

Bolivia: indigenous feminists against the coup

Militias in Bolivia are burning the indigenous flag

Monday 18 November 2019, by [GUZMÁN Adriana](#), [KOROL Claudia](#) (Date first published: 17 November 2019).

The interview below offers a feminist, anti-colonial perspective on the coup in Bolivia. Conducted by Claudia Korol, an Argentine feminist writer, the Q&A that follows presents the analysis of Bolivian feminist Adriana Guzman, an Indigenous Aymara activist. This interview originally appeared in Spanish in *Página/12*

Claudia Korol: How would you characterize the coup d'état in Bolivia?

Adriana Guzmán: There is profound pain over the triumph of this civic, military, fundamentalist, corporate coup. The opposition's mobilizations started following the October 20 elections and the claims of electoral fraud after Evo Morales received 10 percent more votes than the second-place candidate Carlos Mesa. There was discontent in some sectors of society over Evo's re-election bid. We at [Feminismo Comunitario Antipatriarcal] are self-critical about that. We think that the re-election bid by Evo should have been reconsidered because of the importance of creating space for other leaders. But on the other hand, there were a ton of impositions by the other parties. For example, Carlos Mesa (who is genocidal and one of the actors responsible for the Gas Massacre of 2003) was running in the elections as a candidate. If someone who is genocidal can go to elections, why can't another person run against him for a third time?

Who are the main players in the coup?

On the one hand there's the opposition who in "democratic" terms would be the ones affected by the supposed fraud, led by Carlos Mesa. He was the vice president under [former president] Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada and was jointly responsible for the Gas Massacre. He was the last person left for the political opposition to use, being an anachronistic opposition without proposals ... left in shambles after these years of the process of change. Parties whose names don't even exist anymore joined together and put up Carlos Mesa as their candidate. That is the "political opposition." They are the votes against the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS, the Movement toward Socialism). The coup d'état is not just against the state, the government, but also the social movement organizations.

The others are the fascist right-wing groups led by the Civic Committee of Santa Cruz, with Luis Fernando Camacho as president. It's a formation created by the business elite to make decisions together and create laws to defend their interests. The Civic Committee represents the business elite, the oligarchs, the landowners and the partners of transnational corporations in eastern Bolivia. Eastern Bolivia is controlled by the landowners whose lands were gifted to them during the years of dictatorship and who have subjugated the Indigenous peoples there — the migrants from La Paz and other states, the Aymara and Quechua migrants — to serve them, as their peons. That is the economic opposition that headed up this coup d'état. Luis Fernando Camacho is also linked to the drug trafficking cartels. He is the son of a paramilitary leader who had served the dictatorship. That

is what the people leading this coup d'état represent.

There are some political sectors that are not calling this a coup d'état. Why do you all characterize it as such?

First, because it has sought social and political destabilization by sowing terror with armed groups in different places — armed with firearms, helmets and shields. It has brought together university groups, parastate groups, paramilitaries, fascist and racist groups, which had started organizing ever since 2008, as with the Unión Juvenil Cruceñista (Santa Cruz Youth Unión). To sow terror and politically destabilize is the first characteristic of the coup. Then they ally with the police, who mutiny. Then they bring in the military, which joins in to supposedly defend the people. But which people? The people led by Luis Fernando Camacho. All of those are characteristics of a coup. Finally, as we saw today, instead of Carlos Mesa entering the Presidential Palace after Evo steps down, it's Luis Fernando Camacho, the representative of the business elite, of the church, of the worst fundamentalism in the country. He lays down the flag and the Bible and calls for a civic-military junta, formed by the military and elites.

This coup d'état on the one hand has some traditional hallmarks, like the presence of soldiers and police, but also has some distinct elements, promoting confrontations between neighbors by taking advantage of profound racism. Some residents have come out and said "enough of the government of Indians and thieves." All of us with Indigenous faces are singled out as being part of MAS. Especially those of us who are Indigenous women. The coup d'état is also a blow to women and social movement organizations. Because of the terror, the degradation, it is a double blow. It's not just against the state, the government, but also the social movement organizations.

