

FROM CIVIL UNREST TO SOCIAL COHESION: THE ROLE OF EL ALTO CITY IN BOLIVIAN HUMAN SECURITY

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The South American country of Bolivia is no stranger to civil unrest and government repression and has consistently been one of the most unstable countries on the continent. The recent election of Evo Morales, an indigenous coca grower and former trade union president, has many international observers contemplating the future path of this unstable Andean nation. Many Bolivians are hopeful that Mr. Morales will bring a degree of stability to the country, which has seen five major indigenous uprisings in as many years resulting in extensive civilian deaths and the toppling of two governments. At the centre of these uprisings has been the altiplano city of El Alto. Comprised mainly of indigenous migrants, this city of close to 800,000 inhabitants has been the centre of recent mass urban protests and was used as the organizational base for demonstrators from around the country. Within El Alto itself, the extensive network of over 600 neighborhood councils has transformed it into a powerful social and political force and has come to symbolize the recent left-wing movements that have been sweeping across the continent.

This research examines the powerful and increasing role of neighborhood organizations in the city of El Alto. Specifically, how has the Federation of Neighborhood Councils (FEJUVE, Spanish Acronym), a coalition of close to 600 neighborhood councils that comprise the city of El Alto, been so successful in overthrowing governments and crippling an entire country? This research points to three

main findings. First, traditional community obligations transplanted by migrating indigenous from their rural villages to the city of El Alto have allowed them to facilitate mass urban demonstrations. Second, the decentralization process enacted in 1994, the Law of Popular Participation (LPP), provided greater authority and responsibility to the normally repressed indigenous population and strengthened FEJUVE's position in the community. Third, El Alto's strategic urban landscape has allowed the indigenous majority to control all movement in and out of La Paz, effectively isolating it from the rest of the country.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a brief socio-economic overview of the cities of El Alto/La Paz along with a brief description of the civil unrests in 2003 and 2005. Section 3 explores the research question and provides the reader with three possible explanations. Section 4 is the conclusion to the paper.

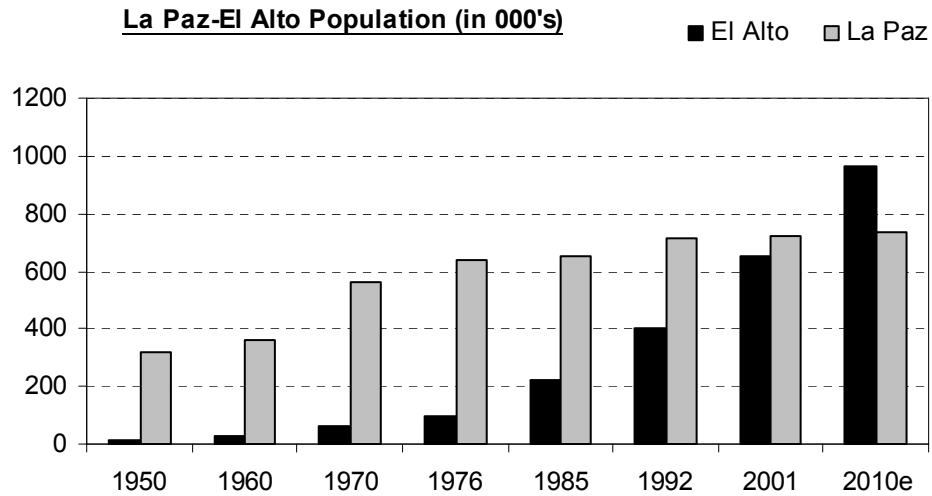
2.0 LA PAZ/EL ALTO – AN OVERVIEW

2.1 A Socio-Economic Perspective

Situated at 13,300 feet above sea level, the city of El Alto towers above the administrative capital city of La Paz which is located in a deep valley 1000 feet below. It has been transformed from a rural town on the outskirts of La Paz into one of the country's largest cities with close to 800,000 inhabitants. Comprising of a population of over 80 per cent indigenous, El Alto exploded in residents as a result of the growing number of rural peasants moving to La Paz in search of greater prosperity (Zibeche, 2005). However, what many of them found was discrimination, both economically and socially, by the white and mestizo minority population of La Paz. As a result, many migrated from La Paz and congregated with other indigenous Bolivians in the growing

metropolis of El Alto. Figure 1 demonstrates the explosive growth of El Alto over the past fifty years. In 1950 the city of El Alto was comprised of a population of only

