

Tracks through the jungle: Bolivia and the TIPNIS conflict

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Conflict between lowland indigenous and the (indigenous led) government in Bolivia continue. But the conflict is far more multifaceted than what has been presented in international media.

The TIPNIS conflict: What was first presented as a conflict between a government-led road project and lowland indigenous people efforts to protect nature has turned out to be something much more complicated. The recent indigenous march in Bolivia (from the 15th of August to the 19th of October) has gained international attention, and raised questions about the loyalties and radical pedigree of the country's indigenous led government. Highlighting the true range of actors and interests involved in the conflict this article demonstrates that the situation is far more complex than a simple face-off between developers and conservationists.

After 66 days and 600 kilometers of walking through heavy rain, dusty roads and burning sun, 2000 marchers reached the capital of La Paz the 19th of October. The main demand of the protest march was the cessation of a road building project planned to go through the Isobore Secure National park and Indigenous Territory (TIPNIS¹). In the weeks preceding this event, the march faced a road blockade by coca farmers favorable to the road project, had suffered a violent police raid, nine attempts of negotiation with the government and a range of harsh accusations attempting to discredit and link the protest to everything from US intervention to eco-terrorism.

¹ The area was defined as a national park in 1965, and the sub regional organization in TIPNIS got the Indigenous territory title to the area in 2009

Despite these hardships the march was welcomed by thousands of residents in the capital city of La Paz. Bowing to popular pressure, the government also renewed efforts to seek a resolution to the protest with the indigenous leaders directing the march.

Formally, integration and development were the two arguments that the Morales' government had emphatically used as the reasons why Tramo II of the Villa Tunari-San Ignacio de Moxos road (300km) should be built. The government had argued that the road would create the possibility of a physical connection between the Andes and Amazonia. Reneging on its earlier decision following more than two months of conflict, President Evo Morales enacted a law on the 24th of October declaring the TIPNIS park "intangible" state property i.e. indefinitely stopping any road building or extractive activities within its boundaries. In the aftermath, several environmental licenses for tourism, commercial activities (such as the selling of alligator skin) and forest extraction in the park were also withdrawn.

Protection and use

From all ostensible accounts this appeared to be a positive and peaceful ending to an issue that had rocked the foundations of the Morales government's "process for change", and cost valuable international political capital and support. However, days after this hard won decision, indigenous leaders from TIPNIS claim that by labeling the park as intangible the government has managed to secure its long-term revenge against the indigenous protestors. Defining the park as intangible restricts many of the productive activities that can be carried out within the territory. The indigenous protestors from the area argued that intangible should only apply to external third parties ("terceros") i.e. actors who are not indigenous from the area, such as peasants entering the area or other external commercial interests.

The government denies the claims that the new labeling of the territory is meant to imprison the TIPNIS, and states that it is was a true response to the demands presented to them at the negotiating table in Presidential Palace. The government had also urged the indigenous leaders behind the march to explain to their own people in the communities of the TIPNIS what the formal demands they presented to the government entailed. Accounting for these demands a more complex, less eco-heroic but also more realistic story of competing interests is revealed.

The indigenous leaders state that their protest was not intended to indefinitely stop all development projects in their territory, but rather to oppose the irresponsible building of a highway that given its routing would clearly not benefit local communities in the TIPNIS (because of distance and lack of connection to many of the communities). Early on proposals had been made to the government by community leaders that the road should rather follow the route of

the River Secure where most of the local communities are located. It was argued that such a routing would help connect them to necessary services and markets outside of their territory, but at the same time allow greater possibility for the protection of the mass majority of the park-including areas that are sacred and environmentally sensitive. Initially there had been proposals to the government about alternative routes, but with the government's refusal to enter into dialogue on these points, its failure to respect the law regarding impact studies, to carry out genuine consultation and signing of a contract with a Brazilian company to go ahead with the project, the demands of the protest had become increasingly recalcitrant in rejecting the road entirely.

Fears also existed that the road would facilitate access to the park of non-indigenous interests that would threaten their traditional livelihoods (mainly based on hunting, fishing and swidden agriculture). Land hungry coca farmers have moved illegally into the Southern part of the park territory. Recent news reports reveal that coca leaf has been produced within the Park. Rather than expelling these illegal settlements the government chose instead in 2009 to legalize their titles to territory. In the process around a third of the original territory of the park (150,000 hectares) was given to the *cocaleros* (coca growers).

Oil and gas

To the west of the park territory several blocks of natural gas have been identified and under earlier government contracts were signed with the Repsol for the exploitation of these fields. Under the current nationalized oil and gas industry these contracts have been transferred to the Bolivian-Venezuelan joint venture, Petro-Andina (YPFB-PDVSA). Whilst on the one hand the national oil and gas company states that it currently has no dates for when these blocks will be accessed, there is nonetheless recognition that currently exploited fields will not be sufficient to meet the demands of both domestic consumption of energy and international agreements for the sale of gas to Brazil and Argentina.

