

Evo Morales, Climate Change and the Paradoxes of a Social Movement Presidency

By Jessica Camille Aguirre and Elizabeth Sonia Cooper

Last December, at the UN-hosted climate change summit in Copenhagen, it seems likely that the people with whom Bolivian President Evo Morales felt the strongest identification were not his fellow heads of state that met behind closed doors, but those left outside. Of all the groups Morales spoke to over the course of the summit, he shared the longest history with the Indigenous Caucus he addressed on December 16th. Almost nostalgically, he proclaimed to the gathering of 200 indigenous peoples: "Before I was a leader, I was together with you in the alternative summits, in the summits parallel to the summits of the heads of state... We are out there marching and mobilizing, because [we are a] big family." Morales distinguished himself from other heads of state by gravitating towards this "family" of social movements and its struggles, intentionally locating himself outside the walls of the Bella Center.

When the climate negotiations at Copenhagen failed in its mission to sign a binding agreement for action on climate change that could protect nations like his from the radical environmental changes already underway, Morales led a stinging denouncement of the entire process. He declared, "We come from the Culture of Life, whereas the Western model represents *the culture of death*. At these summits we have to define whether we are on the side of life or on the side of death." Soon after Morales announced that he was convening a climate summit of his own, a "People's Summit", which was held in April just outside Cochabamba, Bolivia.

As a political actor who had no decisive responsibility in building the UN agreement, Morales was free to use his position as head of state to become instead a forceful advocate for the voices of the disenfranchised – a president with one foot on the inside of the negotiating process and another on the outside.

Morales's positioning on climate change is a sign of a different kind of presidency, one that comes directly from his personal history as a social movement leader. It is a "social movement presidency" that contains within it the paradox of being something new and different in the world of global politics, but something far more traditional back at home in the practicalities of Bolivia's domestic politics – political compromise included.

"The People's Summit" Under a glaring Cochabamba sun and stark sky, bleary-eyed Climate Camp activists recently arrived from the UK rubbed elbows with Aymara *campesinos* recently arrived from La Paz. It was the first day of the People's World Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of the Mother Earth (PWCCC), and many participants were waiting in line for a welcome package, which included a book of President Morales' climate change-related speeches.

In Copenhagen, Morales was asked midway through the summit if it would be catastrophic if there were no deal. He replied, "No, it's a waste of time. And if the leaders of the countries cannot arrive at an agreement, why don't the peoples then decide together?" In that statement the idea for the Cochabamba meeting was born.

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Morales called the summit to open space for a more inclusive climate change discourse. Jonathan Neale, union leader from the UK, observed on the first day of the summit that Morales was the only leader on the global scale who could have accomplished such a feat. He attributed this capacity to Morales' unique position as both an ally of social movements and a head of state with the resources and clout to organize such an event. Recognizing an opportunity to build bridges of solidarity between movements from the North and the South and construct a global climate movement, Morales in one motion put the "outsiders" from Copenhagen on the "inside" of a new conversation.

The summit was fundamentally a space for international social movements and secondarily for government delegations from the Global South. While he was at the UN in early May to present the summit's conclusions, Morales told a press conference that of the 35,000 participants in attendance, approximately 9,000 had come from outside South America, together representing 140 countries, including 56 Government delegations. The concluding document that came out of the People's Climate Summit thus represents a dual function. It is on one hand oriented towards the creation of an alternative proposal to be brought to the next step in the UN process, the 16th Conference of the Parties under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The conference will be held in Cancun in December 2010, and it will be the next major forum for creating an international agreement on climate change action. Toward this end, Morales traveled to New York to present the Peoples' Agreement document to Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and to press the G77 to "build a common position" around it.

But various social movement leaders also accompanied Morales to the UN, representing civil society in their demands to the international community. The document, as represented by these leaders, secondly functions as a rallying point for the climate movement all over the world.

For the activists that attended that People's Climate Summit, and for their networks by extension, these demands may become a blueprint for the way forward. Tom Goldtooth, executive director of the Indigenous Environmental Network of North America, released a statement supporting the conference's conclusions outlined in the document: "We are a movement of millions of people throughout the world demanding transparency, inclusion and to have a voice in UN climate negotiations that will create climate policy that directly affects the future of our communities and the world." The main demands articulated in the document (which can be found at <http://pwccc.wordpress.com/2010/04/24/peoples-agreement/>) are the following: the establishment of a UN Universal Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth that would reflect and complement the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the establishment of an International Climate and Environmental Justice Tribunal with legal teeth to "to prevent, judge and penalize States, industries and people that by commission or omission contaminate and provoke climate change"; the acceptance of a comprehensive climate debt owed by developed countries (notably the U.S. and in Europe) to the developing countries suffering the impact of climate change; and the carrying out of a global referendum to consult the peoples of the world on these and other topics related to climate change.

Nnimmo Bassey, Nigerian environmental activist and chair of Friends of the Earth International, also supported the document, but stressed that international summits were only one facet of a much greater process: "I'm not looking strictly at Cancun right here; I'm looking at a different process that's going to open up new spaces. And governments that

have been sitting on the fence or those that have been refusing to accept real solutions will have to tell us – if the people have spoken, why they’ve refused to listen to the people.”