Figure 1¹



11,000 but steadily grew to 95,000 by 1976. Future growth proved even more robust, with the city increasing to over 200,000 in 1985, over 400,000 in 1992, over 600,000 in 2001 and is expected to exceed La Paz's population in 2010 with over 950,000 inhabitants (Arbona and Kohl, 2004). However, as a result of this explosive growth, the city's infrastructure and services have not been able to adjust and have proven to be far from adequate. For example, only 35 per cent of the houses in El Alto have running water compared to 65 per cent in La Paz; 37 per cent are without access to indoor plumbing compared with only 16 per cent in La Paz and only 7 per cent have all basic needs satisfied compared with 37 per cent in La Paz (Arbona and Kohl, 2004). This expanding population along with a growing inequality have been the underlying factors in many of the country's civil unrests.

¹ Date for figure obtained from Arbona and Kohl, 2004

2.2 *The Gas “Wars”*

The city of El Alto has been at the center of Bolivia’s recent instability, specifically the civil conflicts during the fall of 2003 and spring of 2005. The indigenous uprising of September-October 2003 led to approximately 80 civilian deaths and the resignation of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada. The main participants of this first gas “war” came from a variety of backgrounds; there were miners from the town of Huanuni, urban protesters from El Alto, residents from poorer sections of La Paz, Aymara peasants from around the Altiplano and middle class sympathizers to the indigenous plight (Webber, 2005). The motivations of this first gas “war” were complex; however, the catalyst was an agreement with a multinational consortium to export natural gas through Chile to the United States (Webber, 2005). The indigenous population saw this as one more abuse of their natural resources from another imperial power (the first being the exploitation by Spain). There was also lasting anger towards Chile for the loss of their coastline territory during the War of the Pacific, which was fought between 1879 and 1884. During this first gas “war” the urban arena of El Alto not only acted as a focal point for protesters from outside the city, but also as a spark for other protests. For example, civil unrest spread to other towns and cities, mainly in western Bolivia, as a show of support for El Alto “brothers” (Lazar, 2006).

The second gas “war” occurred in May-June 2005 and led to the toppling of Carlos Mesa’s government. The massive urban demonstrations were a result of renewed demands for nationalization of Bolivia’s natural gas, and, similar to the 2003 civil unrest, the center of this social mobilization was in El Alto. In February 2005, FEJUVE organized a general strike when a date for the expulsion of Aguas del Illimani, a foreign

owned company, had not been established (Webber, 2005). As in 2003, indigenous groups in other cities and villages began erecting barricades to block roads and protested in support of the residents of El Alto. For example citizens from Caracallo marched to La Paz, a 200 kilometers and four day journey, in order to voice their support and demands. However, the difference in demands between these groups became evident, with the Caracallo group demanding an increase in gas royalties for Bolivia from the current 18 per cent to 50 per cent, whereas protesters in El Alto were demanding complete nationalization of the industry. Nonetheless, once the Caracallo group arrived in El Alto they began protesting for total nationalization of the industry (Webber, 2005). In this case, the urban environment of El Alto not only became a focal point for organizing and sustaining social mobilization, but the city also appeared to possess the ability to shape and change ideology within indigenous groups.

3.0 FEJUVE - PEOPLE POWER IN BOLIVIA

A growing number of indigenous movements have been gaining strength in Latin America over the past few years. From Mexico and Ecuador to Brazil and Peru, a newly found indigenous social movement has begun, with the nucleus of this movement originating in Bolivia.

