifts in their pickup trucks and the loan of equipment for special events. These benefits came at a price however, Rodrigo let the radio team know that the demands of politicians must now take precedence over the concerns of the bases (Grisaffi, 2009: 229-231).

Two ideas about *vida organica* emerge from the ethnographic detail outlined above. The first comes from Edmundo who sees the Federation owned radio station as a space for local actors free from extraneous control. As far as Edmundo is concerned radio should be independent and operated to oversee the MAS leadership. This position sits well with the coca growers' ideals of assembly culture, which privileges the 'social control' of authorities and the idea that the party should be subservient to the movement. The second view, represented by Evo Morales, suggests that the radio should serve the party's interests. Evo Morales evidently has no time for critical voices from within the ranks. This is clearly illustrated by Evo's attempt to brand Edmundo as a traitor when he stood up for the interests of the bases. Morales has taken control of the Federation owned radio station and has effectively turned it into a government propaganda machine.

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<sup>8</sup> In 2010 the Federation installed a television channel at Radio Soberanía

[Page 60 →]

## **Coca, Radical Democracy and Changing Subjectivities**

Prior to January 2006 (when Evo entered into office) the staff at Radio Soberanía never had to worry about a confrontation between the party and movement because, as we have seen, the two were essentially the same thing. In the past people made criticisms about the way the MAS was run but they would do so in private, there was overwhelming public support for the party. In contrast today tensions over the steerage of the party are beginning to emerge and these are being aired in public. The contradiction between the goals of the bases on the one hand and MAS party goals on the other is most acutely felt in relation to coca. In this final section I outline grassroots assessments of Evo's deviation from direct politics through a discussion of coca policy.

On entering office President Morales made a radical break with the previous strategy of forced coca eradication. Evo's alternative policy, initially developed in collaboration with the Coca Unions, envisions development with coca and turns the coca growers into partners in the fight against drug trafficking. Under the new regime each coca union member is permitted to grow a limited amount of coca, known as a *cato* (one third of an acre) and the responsibility for ensuring compliance has been transferred from the security forces to the Coca Federations<sup>9</sup>. The coca growers consider that the new policy is a step in the right direction, the violence provoked by forced coca eradication is seen as a thing of the past and the Cocaleros have been able to re-establish themselves after years of impoverishment. However restrictions on the amount of coca that can be grown, coupled with eradication efforts, and what is seen in the Chapare as the government's softer approach towards other coca producing regions, has caused sections of the rank and file to complain of betrayal.

Rather than directly challenge the government over its policy<sup>10</sup> some Cocaleros subvert the new regime by simply growing more coca than the 'one

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<sup>9</sup> The new policy is referred to as 'social control' and draws on Indigenous forms of self-governance.

<sup>10</sup> On the 9th May 2012 there was a clash between a group of Chapare coca growers and members of the Joint Task Force who were conducting coca eradication.

cato' limit allows. They do this by subdividing their plots and registering the parcels of land under the names of different family members (who each have the right to a cato of coca) or else they plant extensions of coca deep in the jungle, far from prying eyes. The coca growers justify their actions by pointing out that a cato only generates marginally more money than the national minimum wage, and they claim that this is simply not enough to live on. What is more the coca growers argue that President Morales has done very little to open up markets for alternative tropical crops, leaving them with no option but to grow more coca

Against this background Radio Soberanía has been used to promote the new coca policy. The media producers do this by praising Sindicatos that have successfully maintained one cato per affiliate and naming and shaming those that have not. The reporters portray the policy as the will of the Federations and remind the rank and file of the dangers of not respecting the coca regime. As a result when the coca growers listen to the radio, they often find that there is a gap between the ideological self-image of the Union that is broadcast and the issues that they see as being important in their day-to-day lives. Many times I was sat with coca growers listening to the radio when the broadcast urged the rank and file to grow less coca leaf or to attend a march in support of a government policy that bore little **[Page 61 →]** relevance to them. On these occasions the listeners would react by questioning the validity of government policy and criticizing Federation and MAS leaders for rushing through proposals without adequately consulting the bases. In order to maintain their listenership the media producers at Radio Soberanía rhetorically position the station outside of the state. On air they claim that Radio Soberanía represents the unmediated 'voice of the Cocaleros' and off air they insist that the station maintains a critical distance from government (see Grisaffi, 2009: 217).

