

Bolivia: `More of the same'? Or a break with `traditions'? The MAS: a paradoxical case of democratisation

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The Santos Ramirez affaire marked, undoubtedly, a shift in the social perception of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS). [In February, Santos Ramirez, a former head of the state energy company YPFB, and former head of the Senate from 2006-2007, was charged with corruption and faces a lengthy prison sentence of up to eight years.]

As several researchers of the “political instrument” have highlighted, including Moira Zuazo, the credibility of the party created by Evo Morales in 1999 was largely constructed on bases of ethical politics. [1]

This “ethical principle”, symbolised by the implementation of the Austerity Law at the beginning of the Morales administration in 2006, played a fundamental role in establishing the dichotomy between, on the one hand, the so-called traditional parties (members of the “agreed democracy”) and, on the other, movements that raised the slogan of the moral reform of the discredited Bolivian politics.

Among them were urban middle-class organisations that struggled against corruption and the authentic transparency of electoral mobilisation – such as the Movement Without Fear (MSM), which repeatedly criticised the “partyocracy” – and movements, such as the MAS, that insisted in rejecting the label of “party” in favour of “instrument” – emphasising, also, its close links to the popular organisations (trade unions, local committees ...) which led the period of protest that rocked the Bolivian political system beginning with the “water war” of 2000.

Ethics as `symbolic principle'

In light of the scandal which seriously affects the public image of the “honest” party which benefited the MAS so far, it begs asking a simple question, frequently debated in the Bolivian media by the generators of opinion – with the vast majority linked to the neoliberal ancien régime – that have access to newspapers columns with greater circulation, or to the screens of television channels with more diffusion: is the MAS not just more of the same? Does not the “Ramirez case” illustrate, perhaps, the failure of the MAS in its effort to renovate political practices – including the classic “cronyist” vision of public administration – and democratisation of political life?

By the very fact of having erected the “honesty” in symbolic principle, i.e., in the form of authority in front of the rest of the parties that structure the institutional political sphere, the leaders of the MAS are in a paradoxical situation: all observers and rivals alike demand from them a permanent demonstration of political ethics in their daily practice, including those, that in the years of the “agreed democracy”, were able to assume public office in times when “cronism”, the “quota” and the extensive use of the famous reserved expenses were seen as part of the routine exercise of power. In other words, the MAS was not allowed any stumble in ethical order, less by those who, yesterday, were stigmatised for not having respected these principles.

In that way it can be understood how a case of relatively “mild” corruption – the sale of guarantees in January 2007 – in which a few thousand dollars circulated in exchange for state positions could unleash a media scandal of an enormous scale, without giving the slightest attention to the sociological dynamics which permits one to understand the “why” of the facts. This is not to apologise for objectively questionable attitudes (such as the acceptance of bribes or the imposition of clientelistic practices in the selection process of public staff), but to see how, precisely in a party that includes ethics and honesty as a component of its political identity, its own militants arrive at such paths.

The peasant matrix

Founded in January 1999 on the initiative of Evo Morales and his followers, the MAS-IPSP [Instrument for the Sovereignty of the People] was initially presented as a sort of “extension” of rural trade unionism within the institutional political sphere. In this sense, political militancy was presented as the logical continuation of a rural militant trajectory – a tendency reinforced by the gradual hegemony of Morales over the entire peasant movement, having managed to marginalise his rivals Felipe Quispe and Alejo Veliz – and not as a parallel activity to the trade union activity, as was often the case in the COBista unionism. And this “genetic letter” will have a decisive influence on the constitution of the party later.

The unexpected arrival of Evo Morales in second place in the 2002 presidential elections would generate an expectation among the popular sectors that would begin to build a MAS party apparatus genuinely urban, with a view to the 2004 municipal elections. Likewise, a strict link does not exist between the popular-urban mobilisations of 2000-2005 and the growth of MAS-IPSP in the cities: in fact, in a city with a strong MAS vote today such as El Alto, the days of October 2003 did not play a fundamental role in the implementation of the MAS, but rather the disaffiliation of El Alto people from the traditional parties. The perspectives of victory created within the party such as MAS that could be characterised as “peasant” then led to a process of “forced implantation”: building the party becomes a necessity, but carries with it the risk of a “distortion” of what is the “instrument”.