The opening of new oil and gas blocks is also seen as the only way of ensuring that there are sufficient state funds to cover the cost of the package of social policies, including the pension programme started in 2005. There is therefore a policy-driven drive to expand current levels of production and to look for new fields that can be exploited. The road would, as many environmental organizations in the country suggest, be an important first step in ensuring access to the currently isolated areas where these blocks are found. Also importantly, despite the government's claims of environmental and social sensitivity, the march's indigenous leaders also highlighted that technical and legal procedures including prior consultation of the local

indigenous population inside the park had been ignored, before and after the contract for the road had been signed with a Brazilian construction company OAS in 2008².

Broadly based political demands

Stopping the road was therefore a genuine priority of the protesters, but it should also be recognized that another fifteen additional demands were listed by the time the march arrived in La Paz. These points highlight the influence of the other groups that supported the march as much as they indicate the wider platform of interests of the indigenous lowland organizations. The local leadership of the TIPNIS Sub-central received support from the umbrella organization of the lowlands indigenous peoples (CIDOB) to start the march, and they were joined by representatives from eleven of the regional indigenous organizations from Chaco, the Amazon and western Bolivia, the highland indigenous organization CONAMAQ, and a group of environmental and human-rights oriented NGOs. As the march picked up media coverage, other organizations and individuals also joined the march.

Autonomy, control and protection of indigenous territories (TCOs) were central issues these groups named as the reasoning for this growing support - the threat posed to the TIPNIS by the road was seen as symptomatic of the damage experienced throughout the country as a result of the careless planning of infrastructure, extractive and development projects. The environmental flag was raised, on one hand to protect the livelihoods of the communities living in the park that are highly dependent on the use of natural resources, and on the other hand for the park's extraordinary biological diversity (402 species of plants, 714 species of animals) and fresh water reservoirs in the Bolivian Amazon.

The additional 15 demands also show that the marcher's interests stretched well beyond environmental protection to livelihood concerns and economic interests³. A number of the listed demands related specifically to development concerns amongst indigenous communities in the lowlands (i.e. housing, health, education, and census). The demands also list a request for state-sponsored plans for appropriate economic production, follow up on the land reform, legal frameworks for the forest sector, consultation and the role of the media. The women in the march were especially concerned with education and health issues, which also included better access to these services in remote areas.

² A contract of 415 million dollars. 332 millions of these was a loan through - BNDES- Banco Nacional de Desarrollo Económico y Social – Brazil's National Development Bank

³ 13 of these demands were similar to the ones from a CIDOB headed march in 2010, in addition to a demand on REDD and direct compensation from climate mitigation efforts to indigenous territories, and two demands included by the regional organization of the Guarani people (APG).

Direct compensation to indigenous territories from climate mitigation projects such as REDD⁴ was also one of the demands listed by the march. Indigenous leaders viewed the claim as being related to their claims for collective titles⁵ to land and autonomy (providing an income source to control their territories from illegal logging and other destructive activities) and support to sustainable livelihood activities (e.g. non-timber related income activities, such as collection of the Brazilian nut). However, the government saw the demand as a threat to the international position taken by Bolivia against carbon markets and offsets in projects related to reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD), and accused the indigenous organizations from the lowlands of being traitorous in their promotion of what the president called the “trans nationalization and privatization of the forests”. In the final agreement between the march and the government, the declaration from the World People’s conference in 2010 is said to be followed up, where REDD and forests as part of carbon markets is rejected.

The opposition and the role of the media

Finally are all the interests that have tried to make use of the march for their own benefit. The opposition attempted to use the march for what it has been worth in terms of delegitimizing the current government based on happenings during the two months march. Taking into account the history of US intervention in Bolivian history, the revelation of contact between some indigenous leaders and the US embassy, as well as USAID, awoke disgust within the government. The press, interested in adding fuel to the fire, was also eager to report on harsh accusations from both sides. The civic committees from the lowlands (mainly business and agroindustry elites), who have given the indigenous cause close to no attention in the past, have also eagerly supported the march. The international press has also seen fit to report on the case in many countries, and quite disproportionately so given the level of coverage given to similar incidents in places such as Bagua Peru (where 37 people were killed). Migrant Bolivian communities in the US have also seen the TIPNIS case as cause to organize local protests in opposition to the MAS government.

After two days of negotiations the march and the government reached an agreement on all the 15 demands, and the presidential comments on the TIPNIS bill was approved by Congress. In spite of the announcement from the Unity Pact (Pacto Unidad - the five largest indigenous and *campesino* organization in Bolivia) that they support the government bill, 45 organizations from Cochabamba have nonetheless signaled a coming demonstration on the 9th of December in favor of the road.

⁴ Reduced Emission from Deforestation and Forest degradation

⁵ A unique position in comparison with indigenous in other countries in Latin America and the world

Land and migration to the lowlands look to persist as a heated debate in Bolivia. For now, the inspections of the TIPNIS area continue, and local inhabitants interested in tourism and forest activities fear for their livelihoods. President Morales has called for a national summit in December to gather the social movements of Bolivia to collectively construct a “new national agenda”. What this new agenda will contain will be of central importance for the country’s many challenges ahead.