In the Chapare people are acutely aware that Morales has abandoned their political practice. Union members complain that they can no longer get close to Evo Morales when he visits the Chapare, and established leaders lament that Morales has no time to listen to their proposals. As the links between the movement and party ossify, so the coca growers have given up referring to themselves as 'presidents'. Nevertheless, the rank and file

continue to hold Morales in high regard. If Morales makes a mistake or is not radical enough, then it is widely assumed that this is the fault of his aides, who the Cocaleros characterise as 'opportunists' with no commitment to the goals and values of the MAS party. I frequently heard Union leaders discuss the possibility of bringing parliamentarians to the Chapare where they could be disciplined, just as a union leader would if they failed to follow the will of the rank and file.

Most Cocaleros continue to support the MAS administration, principally because they are concerned that any other government would reinstate forced coca eradication. However, not all coca growers are so sanguine, some have held onto their radical sense of democracy and are looking for alternatives to Morales and standard electoral politics. A handful of Sindicatos (those located in areas where coca eradication is being enforced) have threatened to split away from the Six Federations with the aim to establish their own alternative organization to challenge the MAS (see Grisaffi, 2009; 127-128).

## Conclusion

I set out to understand what the coca growers meant when they declared 'all of us are presidents'. To this end I posed two questions, what does democracy mean to the coca growers? And, how does this frame their understanding of the MAS administration? In response to these questions I have illustrated that for the coca growers full membership of a political community is dependent upon the exercise of political rights that far exceed the right to vote. We have seen that the coca growers put an intrinsic value on political participation, which they describe as a moral duty that everyone must fulfil. Their assembly culture prioritises personal relationships, consensus building, and the direct accountability of leaders to their community. I argue that this form of assembly culture has shaped the way that the coca growers perceive the MAS administration. I suggest that following the MAS victory in the 2005 presidential election the coca growers imagined that the kind of politics found at the grassroots would now extend right up to government. When the coca growers claimed to be Presidents then, they might as well have been stating **[Page 62 →]** 'now we are citizens' because they imagined

that they had finally gained the kind of political rights that they deem necessary for full membership in a political community.

However, I have also shown that there are limits to this emerging form of 'presidential citizenship'. The MAS government undoubtedly challenges taken for granted ideas about what democracy means, and how it can be practiced. Having said that, Garica Linera's utopian claim that the MAS administration represents 'a government of social movements', does seem to be an exaggeration. The ethnographic evidence outlined above clearly illustrates that there is a discrepancy between the self-image of the MAS and political reality on the ground. It appears as if Evo Morales is attempting to sidestep the constraints imposed by direct democracy while simultaneously trying to tighten his grip on the movement. However, as we have seen, this strategy is not altogether successful, the bases remain cynical about the state, even when they vote for the government and can see it as aligned with their interests. This raises important questions about Morales's hegemony on many fronts, but perhaps the most important issue is a popular desire to maintain spaces of political independence in the Chapare.

The findings presented in this article are significant because the 2009 constitution makes room for new and diverse forms of democracy and belonging, based on the kind of communitarian democracy described here. This article raises questions for the future of the new constitution such as: will the MAS be able to incorporate the desire for direct democracy? Or will those people schooled in alternative democratic systems always feel as if they are not full rights bearing subjects when they enter mainstream politics?

At a broader level the case of the Chapare Coca growers draws attention to fact that while 'democracy' is a widely used term it's meaning is not fixed. In concert with Julia Paley (2002) I argue that anthropologists need to examine the ways that democracy plays out at the local level, the kinds of meanings that get attached to the term, and the impact this has on notions of citizenship.

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