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What Came Down in Bolivia

A tale of struggle, surprise, and-most of all-courage
as Evo Morales is sent packing by a revolution
that most definitely was not a military coup

By Chellis Glendinning / ColdType.net
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"When a judge says to me: Evo, in judicial terms you are wrong, what you are doing is illegal, I tell the lawyers, if what I do is illegal, then make it legal." – Evo Morales, 2008

¡Democracia Sí, Dictadura No! – Chant by pro-democracy demonstrators, 2019

Having been born into the cloud of illusion blurring reality in post-WWII USA, it didn't occur to me that one day I might be fighting against fascism. It *did* occur to me to fight for peaceful and just means of resolving the injustices of global imperialism, civil-women's-and-indigenous rights, the outlawing of nuclear weapons, and the survival of the planet. But just like Brian Eno's bewildered protagonist – *And you may find yourself/ In another part of the world* – I found myself living in Bolivia. Call it what you wish; in these parts the government that recently fled is called dictatorship.

It's not news that various brands of hyper-regimented populism are storming human communities. After all, we've found ourselves living in times of proliferating guerrilla terrorism, technologically-based threats to traditional identities, community stability, and place-based economies; global epidemics that spread like mass murderers, and perhaps most profoundly, panic at losing the very source of life's miracle, planet Earth.

One response to this disaster can be an unconscious wish for a Father Figure, alighting perhaps *deus-ex-machina*-style, to solve the problems for us. But dear democracy lovers: just as Thomas Jefferson once predicted, we're back at the Bastille in the 1790s, with the Luddites in England of the early 1800s, with the worldwide decolonisation movements after WWII, in the forests of Mexico with the Zapatistas. Granted oppression and cruelty never left, but they're back in full force.

I find myself with few words to describe what it felt like to hear that President Evo Morales, his Vice President Álvaro García, and the Minister of Health Gabriela Montaña had evacuated on the heels of three weeks of long-brewing outrage. Read: citizen rebellion. The news first came to me via a man on a bicycle who whispered as he pedaled by: “*Se fue*” (He left). WHAAAA!?! I was seriously discombobulated. It was like the time I picked the *San Francisco Chronicle* off the front stoop that announced in bold letters JOHN LENNON SLAIN; at that moment my ability to think was so stunned by this unthinkable event, I was sure that the word ‘slain’ meant ‘hurt’. One needs time to process upending information.

Soon enough, though, people began to throng into the Plaza 25 de Mayo, hundreds and hundreds of people smiling, singing, hugging, laughing, wearing the tri-color of Bolivia like a patriotic cape, waving the *wihpala* flag celebrating its many cultures, crying for joy, and throwing confetti. Fireworks lit up the skies, bands that appeared out of nowhere blared the national anthem, and via loud speakers liberation songs from Argentina and Chile contributed a sense of history. Suddenly the police appeared, but not to beat up pro-democracy crowds. No, they came dancing through the cheering multitudes, some in regimental costume and form, others dropping all semblance of role and leaping for joy. Just days before, they had carried out a countrywide mutiny. Their spouses and children, for Pachamama’s sake, were activists in the resistance that had shut down all the major cities and paralysed the country. (For five minutes of this mind-altering event: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0npSXKHsLLk>)

To boot, they were tired of dedicating their lives to defending a state apparatus that, in the name of socialist ideals, had effectively taken iron command of all government agencies to do their bidding – judicial, legislative, elective, cultural, sports-related, military, police, the works. This hyper-controlling apparatus was also neck-deep in cocaine production and trade to enrich personal offshore bank accounts. It revelled in harassing and even offing critics – sometimes by outright execution and others by crafting a passive-aggressive situation that would lead to death. Meanwhile, the administration pursued high-tech extraction of petroleum, metals, and gas, massive industrialisation projects, the building of colossal dams and super-highways, and laying long-distance gas lines – at the same time as projecting a *Planeta o Muerte*/rights-of-nature image abroad – and was accomplishing its promised goal of cutting ribbons only when elections loomed.

All the while the ‘socialists’ in the Palace were spending billions on state-of-the-art airplanes and helicopters; were demolishing cultural heritage sites to erect skyscraping homages like pyramids for the pharaohs; were fostering million-dollar building projects that mysteriously ran out of money and now speckled the Bolivian countryside like cadavers of corruption. They were also diluting freedom of the press. They bought up hundreds of community radio/TV stations to spout propaganda, passed laws containing legal mechanisms to shut down venues that didn’t speak the party line, and catalysed violence against *periodistas* on the job.