From the standpoint of a large urban environment, El Alto is unique to Latin America in that it is one of the few cities where the population is almost entirely comprised of indigenous citizens (Lazar, 2006). In addition to indigenous identity, citizens of El Alto also identify themselves with the neighborhood in which they reside. Lazar (2006) states that this self-identity is integrated and formalized into state structures through neighborhood councils (*Juntas de Vecinos*). A typical neighborhood council

usually consists of an elected committee that meets at least once a month. Additionally, every two to three months a General Assembly is held for all residents of the neighborhood (Lazar, 2006). Within El Alto there are close to 600 of these neighborhood councils and together they form The Federation of Neighborhood Councils of El Alto (FEJUVE). The councils are organized by geographical zones and need to have at least 200 members to be recognized by FEJUVE (Zibeche, 2005). Leaders of the council are elected and must meet the following requirements;

- A minimum of two years residency in the zone.
- Must not be a real estate speculator, merchant or transportation worker.
- Must not be a leader of a political party.
- Must not be a “traitor” or have colluded with dictators.

(Zibeche, 2005)

The councils deal with primarily communal issues, such as schools, plazas and soccer fields, however they also deal with individual issues. For example, any resident who wishes to buy or sell a house in the neighborhood must first appear before the council, as well as any newcomers who wish to join the neighborhood. The council can also act as a judicial intermediary in disagreements between neighbors. Additionally, women play a prominent role in the council holding 10 out of 29 leadership positions in 2004 (Farthing et al, 2005). Although FEJUVE was not the only organization involved in Bolivia’s recent civil unrest, they have been credited with playing a lead role in the 2003 and 2005 mass urban protests.

This section examines three aspects that contributed to FEJUVE’s success in organizing these urban movements. These are traditional community obligations, the

decentralization process known as The Law of Popular Participation, and the city's unique urban landscape.

3.1 Traditional Community Obligations

Traditional community obligations were critical in providing FEJUVE with the power and collective action to organize major demonstrations and turning the city of El Alto into an organizational base for many of the large scale protests.

Zibechi (2005) states that these communal obligations towards the neighborhood councils reflect the traditional organizational structures of rural Aymara and Quechua communities. For instance, in these rural communities, small farmers do not own the land they farm; rather, it is owned by the community and therefore farmers must respect and comply with community values to access the land. This may partly explain why neighborhood members are required to participate in protests and other political actions organized by the neighborhood committees. For example, the majority of the small market stalls which make up the greater part of the economy in El Alto are not owned by individual citizens, but rather collectively by the union (Zibechi, 2005). If they were to lose access to their market stalls they would not be able to make a profitable living. It is estimated that 71 per cent of the economically active population in El Alto depends on this informal economy, such as small market stalls and micro businesses, to make a living (Rojas and Guaygua, 2002).

Furthermore, all assemblies or meetings called by the neighborhood councils are expected to be attended by at least one member of each household. If not, members may be subjected to social sanctions, such as rumors that they do not respect the neighborhood

or council, and in some cases even fined. This leaves many street vendors at the mercy of FEJUVE and other social organizations, as stated by the following resident of El Alto;

“We are street vendors and we also march, protest and participate in blockades. However, for us, a day of work is a day we can feed our family. We lose that day of income when we have to go down to La Paz. On those days we cannot go out to sell our goods and we do not have food to give our children. But we are obligated. If we do not go, we will be fined.” (Loayza and Suarez, 2002)

It was this sense of communal obligation that led to the success of the “*parvo civico*”, or strike, called by FEJUVE in El Alto at the beginning of October, 2003. This strike “forced” FEJUVE members to close all their shops and businesses, as well as services such as public transportation, and allowed them to focus all of their attention towards the demonstration directed at the government (Lazar, 2006). Additionally, Lazar (2006) acknowledges that defense committees were also organized to visit neighborhood houses to pressure people to join the demonstration.