As feministas comunitarias antipatriarcales, what is your perspective on Evo's government?

As feministas comunitarias antipatriarcales we have been part of this process of change; we have built it. Our feminism was born from this process of change. The main debates have been during the Constitutional Assembly. Being pluri-national, having our peoples recognized, the exercise of our autonomy, of our self-determination. Today there are autonomies for the original peoples, the Indigenous, for rural women. Yes, there are many limitations, but they are being built, the path to reconstituting our territory is being made, which is what we wanted as peoples. The Constitution now says things about the state being made up of grassroots communities, about the community economy. Article 338 speaks of the unpaid work of women, of how domestic work produces wealth and should be valued by the state. These debates have translated into laws, which have translated into programs, possibilities and concrete actions.

Nonetheless, there are also criticisms of the government of Evo Morales with relation to extractivism, right?

Above all, in the economic area we have critiques. The framework of the capitalist system hasn't been fully transformed; the interests of the corporations, the ranchers, the loggers have remained intact. That is true. There also were 100-year contracts. There hasn't been political decisiveness in nationalizing mining, for example, which is one of the things we have asked for. Nonetheless, there have been many achievements in terms of indigenous peoples: the building of a path for our own education, our own political organization — changes that we have been making, even beyond and sometimes in spite of the state.

As a feminist, can you defend a president who has been characterized as a machista?

As feminists we have many critiques of Evo Morales, because of his economic framework, because of

extractivism. We have questioned his machismo. But we also understand that having a president in whom we can see ourselves, even if he is a machista president, is not the same as having a white, corporate, oligarchic president.... We understand the difference. We understand it in our beings, not just through reason. For us it was important for Evo to be president. It was parallel to the process that we as social movements have carried out in transforming daily life, being able to look at ourselves in the mirror, recognize ourselves, name ourselves. The coup d'état is against all of that. That's why they degrade. That's why they punish. That's why they burn the Indigenous wiphala flag.

What does it mean for racism to be a structural part of the coup d'état?

We don't lose conviction, we don't lose our dreams, we don't lose the urgency of making another world possible. It is much more difficult in a fascistic state, but we will continue to do it.

In the process of change we have pushed to decolonize education, through different public policies, both in the state and in organizations — not only through the recuperation of ancestral practices, but through the epistemological recuperation of other ways of thinking, of managing power in other ways. Nonetheless, despite this decolonization, we had not eradicated racism. Why? Because racism is an exercise of privileges. The way to end racism is to end the privileges that come above all from the economic world. The privileges of the oligarchs and landowners have not been confronted to the extent needed.

Also, racism is transversal, it doesn't belong to just one space or political party...

One example of racism is also in the practices of the left and of certain feminisms — of a colonial left that assumes that the Indigenous and peasant organizations are good for throwing rocks and putting up blockades but not for deciding how we want to live. That was the fight during the Constitutional Assembly, and the fight between bourgeois, white, middle class feminism and community feminism. And by white, by bourgeois, I am referring specifically to the feminists that intervene with their privileges, with their class, their homes, their positions, their money, their last names. They have judged the government not just because of its political mistakes. They have judged it for being Indigenous. During this conjuncture, they first spoke out denouncing fraud, but without questioning the fact that Carlos Mesa, the other candidate, is genocidal. In the midst of the mobilizations, they have framed this dispute as a confrontation between men, without considering racism. Beyond that, they have delegitimized our denunciations of racism, saying that speaking of racism was a campaign tactic by the government. As if this wasn't a country colonized by the Spanish, systematically invaded and raped. As if one party, the MAS, could right now erase those years of colonization and racism.

What do women — what do the people — lose with this coup?

