

# Does CONAMAQ represent Bolivia's highland indigenous peoples?

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The Bolivian indigenous organization CONAMAQ made headlines earlier this year with its threats to blockade the Dakar rally on its passage through the highlands region.

This was not the first time that the organization caught the attention of the world's media outlets. Leaders of CONAMAQ, which stands for National Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyu, have been regularly quoted in the media due their outspoken criticism of the Morales government.

Inevitably, CONAMAQ is described in the articles as "the main indigenous organization in Bolivia's highlands".

The two main indigenous groups in the highlands are the Aymara, and to a lesser extent the Quechua. They are also the two largest of the 36 indigenous peoples that inhabit Bolivia.

CONAMAQ's radical, anti-government discourse, and its claims to represent highland indigenous peoples, have endeared the organization to many activists outside Bolivia.

However, this newfound image sits awkwardly with the organization's history.

## Unions or ayllus?

CONAMAQ traces its roots back to pre-colonial times, when traditional forms of community organization such as ayllus predominated. However, its contemporary history begins with the attempts made to build local federations of ayllus in the early 1980s.

Ayllus represent a form of indigenous self-government within a communally owned territory. They usually comprise a small number of families that work the land in a collective fashion and make decisions by consensus over issues affecting their community.

The push to promote such organizational forms was motivated by a number of local factors.

One of these was the role played by indigenous intellectuals operating as the Andean Oral History Workshop (THOA). Their aim was to recover and reinvigorate traditional indigenous practices in rural highland communities.

Their interest in promoting the ayllu was aided by the existence of certain communities that felt

marginalized by the Sole Union Confederation of Bolivian Campesino Workers (CSUTCB). This was the main organization to which rural indigenous communities were affiliated in the highlands.

One point of contention was whether to organize as unions or ayllus.

However, at the grassroots level, both forms of organizations tended to share much in common, including a membership comprised of indigenous campesinos and structures that incorporated traditional practices such as consensus decision-making and communal labor.

In some cases, local communities simply rebadged the local union as an ayllu, all the while maintaining the same internal structures.

The local push to promote ayllus received a boost from outside as a result of the boom in funding of “ethnodevelopment” or “identity with development” projects. Growing international concerns over the environment led numerous foreign governments and international institutions to fund local development projects in indigenous communities.

While communities in the Amazon received the bulk of the attention, a number of NGOs began to pay attention to the renewed focus among some highland indigenous communities on reviving traditional practices.

The European Community and NGOs such as Oxfam and IBIS saw an opportunity to promote projects in these communities. They financed the creation of regional ayllu federations that subsequently became willing partners in local development projects.

This was not the only factor that enticed outside financiers. Many were also supportive of the moderate and ethnic-focused discourse of these organizations.

They saw in the ayllu a potential alternative to the more radical, class-based CSUTCB that under a new radical Indigenista leadership had recently broken its pact within the military regime and begun to make links with the militant Bolivian workers federation.

### **Molded by neoliberalism**

Ayllu organizations received a further boost during the nineties, as neoliberal governments sought to shed responsibility for maintenance and administration of social policies and programs, and to devolve this to local and regional communities.

Successive governments embraced the idea of “multicultural neoliberalism” as the World Bank began to condition loans on certain funding going to projects in indigenous communities.

Two laws in particular were introduced to aid this process.

The Law for Popular Participation allowed communities organized as ayllus to be legally recognized as “indigenous” communities (as opposed to union-organized “campesino” communities).

The Law for Agrarian Reform granted indigenous communities the opportunity to claim ownership over “Originary Communitarian Lands” (TCOs).

Together, they provided an important incentive for indigenous communities to shed their union organization and adopt an ayllu identity.

The result was a deepening of tensions between “campesinos” and “indigenous” organizations and the fragmenting of the Aymara and Quechua identity into dozens of “reconstituted nations”.