Through it all, they blamed Chile or the United States or the few right-wingers they had not bought off in Santa Cruz, and when confronted with lawsuits and public opinion, they brashly justified themselves with lies. Ah, the interminable twists of reality that spouted from the Palace! My unofficial estimate is that round about midway through his 13-year grip on power, the president lied maybe 30 percent-40 percent of the time, but when the unity of citizens had taken to the street, he was double-dealing truth 95 percent of the time. Example: when the president’s still-loyal followers obeyed his orders,

delivered from his refuge in Mexico, to mob the streets and burn down the homes, media outlets, and workplaces of pro-democracy activists, he proclaimed that it was they who were hurling flames at his people's homes, radio stations, and businesses.

The final scene starring the ruling party came at the close of the presidential campaign. A host of opposition candidates were facing down Morales, who was running illegally. He had defied both the Constitution that prohibited running more than twice (he had already run three times) and a legal referendum in which '*Bolivia Dice No*' to his re-election had boldly triumphed. The most threatening challenger among the candidates was the astute, honest, and morally-driven historian/journalist/ex-President Carlos Mesa Gisbert, who had been among the first to call Morales to answer for his relentless dismissal of citizen involvement in government. According to several non-partisan international and national agencies, the vote counting had suffered severe fraud via some thousands of 'manipulations and irregularities' discovered within the electoral computer. These included wholesale invention of voting districts; fabricating 'votes' at numbers more than a district actually contained; mixing falsified ballot results with real counts so they would not be visible; modifying software so as to permit alterations, and implementing a mysterious computer shutdown in the middle of the night. I was not surprised, but indeed I was aghast. I also had a private chuckle. The methods used, largely technological although not always sophisticated, were exact replicas of those the brilliant Hollywood film director Preston Sturges had highlighted in his 1940 satirical comedy *The Great McGinty*.

My friends and I climbed up the stairs to Los Balcones restaurant and sat down at a table overlooking the plaza. We drank more wine than I usually do; we talked politics, shared what we knew, cried, and laughed up a storm. For me the experience mirrored my imagination of those joyous photos of celebration in New York City after WWII. *The Witch Is Dead, the Witch Is Dead* kept running through my mind, and I could sob at the drop of a *boliviano*.

I'm well aware that this story clashes with how many good folk of the US and European Left wish to see events in Bolivia. I am also aware that any potential threat to one's ideology, and so to one's very identity, can catalyse a person to hurl insults onto others as a way to externalise any sense of vulnerability that may arise. On the other hand, I was impressed with the openness of the warrior-poet-author Margaret Randall at one of our yearly Thanksgiving dinners in New Mexico. She had lived in Cuba for years and wrote several solid books about the socialist effort there to improve the lives of the people. She asked me what was my take on Evo Morales. Upon hearing my answer, she pondered: "Curious... My friends who do not live in Bolivia are adamantly in favour of Morales' presidency, while my friends who live in Bolivia are adamantly against it."

Did he flee because a military coup d'état forced him out with tanks, machine guns, and bombers? The real story is that Morales was merely warned by his loyal military commander that he could be in danger of assassination, by whom no one knows as, up until the time of Evo's departure, the citizen movements in the streets were dedicated to non-violence. But this possibility is what propelled him to decide – *on his own* – to leave. There was no 'military coup', and we are now not being governed by a military junta.

Were the activists in the streets 'neo-liberal right-wingers'? I lived and breathed this struggle and all that led up to it over the years, and I can tell you that the majority of people who organised, set up blockades, relentlessly marched, wrote opinion pieces for

newspapers, and filmed the actions were not 'neo-liberal right-wingers'. They were young people, women, miners, non-cocaine producing coca growers, health workers, journalists, *campesinos*, motorcycle riders, civic committee members, trade unionists, taxi, bus, and transport drivers; artists and artisans, environmentalists, firefighters, teachers, university administrators, bloggers, liberation theologians, intellectuals, *políticos*. All of them gave their time, intelligence, and determination to achieve what had been hoped for during this recent stretch when political means matched the steps toward fascism that Naomi Wolfe and others have described. Most were free-thinking, issue-oriented regular folk; in fact, opinion pieces appeared frequently in the media about the contemporary need to leave rigid ideologies behind and invent new ways to think about/work for the collective good – which doesn't mean giving up the fight against inequalities based on race, culture, gender, or economic disparity and for the creation of a just, peaceful, and sustainable world.

Dare I say it? The festivities the night of 10 November 2019 lightened the load, even if only momentarily, that democrats had carried like a backpack full of rocks throughout this 21st-century struggle. Now we find ourselves in a nation enduring the pains of birthing: we are face-to-face with the precarious task of re-defining and re-establishing governmental structures to reflect its diverse notions of honest and just means of citizen participation in communal decision-making. Whether we make it or not remains to be seen.