This authoritarian side of the neighborhood councils would have enraged many North American and Western European citizens. Lazar (2006) argues that the model in Bolivia should be viewed as democratic since it represents the will of the people. For example, the leaders of the movement embody the will of the members, and if not, there are mechanisms in place to deal with leaders who do not represent the population adequately. Strobele-Gregor (1996) argues that the lack of career politicians, such as in Western governments, results in a local “civic” duty to participate in demonstrations. Although the tactics used by the neighborhood councils towards members were non-violent, they were coercive and represent another example of transplanted traditions from rural villages to an urban setting. Nevertheless, this author will allow the reader to

determine whether these tactics constitute a form of traditional indigenous mobilization or an authoritarian regime with coercive tactics.

El Alto and FEJUVE were not only critical in organizing the demonstrations but also in sustaining them. For example, local radio stations played a major role in providing information to different areas of the city, strengthening communication between protesters (Zibechi, 2005). This became particularly important when clashes among demonstrators and police began; the radio stations provided strategic information on the location of the fighting. Furthermore, traditional systems of shift work, originally used in rural settings, were crucial in feeding protesters, caring for the wounded and maintaining road blocks. Zibechi (2005) states that these rotations would normally be done by neighborhood zones, community and family. These shifts allowed demonstrators who were not protesting to prepare food and other supplies to the people on the front lines. The shift system also permitted the demonstrations to continue indefinitely and created strain on the government's police and military services.

Although the social mobilization of FEJUVE has been impressive, it does not conceal the fact that any opposition to the government normally takes the form of mass urban street protests, which usually includes fairly radical demands (Booth and Piron, 2004). Greater social dialogue must take place between this local and national intersected region. If not, mass urban demonstrations will be called upon for every political issue that a certain organization deems unjust.

Tactics and traditions routinely used in rural Bolivian communities proved to be extremely effective in the urban setting. The ability to organize, discipline and support community members in an urban environment with close to 800,000 inhabitants was

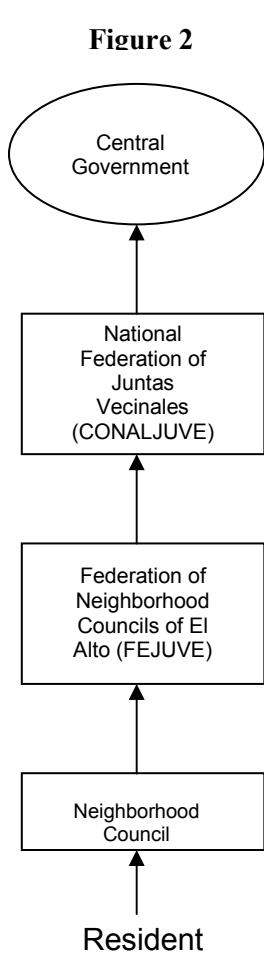
pivotal in the success of both demonstrations. However, the use of authoritarian style tactics, along with continued mass demonstrations may only damage this fragile country that is on a slow road to recovery.

3.1 Decentralization - The Law of Popular Participation (LPP)

As a result of the economic failure of the centrally planned system of government and a growing recognition by indigenous groups for greater participation, the Bolivian decentralization process was launched in 1994 with the creation of the Law of Popular Participation (LPP) (Kohl, 2003). Although the LPP is a large and complex law, five main measures lie at the center of its creation;