By the time CONAMAQ was officially created in 1997 to unite different regional federations of ayllus, this new indigenous movement had become heavily dependent on foreign funding and developed close relationships with neoliberal governments.

Moreover, CONAMAQ’s development had also shaped its strategic outlook, which focused on seeking state recognition for the right of ayllu self-government within defined local areas.

The CSUTCB, on the other hand, sought to wage an all-out struggle for indigenous power at the national level.

These differences were brought into sharp relief three years later, when a wave of indigenous protests swept through Bolivia.

With the city of Cochabamba rising up against water privatization and coca-growers in the Chapare blockading roads, the CSUTCB unleashed a wave of struggle that threaten to bring down the Banzer government.

CONAMAQ leaders chose this moment to go to the presidential palace and shake hands with Banzer. They publicly stated that the ayllus were not like the unions, as they preferred dialogue to confrontation.

CONAMAQ’s credibility took a beating as a result of this, with even some of its funders stating they would reevaluate their support for CONAMAQ.

The election of a new CONAMAQ leadership soon after saw the organization become more vocal in its opposition to neoliberal governments. In 2002, it organized an important march in support of a Constituent Assembly, together with the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of the Bolivian East (CIDOB).

However, during the uprisings that overthrew Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (2003) and Carlos Mesa (2005), CONAMAQ played a secondary role to organizations such as the CSUTCB, the largely Quechua coca-growers, and the federation of neighborhood committees in the overwhelmingly Aymara city of El Alto.

### **From unity to division**

At the end of 2005, this diversity of indigenous and social movements came behind the candidature of Evo Morales and propelled him into the presidential palace.

As part of this broader process of unity that had been forged through struggle, the powerful CSUTCB, together with other campesino organizations began to increase its links with the smaller indigenous organizations such as CONAMAQ and CIDOB.

This led to the creation of the Unity Pact, which went on to play an important role in drafting Bolivia’s new constitution. The new constitution incorporated the concept of “originary, indigenous, campesino peoples” as a reflection of the growing unity among these organizations.

The Unity Pact was the bedrock of support for the Morales government, particularly when it came under attack from right-wing forces.

Unfortunately, ongoing differences over issues such as land reform, indigenous representation in parliament and ownership over natural resources, along with clashes over certain government projects like the proposed roadway through Isiboro Secure Indigenous Territory and National Park (TIPNIS), have led to the fracturing of the Unity Pact, one again along campesino/indigenous lines.

Disagreements over CONAMAQ's hostile stance towards the government have also led to internal rifts, with some local affiliates choosing to set up a rival CONAMAQ and rejoining the Unity Pact.

Some claim these divisions reflect differences between CONAMAQ's communal indigenous ideology and the pro-development outlook of campesino groups. However, there is little evidence to back this claim.

A good example is the debate over land reform. While numerous CSUTCB-aligned communities continue to work the land communally, some CONAMAQ affiliates have begun demanding the right to individual titles.

If anything, differences can be more readily explained by ongoing strategic debates over whether to pursue local self-government or struggle for indigenous state power.

Ultimately, CONAMAQ had to abandon its planned blockade of the Dakar rally due to lack of support even from among its own affiliates.

While CONAMAQ leaders have signed an agreement with the newly formed Green party, polls indicate that highland indigenous communities, which continue to be predominately affiliated to the CSUTCB, will once again turn out in big numbers to support Morales in the October presidential elections.

Add to all this the fact that the majority of Bolivia's indigenous population live in cities, and it is clear that CONAMAQ does not represent the views of the majority of highland indigenous peoples.

Attempts to portray CONAMAQ as such generally hide ulterior agendas, whether aimed at discrediting the indigenous credentials of the Morales government, bolstering chances of receiving international funding for certain projects, or imposing fictional stereotypes on what it means to be truly indigenous.

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**P.S.**

\* Posted by Bolivia Rising on Thursday, May 22, 2014:

<http://boliviarising.blogspot.com.au/2014/05/does-conamaq-represent-bolivias.html>