GLOBAL CENTRE FOR PLURALISM
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Diversity and Democratization in Bolivia:

SOURCES OF INCLUSION IN AN INDIGENOUS MAJORITY SOCIETY

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As in many other Latin American countries, the process of democratization in Bolivia has been accompanied by constitutional reforms that highlight the presence and rights of indigenous peoples—a trend that is sometimes called "multicultural" or "plurinational" constitutionalism. These reforms are often informed by, and include explicit reference to, international indigenous rights norms, such as ILO Convention 169 or the UN Declaration on Indigenous Rights. But Bolivia differs from other countries in the region in that indigenous peoples form a majority within the country and so, in principle, can pursue their interests through majoritarian democratic processes.

And arguably, this is what we see happening in Bolivia. Since his election in 2005, President Evo Morales has been attempting to "indigenize the state" through the exercise of majority rule. Yet indigenous rights remain an important idea in Bolivian politics, including in its constitution. Even as indigenous Bolivians establish claim greater recognition in the nation state, they remain committed to a constitutional order premised on ideas of respect for "multicultural" or "plurinational" diversity.

In many countries, dominant groups—including minority regimes—view diversity and pluralism as a threat to national unity, and non-dominant groups—including oppressed majorities—champion pluralistic conceptions of the state and of citizenship. Bolivia fits this pattern historically: in the past, Bolivia's white/mestizo elite was the bearer of assimilationist and homogenizing ideas of nationhood, while indigenous peoples advanced more pluralistic conceptions. The persistence of Bolivia's commitments to multiculturalism/plurinationalism since 2005 suggest that pluralism has become a constitutive feature of its politics and constitutionalism, but to what extent?

This paper is part of a new publication series from the **Global Centre for Pluralism** called **Accounting for Change in Diverse Societies**. Focused on six world regions, each "change case" examines a specific moment in time when a country altered its approach to diversity, either expanding or eroding the foundations of inclusive citizenship. The aim of the series – which also features thematic overviews by leading global scholars – is to build global understanding of the sources of inclusion and exclusion in diverse societies and the pathways to pluralism.

In commissioning the Bolivian case, the Global Centre for Pluralism has sought to understand, first, the interaction of majority rule and indigenous rights, and second, the impact of Bolivia's dramatic changes in power relations on attitudes toward diversity and pluralism. Has the change in power relations between the former mestizo/white elite and the indigenous majority helped to build a consensus around the inevitability of some conception of pluralistic citizenship, or has it further polarized relations? What are the limits of Bolivia's constitutional commitments to pluralism and its discursive shifts?

CASE NARRATIVE

Bolivia is a country of 10 million people, of whom over half speak one of 36 indigenous languages—either instead of or in addition to the national language of Spanish. Despite economic expansion, high levels of poverty and economic inequality persist. Colonial legacies have shaped a contemporary history of institutionalized exclusion of the largely indigenous and labouring majority along ethnic, racial and linguistic lines. Despite complexities of identity categories and a heterogeneous middling class, this pattern yielded a social and conceptual distinction between wealthier lighter-skinned criollo Bolivians and less prosperous urban and rural Bolivians of indigenous origins. Institutional and routinized racism, elite antipathy toward indigenous languages and cultural forms and an inherently unstable system of political incorporation—sometimes democratic, often not—further reinforced lines of economic inequality.

After several centuries of Spanish rule, Bolivia entered the twentieth century as a country structured around the de jure and de facto political subjugation of the indigenous majority. The Revolution of 1952, led by the middle-class reformist National Revolutionary Movement (MNR) party, extended citizenship in part. Land reform, public education and the right to vote were among the most significant reforms—ending, to an extent, the system of forced labour that had characterized most of the country's existence as an exclusionary oligarchic state.

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Yet colonial idioms and relations persisted in more subtle ways. Indigenous and rural peoples continued to be treated as distinct types of subjects. A new discourse of nationalism advanced the idea of mestizaje, a mixing process predicated on white supremacy that would gradually lead to the racial and cultural assimilation of the Indian. At the same time, political parties controlled by light-skinned elites positioned themselves at the helm of a society characterized by racial and economic stratification, with indigenous and rural peasants at the bottom. The Cold War and a string of military dictatorships brought this initial era of change to an end.

In 1994, during a period of liberalizing economic reforms, the political parties of the ruling elite responded to the rising social mobilization of indigenous peoples with constitutional reforms that recognized the "pluricultural" reality of the country—until then largely denied. Part of a wider "multicultural" or "intercultural" turn in Latin America, the official recognition of difference began to unsettle conventional idioms and structures of exclusion. In the 2000s, the mobilization of various social movements deepened this transformative turn and paved the way for the election of Evo Morales, an indigenous farmer activist, as the country's first president of indigenous origin in 2005. Four years later, the new Morales government introduced an entirely new constitution.