From there the distinction between urban and rural areas within it, is reproduced in all areas where it acts. In parliament, tensions regularly arise between uninominal and plurinominal deputies in the period 2002-2005. The first, with a peasant trade union profile, elected by their bases, repeatedly denounced the attempts of the second, with a middle-class profile (intellectuals, NGOists and/or ex-militants from left), of driving the activities of the bench, in a institutional space in which the latter reveal themselves much more comfortably. Here, unlike the “principled militant” – understood as knowledge accumulated over time – among urban and rural areas is to emphasise the difficulty for peasants to adapt to the new sphere, as well as changes in the party for the incursion into the institutional space, whose centre of decision-making is no longer the National Directorate, but the bench. In a sense, the presence of the MAS in the national institutional enclosures creates the possibility of the reproduction of domination, structural in Bolivian society, of the peasants within

their own emancipatory tool.

In response to this process at the institutional level, peasant leaders will aim to consolidate their domination in the party apparatus, before the urban militants that are converted into second rank: likewise, the access to “work” — that becomes an incitement to militancy of great importance after the victory of Morales in 2005 — is growing and tightly controlled by union leaders. And there are few cases of “compañero” peasants whose entry into public office translates into an experience of symbolic violence that is particularly hard, that often ends in the desertion of the job post.

Being a popular-urban militant in the MAS, therefore, requires recourse to a wide range of strategies to legitimise to the rest of a party that, while there is diversification from a sociological point of view, remains configured by its peasant matrix. To be able to obtain “work” through the militancy within the MAS, it is necessary, therefore, to gradually forge a series of alliances with rural leaders who, subsequently, consolidate the legitimacy of the “urban” militant in front of their rivals who are in competition for “work”.

Such situations, of course, leads to internal conflicts if these same urban sections are not adequately channelled through by the rural leaders. Thus, in 2006, the divisions between campesinos in departments such as La Paz or Beni have led to the utilisation of the urban section as “cannon fodder”, as each campesino fraction demands from the cities an absolute loyalty to it. This led, in the cities, a reproduction of the divisions that govern the sphere of rural organisations.

The ambiguous attraction to the state

It would be easy to draw from this analysis the conclusion that, within the MAS, there is a “peasant tyranny” underway towards the urban sectors, a desirable myth to give validity to the prejudices according to which the peasant movement does not demonstrate nothing but contempt to the exercise of representative democracy.

Such a conclusion would deny two fundamental problems. First, the symbolic structural domination suffered by peasants and indigenous peoples in Bolivian society, against which the MAS was constructed as a political project. While it is true that the history of colonisation has been a history of mixed races and the building of mutual loyalty, a history of which campesinos have been active subjects - illustrating up to some extent what could be a process of “voluntary servitude” [2] - there is no doubt that the configuration of Bolivian society has been constructing on the establishment of unequal and asymmetrical relations between “colonisers” and “colonised”, structuring also an exclusive society based on an often blatant racism.

This structural dominance has not stopped in staining the most ambitious projects of emancipation that Bolivia has known, as the National Revolution of 1952, or even the left-wing parties that reduced the “peasant compañero” to a strategic ally devoid of any political initiative worthy of being taken into account. In some ways, the permanent struggle conducted by the peasant leaders for preservation of the monopoly of power within the MAS - a party built by them and for them - is a struggle for preservation of the originality of a political project that, for the first time, consecrates the autonomy of the peasants as political subjects. In that sense, although the extension of the party to the cities, in a country highly urbanised, imposed an obligation to decisively consolidate a hegemony at a national level, it becomes even more necessary to contain any danger of professionals and other “white-collar” people who take ownership, tomorrow, of the “instrument”, beyond asking if, in case the situation presents itself, the continuation of the MAS as a party would still have some meaning.