Meanwhile, in Bolivian Domestic Politics... While Morales articulates uncompromising environmental demands in international spaces such as UNFCCC negotiations, in the context of Bolivia’s economic and political landscape, Morales is constrained by the political practicalities of making a country run. At home Morales cannot play the role of activist outsider: his position as head of the Bolivian government means that there are political realities and compromises that he is forced to face. During the Cochabamba summit and in the weeks afterwards a pair of episodes illustrated just how bound to political and economic tradition President Morales is in his own backyard.

The first episode took place during the conference, right outside its front gate. Though the summit was conceived as an open forum to facilitate genuine discussion, concerns that the conference was pre-cooked and over-managed by the government spurred the creation of parallel events by major Bolivian social movements.

Most of this energy converged in *Mesa 18* (Table 18), a parallel event intended as a space to discuss local issues that weren’t being addressed by the 17 formal working groups inside the summit. It is these spaces of political dissidence that emerged around the summit that further highlight the not always trouble-free relationship between Morales and Bolivian social movements.

The criticisms coming out of *Mesa 18* centered on contradictions between the Morales administration’s development plans and its vision of environmental sustainability. These contradictions are exemplified in the proposed Trans-Oceanic Highway, a project jointly undertaken by Bolivian, Brazilian and Peruvian governments to connect their markets to seaports, and which if constructed would destroy ecologically sensitive areas in the Chapare of Cochabamba and the Beni region in the Amazon. Another example of a development mega-project is the two billion dollar hydroelectric dam, Cachuela Esperanza, to be built on the Beni River.

What is significant about *Mesa 18* is that it was one of the first, and probably one of the most visible public expressions of wariness towards the Morales administration from his social movement base.

Recent national elections, particularly those held in April for department-level offices, have definitively consolidated MAS’ political power and undermined traditional strongholds of conservative opposition in the eastern departments. With a diminished need for political unity among MAS supporters, opposition is now coming out of the woodwork in Morales’ own traditional base.

Mesa 18’s criticisms of Morales’ environmental policies focused on the discrepancy between rhetoric and action. Representatives from some social movements and indigenous organizations such as CONAMAQ (Bolivia’s largest indigenous organization) articulated their growing distrust that socialism was a viable model by which to develop natural resources responsibly. The counter-proposals coming from the critics of Morales’ socialist development schemes centered on the idea of “communitarian socialism” – the imperative that resources be managed through local community structures. Resources, many said in *Mesa 18*, belong to these communities, not to the state.

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“The [economic] models that we’ve known until now are socialism and capitalism,” commented Rafael Quispe, one of the leaders of CONAMAQ, “but both are Western, both are extractivist, developmentalist, consumerist and predatory. These models violate the rights of Mother Earth, and if President Evo Morales expresses that we are in a socialist model then he violates the Mother Earth.”

This statement highlights some of the political tensions arising for Morales as he attempts to utilize some aspects of the indigenous *cosmovisión* – including the symbolism of the *Pachamama* (the Andean conceptualization of the Mother Earth) – to inform a version of socialism that promises both development and solutions to climate change.

That the government’s policies contradict its rhetoric was not only argued in words, but demonstrated in action, too. The same week that 9,000 foreigners arrived in Bolivia for the People’s Climate Summit, community organizations in the Salar de Uyuni staged massive protests against the mining company San Cristóbal for its unsustainable water use and for not compensating the nearby communities for this cost. Minera San Cristóbal is a fully owned subsidiary of the Japanese manufacturing corporation Sumitomo. Whether by lucky coincidence or strategic planning, every newspaper in Bolivia trumpeted news of the protests just as journalists descended from all over the world for the summit. Thus, Bolivian social movements made use of international attention focused on the country to stake out a space to make their own demands apart from those encapsulated in Morales’ environmental rhetoric.

The final document from *Mesa 18* focuses on the necessity of local control over natural resources: “Considering the lack of political will of the governments of the world, as social and indigenous organizations, we demand the right to define a new model of development and direct control of the natural patrimony.” At first glance, this position may seem analogous to the demands coming out of the conservative eastern departments, but the key difference is between the desire to preserve land on one hand and the desire to maintain private property laws on the other. According to the *Mesa 18*’s concluding document, for example, local ownership would entail the expulsion of all corporations from development processes and the deconstruction of the paradigm of concentrated resource ownership. Even while Quispe, along with many other *Mesa 18* members, participated in the formal working tables *inside* the summit as well, some Bolivian social movements expressed a distinct sense of exclusion from the conference. That same sense of exclusion, it must be noted, was the basis for Morales’ critique of Copenhagen, and the tone of the critiques is remarkably similar.