What are we losing with this coup against the pluri-national state and the imposition of a Catholic, Christian Republic? This coup is to punish the government of an Indigenous man, and to replace it undoubtedly with a military junta made up of soldiers and elites. That's where it is colonialism. To supplant an Indigenous man with soldiers and elites. This is a coup against an Indigenous, autochthonous government, along with the rural organizations and social movements. It is punishment so that we don't ever again think that it is possible to live outside of capitalism, that a good life could be possible — so that we never again think of self-determination, think that we can govern ourselves, organize ourselves. So that we accept the capitalist, neoliberal, patriarchal, colonialist system. That is the message.

How do you believe that it could change the lives of the Indigenous, autochthonous communities? Especially in the case of women.

There is going to be a complete setback to all of the rights we have achieved. They are already talking about striking down laws, like Law 348 that assures a life free of violence, that recognizes femicide, a law that the fascists have never accepted. They will go after all of the rights we've won, all of the symbolic and real achievements. They are also going to attack the Indigenous universities.... Because of the struggle of social movement organizations, we have Indigenous universities, where the youth go to study what their communities need, and after studying that they go back to serve their communities. [These are] not universities that produce businessmen and people alienated from the world, as with the universities in the cities. Fascism doesn't listen. Fascism doesn't turn back. Fascism eliminates.

What we lose is the possibility of carrying forward this process of transformation alongside the state. But we don't lose hope. We don't lose conviction, we don't lose our dreams, we don't lose the urgency of making another world possible. It is much more difficult in a fascistic state, but we will continue to do it.

What is the situation in this moment, now that Evo Morales has left Bolivia?

The coup perpetrators are taking over the airwaves. They are taking over the community radio stations. Through the outlets taken over by the coup perpetrators, they are denouncing looting, sowing terror in the name of MAS. They say they are brothers and sisters who have come from the communities, and that is not the case. They are denouncing these things to delegitimize our resistance. The social movement organizations are not looting, because they are part of the people in resistance. They want to delegitimize our resistance. The social movement organizations have called for a blockade around La Paz.... We are going to recover La Paz, and reorganize ourselves.

What do the people in resistance need from the peoples of other territories? What do you need from feminists worldwide?

Our call, sisters, crosses borders: We know each other, we have seen each other. The first ask is for you to trust our words, because the information that is circulating says that there is no coup, that everything is OK. What is true is that the military and police are supporting the coup perpetrators, terrorizing our organizations.

This is a coup. We need you to say it. We need you to share in our indignation, our pain, to also share in our fear, in the face of what these armed groups are carrying out....

[The false idea that] this is just a dispute between men doesn't allow us to see the confrontation with patriarchy, with capitalism — the economic, colonial aspects of the system. It doesn't allow us to see that you cannot dialogue with fascism.

Fascism doesn't listen. Fascism doesn't turn back. Fascism eliminates. Through degradation they are trying to eliminate our struggles. We call on you to denounce this, to build a feminism that is rooted in community, that is grassroots, that is based on direct action, that is from the territories, that is not neutral in the face of right and wrong, that doesn't serve the right wing at the end of the day.

Adriana Guzmán interviewed by **Claudia Korol**

P.S.

Matt Ginsberg-Jaeckle translated this interview into English for Truthout. Reprinted by No Borders News.

The No Borders News présentation included the following introduction

Adriana Guzmán is part of Feminismo Comunitario Antipatriarcal de Bolivia (Community of Anti-Patriarchal Feminism of Bolivia) and Feministas de Abya Yala (Feminists of Mother Earth). She joined the struggle in Bolivia along with other sisters during the Gas War of 2003, and says she learned in the streets what patriarchy is all about and why feminism is a key tool to create other ways of life.

Guzmán is currently resisting the advance of the militias who have delighted in burning the Indigenous wiphala flag in public plazas, a gesture of symbolic violence whose very mention is heartbreaking. In this interview, she describes the coup d'état and calls on others to confront it and support the resistance against it.