To this socio-historical matrix specific to the peasant movement, it should be added as another key part of the analysis, above all to understand the permanence of clientelistic practices within it: the Bolivian state. Indeed, this was, in large part, an essential component of the structural domination suffered by rural trade unionism. As Max Weber sensed by observing the incipient German social-democratic movement, the risk of a party is not so much penetrating the state, but being penetrated by it and by its operational logic.

Paradoxically, although the peasant movement has been marginalised throughout many years in the institutional political sphere, there is no doubt that the latter exercised upon him a principled influence. The relationship established by the revolutionary State (1952-1964), then the military regimes until the slaughter of Tolata (1964-1974) with the National Confederation of Rural Peasants of Bolivia (CNTCB), was based on the use of co-optation, resulting in systematically instrumentalising the movement [3]. And the state as a loot, which can be accessed as a kind of “lesser evil” compared to the structural dominance, other potential sources of revenue were added with the advent of neoliberalism in the 1980s: NGOs and international cooperation. Without a doubt, to break with a vision both of the state as with international cooperation as “baby bottles” will not depend solely on the ethics of the leaders, but also on the structural changes carried out by the government in order to put an end to the “NGOist projector” [4] and generate a renewed model of development in which the state (and its “work”) do not appear as the main channel of social ascent that the country’s economy can provide for the most humble sectors of Bolivian society.

Upon massively penetrating the institutional political sphere beginning from 2002, the peasant leaders were faced with another challenge, even more important. In a strict continuity with its previous approaches, the MAS would continue, in each of its electoral appearances, emphasising “honesty” as part their political identity, which would be illustrated systematically by a rejection of public financing of their campaigns. Likewise, all candidates nominated by the MAS have an obligation to self-finance their campaigns - which implies the possession of sufficient financial resources - leading some of them into debt, sometimes significantly, to be able to compete with the possibilities of being elected.

In the 2005 elections, that “honesty” was translated into a key demand: the “institutionalisation” of the state, understood as a break with the traditional practice of the total renewal of state personnel with the arrival of each new government, emphasising also the intrinsic quality of public officials, whose presence in the administration no longer depended on partisan affiliation. The demands completed two objective strategies: on the one hand, it was about conserving those public officials with the abilities of management of which the vast majority of the MAS militants lacked - the spectrum of a scenario “do it as the UDP [Popular and Democratic Unity]” obsessed then some of the MAS cadre - and, on the other hand, to reassure the Bolivian middle class which stigmatises the “inexperience” of Evo Morales and his party.

If the MAS comes to fulfilling its promise in its first year of government, with the replacement of public officials limited to no more than 5% [5], the pressure by the “cronyists” exercised by the “bases” - fundamentally the urban sections - illustrated by the repeated questioning of their leaders in many public events, led the ruling party to proceed to a gradual, but significant, opening of public positions to its militants.

In this particular context, which combines a tremendous shortage of available positions accessible to the militants due to external causes (a reduced neoliberal state) and internal (the promise of the party to institutionalise the public service) and an exasperation of these against an organisation that does not comply with the traditional role attributed to a political party in Bolivia (the granting of a public position against the participation in the electoral mobilisation) which gives the scandal of the sale of guarantees in the Departmental Directorate of the MAS in La Paz, in January 2007.

It should be noted here that the practice of “guarantees”, existent since the National Revolution, is generalised as a means of regulation of access to the public service since the 1990s, when the neoliberal reforms severely affected the ability of the governments effort to satisfy “work” for its militants. In a sense, the circulation of guarantees is again, since the beginning of that period, a common practice within the parties who control the state apparatus.

The scandal, the first major blow to the “honesty” of the MAS, will involve some prominent leaders, both of a local and national level, but will be soon forgotten. However, it is significant, that among the Bolivian opinion makers, to have not only reproached the party of Morales for the sale of guarantees, a case of corruption reprehensible in itself, but also the deed of having resorted to that method of selection, precisely when dealing with a widespread practice whose use arises in the proper structure of the national political institutions, as with the militant praxis common to all Bolivian political parties.

More of the same?