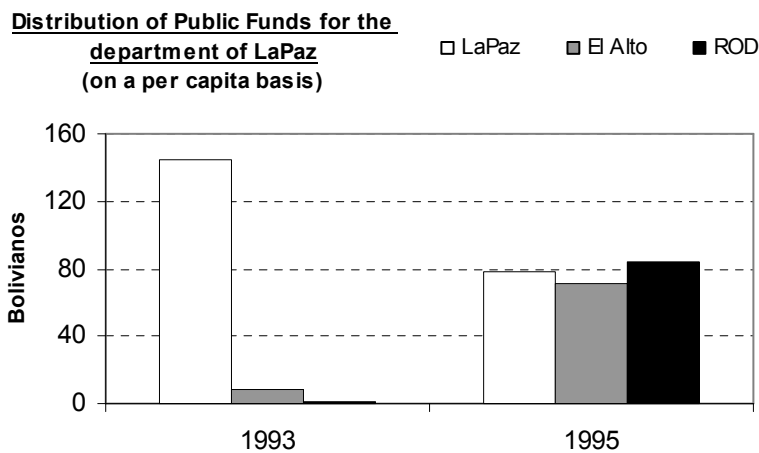
- ***Responsibility for Public Services:*** Ownership of local infrastructure in roads, sports, health, education and culture was devolved to municipalities. In turn they were responsible to maintain, administer and equip these facilities, along with investing in new ones.
- ***Resource Allocation:*** 20 per cent of all national tax revenue was devolved to municipalities on a strict per capita basis.
- ***Municipalitization:*** 198 new municipalities were created and existing ones were expanded to include both suburbs and surrounding areas.
- ***Oversight Committees:*** These were comprised of representatives from local groups who assisted in the policy making process by proposing projects and overseeing municipal expenses.
- ***Citizen Participation:*** Increased through participation in municipal planning and budget allocation in the annual operating plan (*Plan Operativo Annual*).

(Secretaría Nacional de Participación Popular, 1994)



As a result of this law, provinces and departments were assigned new responsibilities relating to implementation and financing, while townships and municipalities were assigned decision-making powers (CIESIN, 2003). As Figure 2² demonstrates, residents can channel their demands through their neighborhood council which in turn feeds the demand to FEJUVE and eventually makes its way to the Central government, or FEJUVE can directly supply it to the municipal government (Lazar, 2006). In addition to this administrative devolution, the fiscal aspect of the decentralization program also empowered the residents of El Alto. For example, Figure 3 demonstrates the devolution of public funds before and after the decentralization process for the department of La Paz. In two years, El Alto’s funding increased from less than

Figure 3³⁴



² Figure from Lazar (2006), p. 187

³ Data for graph obtained from Faguet, 2004 “Does Decentralization Increase Responsiveness to Local Needs? Evidence from Bolivia”

⁴ ROD in graph stands for Rest of Department

10 Bolivianos per person to close to 80 Bolivianos, while citizens of La Paz decreased from 150 Bolivianos per person to 80.

It is this author's contention that the decentralization process enacted in 1994 effected the development and strength of FEJUVE and other organizations in three main areas. Firstly, it gave the neighborhood councils in El Alto a stronger voice and sense of empowerment in the municipal decision making process. For example, as a result of the LPP they could now directly request public investment for their neighborhood from the municipality through "popular participation" (Lazar, 2006). This created political opportunity by reducing their dependency on the state (Schmidt, 2005). Additionally, the fiscal aspect of the decentralization process gave already strong grass roots organizations, such as FEJUVE, an even stronger voice in the country and provided further strength to the emerging social cohesion that was forming in the El Alto region. Secondly, the decentralization process allowed the indigenous groups to obtain unprecedented power in the political arena with indigenous leaders comprising 33 per cent of the country's congressional representatives (Schmidt, 2005). This provided the country's indigenous with access to the national government on a level never experienced. Thirdly, the decentralization process strengthened FEJUVE's ability to pressure community members to participate in demonstrations. Power was now devolved to local authorities that are politically linked to organizations such as FEJUVE, and could use their new found "powers" to influence the actions of community members. For example, local authorities could use tactics such as slowing (or losing) bureaucratic paperwork or not providing local services to neighborhoods whose members did not participate in the demonstrations.