The second episode of dissent from Morales’ base involves one of the most powerful actors in the country, the COB (the *Central Obrera Boliviana*, the largest union in Bolivia). Just weeks after the summit, Morales announced that his government would support an anemic five percent increase in the minimum wage (a decree that covers both the public and private sectors). The COB and other key unions demanded that the raise for the nation’s poorest salary workers be boosted to 12 percent. The conflict set off a series of huge marches by unions and others in several cities around the country, including La Paz and Cochabamba. The government replied with a hard line at five percent and a round of television advertisements proclaiming that annual inflation in the country was running at less than two percent, a claim quickly challenged by many Bolivians. These twin challenges to Morales, and the government’s response in turn, put into clear relief the gap between what a social movement presidency looks like in the international

arena and what it looks like at home in domestic politics. Though Morales legitimates his development schemes by putting the profits towards social welfare programs, criticisms of his policies are based on their failure to mitigate negative social and environmental effects engendered by their large-scale industrial nature. According to his critics, the underlying problem is that these industrialization projects do little to break free from a strictly economic view toward development. But Morales rejects these criticisms. In the international arena, Morales allies himself with dissenters, but at Cochabamba, he belittled those who criticized him in *Mesa 18*, saying, "That's a business of the NGOs and the foundations." The calls from some Bolivian social movements around domestic environmental stewardship are as resolute as Morales' are on the global stage. Exploitation of natural resources, critics say, is impossibly incompatible with the *cosmovisión Andina*, which promotes living harmoniously with the planet through specific nature-based spiritual values rooted in community.

Morales' rhetoric at the global level consistently echoes this same *cosmovisión Andina*, and this rhetoric has inspired a new environmental vision for many around the world, garnering Morales the title of UN "World Hero of the Mother Earth". The symbolic significance of that shift in Bolivian politics – from Gonzalo 'Goni' Sanchez de Lozada's mass privatizations to Morales' enshrining the right to water in the new constitution – cannot be overlooked. But when the international spotlight is not cast on Bolivia, Morales' domestic policies at times contradict that message.

The Morales administration has decided that in order to deliver on promises of social welfare programs and economic development, it must industrialize and exploit natural resources. Pablo Solón, Bolivian ambassador to the UN, reiterated this point at the summit, framing the discussion in terms of climate debt: "It's not possible that only 20 percent of the world occupies 80 percent of the atmosphere with their emissions, because then what happens with the rest of the world is that we don't have any space for any kind of development, because you need to industrialize, and that's going to mean you are going to throw some greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere."

Movements within Bolivia are calling for the administration to find some balance between the commitment to develop and deliver on promises to the Bolivian people and the imperative to do so with a vision of environmental sustainability. Juan Carlos Guzman Salinas, of the organization CEDLA from La Paz, argued in the *Mesa 18* forum that the nationalization of energy resources results in drops in energy prices and therefore impedes the development of clean energy alternatives. "Renewable energies will never be able to compete in this market while the price of combustible energy is fixed so low. Bolivia must reflect on these practices and correct them," he pronounced.

Projects ranging from gas industrialization to exploitation of lithium, which are undertaken with a distinctly populist view towards development, do little to rupture the paradigm of dirty development or to ameliorate actual environmental impacts.

In the international arena, Morales – the ally of the grassroots – has a voice akin to that of social movements in that he creates a discourse to counter power. But at home he is faced with similar tradeoffs and limitations as president that wealthy countries claim limit them on climate change action. At Copenhagen, Northern countries justified with cold pragmatism their inability to adopt policies that might cap climate change to less than two degrees (the target aimed at by Morales and others). In Bolivia, the Morales administration echoes a similar pragmatism – citing limits on resources, inflationary pressures, etc. – in

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holding its line firm at five percent with respect to the minimum wage increase that the COB demands.

Lessons for the Climate Justice Movement – In Search of a Global Road Blockade

It is this very struggle between political limits and social movement demands that is at the heart of the struggles ahead for the climate justice movement. The voices from the People's Summit echo in many ways the voices of Bolivian social movements that have achieved so much (indeed, 75 percent of the conference participants were from Bolivia), most recently during the Water Revolt and Gas War. But those Bolivian victories had an ingredient noticeably missing in the work of climate activists – the means to apply serious pressure to those with the political authority to act. Bechtel was kicked out of the country in 2000, the IMF's belt-tightening package was rejected in 2003, and Goni's gas deal was defeated that same year, all through the political muscle of road blockades and other forms of protest that had teeth. But what is the equivalent of a road blockade that will have any impact on Northern governments, for example?

It is here that reconciling the strategic advantages of each side of Morales' dual role, both as a head of state who understands political limits, and as a social movement leader who decries them, could be the most valuable. On one hand, in the official UN proceedings, the righteous tone he adopts may ultimately help delegitimize weak compromise and open up political space for more effective action. That is the impact that social movements often – and ought to – have on such a process. On the other hand, if his voice is too radical to be heard – declaring for example as he has that the Western capitalist model represents a culture of death and that therefore the only way to solve the climate crisis is to do away with it – both he and the movement he increasingly speaks for could be left muted on the margins.

Morales is a hybrid, a leader unbending in his global voice and overtly pragmatic in his domestic governance. These two sides of the Morales presidency have important lessons for each other. To fulfill the promise of a social movement presidency, he must act more boldly in his environmental policies at home and help the climate justice movement be more politically astute in its actions globally.

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