Beyond multicultural recognition, the new constitution sought the "decolonization" of state and society and an end to the subjugation of the indigenous majority through broad-based assertions of cultural rights, indigenous rights, social and economic rights, and protections against discrimination. Even so, Bolivia's long-standing dependence on natural resource extraction and export—the basis of its colonial economy and the anchor of its current dependence on gas and minerals—complicates the real politics of rule and creates challenges for implementation of these progressive and inclusionary laws and policies. In response, Morales's party—the Movement toward Socialism or MAS—has pursued a nationalist approach to resource exploitation and export, resulting in greater state control, a larger state income and policies of redistribution, which has widened economic benefits.

Supported by Bolivia's new "plurinational" constitution, the Morales government has made significant strides—symbolic, legal and structural—towards a more inclusionary nation-state form. These include redistributive actions and other state initiatives to address poverty, as well as legislation against racism and to deepen intercultural education and linguistic rights. Public ways of speaking about identity have begun to change, with critiques of daily and institutional racism. The economic boom, coupled with redistributive state policies, have underpinned Bolivia's new politics of inclusion.

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Yet the countervailing tendencies are strong. Bolivia's economic dependence on primary resource extraction and export makes the country vulnerable to economic downturns. In urban areas, consumption is soaring along with expectations, despite a scarcity of stable, formal employment. In rural areas, land poverty persists despite agrarian reform efforts—due in part to government efforts to appease the agro-industrial elite. To sustain economic growth, the government is aggressively pursuing further gas and mineral extraction, a situation that sometimes places it at odds with the

formal language of indigenous rights when such rights are claimed to impede resource exploration and extraction.

In February 2016, a referendum on constitutional reform to allow a possible third re-election bid for Evo Morales narrowly failed. Some observers see this failure as a possible opening for opponents of a more inclusionary citizenship in Bolivia, but this prognosis may underestimate the durability of Bolivia's shift in public consciousness, especially outside of the *criollo* elite. The legal and institutional changes discussed in this change case not only remain a significant impediment to reversal; they serve as a foundation for pursuing an even more robust and egalitarian pluralism in the future.

THROUGH A PLURALISM LENS

Sources of Inclusion and Exclusion

The Global Centre for Pluralism asked each author in the Change Case Series to reflect on the sources of inclusion and exclusion through a pluralism lens—that is, using the Centre's "drivers of pluralism" framework. Some highlights from the full Bolivia change case are included here.

Livelihoods and Wellbeing

- Group-based redistributive policies, investments and structural reforms can widen the benefits of economic growth in an extractive, resource-based economy.
- Concentrated ownership of key economic resources perpetuates horizontal inequalities and blocks rights-based reforms (e.g., land reform) and can override rights-based claims.
- Economic growth raises consumer expectations despite the scarcity of sustainable formal employment in cities and rural areas.

Law, Politics and Recognition

- Democratic reforms supported by civil society mobilization can replace minority regimes with more broad-based rule.
- Institutionalized recognition of indigeneity as a source of national identity supports symbolic and substantive inclusion and empowers citizens to challenge racial hierarchies.
- Recognition of indigenous rights in legislation (anti-racism, linguistic rights, political rights) and in education promotes substantive equality and inclusion.

Citizens, Civil Society and Identity

- Continued social mobilization of civil society pushes government to maintain rights-based approach and policies in the face of elite political and economic backlash.

CONCLUSION

Bolivia has taken significant strides toward greater inclusion in public discourse, education and language rights. The international language of indigenous rights has underwritten these efforts, but with limits. Where the expression of such rights undermines wider economic goals—such as the expansion of resource exploration and extraction, or the reorganization of land ownership—the

government has tempered expectations, while pursuing redistributive policies. Resolving the tension between majority recognition, identity and wellbeing with the imperative of economic growth fueled by resource and agrarian sectors still controlled by historic elites remains an ongoing challenge. But the starting point for meeting this challenge has changed.

CASE AUTHOR

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The Global Centre for Pluralism is an applied knowledge organization that facilitates dialogue, analysis and exchange about the building blocks of inclusive societies in which human differences are respected. Based in Ottawa, the Centre is inspired by Canadian pluralism, which demonstrates what governments and citizens can achieve when human diversity is valued and recognized as a foundation for shared citizenship. Please visit us at **pluralism.ca**