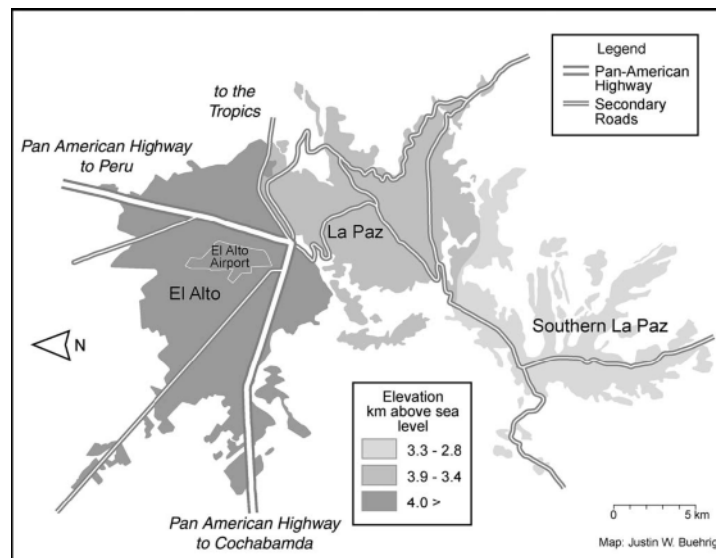
The LPP was only one factor contributing to the ousting of President Lozada and Mesa and, albeit a minor factor, it nonetheless provided El Alto with greater power, both economically and politically, to pursue its struggle against the state. However, it also provided FEJUVE with the ability to strengthen its hold and influence over community members in an effort to increase participation in the urban demonstrations.

3.3 Urban Landscape

The city of La Paz resides in a deep valley carved by the Andean mountains, while El Alto sits above on the Altiplano overlooking the capital. This geographical location provided FEJUVE with a strategic urban landscape over La Paz and was crucial in the overthrow of both governments.

The unique urban landscape of El Alto provided the demonstrators with a strategic advantage over the central government. As Figure 4, demonstrates the only two

Figure 4⁵



major roads leading into La Paz are the Pan American Highway coming from the north and the Pan American highway coming from the south. Both of these roads converge in

⁵ Figure from Arbona and Kohl (2004), p.256

El Alto before descending into the La Paz valley. It is this author's contention that this unique urban landscape played a pivotal role in both major indigenous uprisings and without this strategic location, the protest may not have resulted in the same outcome. This urban landscape allowed indigenous blockades to cut off La Paz from the rest of the country and forced the price of food and other products to rise dramatically, a situation further aggravated by a shortage of both gasoline and natural gas supplies (Webber, 2005).

Two other factors concerning the urban landscape also proved pivotal in the success of the El Alto demonstrations. First, La Paz's main gasoline plant was located in El Alto and was therefore under a 24 hour blockade by the indigenous groups which quickly caused major problems in the capital and around the department. Secondly, the city's international airport is located in the center of El Alto. The blockade and strategic location of the airport allowed the demonstrators to cut off La Paz from the international market.

The urban landscape of the La Paz region was something neither side of the conflict could control. However, it proved to be a critical tool and was used effectively by FEJUVE and the rest of the indigenous movement to suppress the political elite in La Paz.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Case studies such as this research on El Alto can contribute valuable information to the emerging topic of human security in urban spaces. This research provided case-specific examples on the topic, but also offered the reader issues that could be examined in other conflict prone cities.

This research examined the Federation of Neighborhood Councils and its role in the overthrow of two governments. The research pointed to three main findings. Firstly, traditional community obligations brought by migrating indigenous from their rural villages to the city of El Alto have allowed them to facilitate mass urban demonstrations. Secondly, the decentralization process enacted in 1994, the Law of Popular Participation (LPP), provided greater authority and responsibility to the normally repressed indigenous population and strengthened FEJUVE's position in the community. Thirdly, El Alto's strategic urban landscape has allowed the indigenous majority to control all movement in and out of La Paz, effectively cutting it off from the rest of the country.

The urban environment of El Alto-La Paz provided an area where national level governance intersected with local political forces. This intersection provided a fertile ground for both governmental change and civil unrest, where years of oppression at the hands of an elite minority clashed with a repressed majority. The outcome was change for the country's majority with the recent election of Bolivia's first indigenous president. The urban environment provided the cohesion, organizational base and landscape necessary for this transformation, while the indigenous of Bolivia provided their voice.

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