To evaluate the contribution of the MAS to the democratisation of the Bolivian political life in light of the recent cases of corruption that has been shaking the government of Evo Morales has little sustenance for now, and this for several reasons. Among them, the “individual” character of these, which does not reveal any system of systematic corruption within the party, as seen with the mensalão scandal that brought to light a system of buying votes from Brazilian parliamentarians, in 2005, by the ruling Workers Party. However, there is no doubt that the “Ramirez case” will be a litmus test for the government of the MAS if it intends to preserve its “ethical principle” in the future. This case, indeed, is showing a lack of control that may currently exist in the ruling party over its own leaders in the performance of their duties. But beyond the individual dispositions of the protagonists in facilitating these events, it should be emphasised the role of the Bolivian political structure that permits the expression of these types of dispositions with ease, and the difficulty the government has to remove them. Combined with the difficulty of replacing the debilitated neoliberal institution - including the judiciary apparatus - with a new institutional framework in line with the new post-liberal and decolonised principles.

From there should we draw the conclusion that the MAS is, finally, more of the same? Many of the criticisms formulated these days against the government party on the basis of this scandal are fuelled by the caricature vision that many of the editorialists maintain on this, as combined with the Bolivian popular organisations.

It is not about denying here that this latest evidence shows, frequently, many dark faces. Clientelism, the lack of internal democracy, verticalism and authoritarian practices, without physical violence, are some of the facets of these movements that undermine its credibility before the middle classes. But do these characteristics have anything to do with the criminal practices observed in the Ramirez case?

The challenge consists in trying to understand where these characteristics come from that are so stigmatised by the middle class: perhaps clientelism which is so criticised does not come directly from practices imposed by the rulers of yesterday, who did not hesitate to use them to benefit their own interests? Perhaps the use of physical violence is not the result of a long history of bloody confrontations with the repressive state, as occurred in El Alto in the days of October 2003, or, more recently, during the slaughter of El Porvenir on September 11, 2008?

Undoubtedly, a lot remains to be done in the Bolivian popular movement and the MAS to meet the heights of the political, economic and moral reforms which the majority of Bolivians expect, and that

is in many areas. But to evaluate their commitment to democracy in light of their more obvious defects lacks intellectual honesty. In fact, the French political scientist Dominique Colas, studying the case of the communist parties of Western Europe, noted a curious phenomenon: despite the obvious lack of internal democracy within their organisations, the Communist militants, to develop in a democratic environment, began to internalise democratic practices such as voting or contradictory debate, and show a commitment to the rules of democracy, such as multiparty competition.

But at the same time, these parties extended the democratic game to workers and to the popular sectors previously excluded. And it is precisely what we observe in Bolivia in the case of the MAS: although one can observe a deficient internal democracy, authoritarian attitudes or psychological pressure, the MAS contributes decisively to entrenching democratic practices in a profound manner in the emerging militants in sectors hitherto marginalised from the institutional political sphere.

Moreover: having won a series of elections, representative democracy won validity before the popular movement as a whole. What better way to illustrate the manner of which has resolved the political crisis that crossed the country in recent years: both in the “gas war” as in the days of May-June 2005, the constitutional avenue was imposed by the will of the popular movements. Is this democratisation paradoxical? Perhaps. But it is real, without a doubt.

P.S.

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* Hervé Do Alto is a political scientist (IEP Aix-en-Provence, France). He is co-author, with Paul Stefanoni, of *Evo Morales: from coca farmer to the presidential palace* (Malatesta, La Paz, 2006).

Footnotes

[1] Moira Zuazo, *¿Cómo nació el MAS? La ruralización de la política en Bolivia*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, La Paz, 2008.

[2] Sinclair Thomson, *Cuando sólo reinasen los indios; La política aymara en la era de la insurgencia*, Muela del Diablo/Aruwiyiri, La Paz, 2006.

[3] Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Oprimidos pero no vencidos; Luchas del campesinado aymaray qwechwa 1900-1980*, Aruwiyiri/Yachaywasi, La Paz, 2003 [1984]

[4] Antonio Rodríguez-Carmona, *El Proyectorado, Bolivia tras 20 años de ayuda externa*, Intermón-Oxfam, Barcelona, 2008.

[5] Conferencia de Álvaro García Linera, Washington D.C., EE.UU, 21 de julio de 2006.