

# Bolivia: Rebellion From Within

By Michael Shanks

In June 2005, popular protests cut off access to La Paz, the capital city of Bolivia. Governmental offices were besieged, gas and food were in short supply, prices rose and nerves frayed. Mobilizations disrupted economic activities in other areas of the country as well. Bolivia's second president in three years, Carlos D. Mesa Gisbert, resigned. Mesa found the nation ungovernable as communities rallied around the leaders of relatively new political parties and sought the re-nationalization of petroleum-based industries, among other goals. As the U.S. Department of State pulled nonessential personnel and the specter of civil war was raised, the media sought explanations that lacked historical context. Western, and particularly U.S., media rarely cover Bolivia, but photogenic protestors combined with the tension of the moment to attract news coverage. The media frequently searched beyond Bolivia's borders for the reason behind the uprising. Cuba's Fidel Castro, Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez and Colombian drug cartels were all speculated to be the foreign instigators of the upheaval.

Stanford professor Herbert Klein, a preeminent scholar of Bolivian history, addressed that misperception and outlined the internal historical factors that led to development of powerful social movements in Bolivia. Those factors include the historical prominence of trade unions, the public's experience under neoliberal economic policies, governmental decentralization and improved educational opportunities. The key player in Klein's analysis was the Bolivian folk, and particularly *cholos*, who have indigenous roots but are articulate in Western culture. They speak Spanish, in addition to Quechua, yet still embrace Indian culture and wear traditional clothing. Klein argued that the emergence of the cholos, and their successful popular

mobilizations, have a novel character which is distinct in the history of Latin America. Other repressed groups have been able to incorporate themselves into the dominant culture. However, it has often been through a process of assimilation. Cholos seek inclusion and participation but on terms that integrate and respect their traditional indigenous identities.

About 62 percent of Bolivia's 9 million citizens self-identify as indigenous. Colonial and post-colonial elites have historically valued them only for their labor and tax revenue. Their role in the economy was generally limited to agriculture and mining. The patron-client relationship between the native people and the oligarchic white elites — and therefore the state — was not in the long-term best interest of the majority of the people. No investment was made in their future, and resources from their mother country bled abroad. They were disenfranchised, dependent and exploited but not complacent. Klein made it clear that cholos in Bolivia today are aware and proud of their history of collective resistance to dominant regimes.

The culmination of Indian resistance to that exploitative past was the Revolution of 1952, led by Victor Paz Estenssoro and the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR). It was one of a handful of true peasant revolutions in Latin American history. Its methods were characterized by the participation and direction of indigenous people, who were the beneficiaries of the organizational strengths of syndicalism. Their goals included: universal suffrage, educational improvements, land reform, the capture of the state and the creation of state-run industries. The revolution ended the reign of the rural white elites and marked the beginning of the emergent cholo middle class. From communications and airlines to mineral and energy industries,



Photo by AP/Wide World

multiple nationalized companies were created in the wake of the Revolution. At times, Bolivia's government employed more than 50 percent of the population.

The reforms of the Revolution transcended a series of subsequent military regimes from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. They were led by an eclectic mix of dictators. Some had socialist leanings; others were right-wing and conservative. Many relied upon violent repression to quell dissent. However, syndicalism and solidarity amongst cholos were in some ways solidified in reaction to such repression.

Democracy returned to Bolivia in the early 1980s. In 1985 Victor Paz Estenssoro became president again. The rebellious leader of 1952 brought about a series of policies which contradicted the original revolutionary designs of the MNR. Under the direction of the U.S. government, Estenssoro immediately began a process of structural adjustment. The orthodox shock called for the privatization of companies owned by the state, liberalization of the economy

and cuts to government spending. The principal goal was to reduce the hyper-inflation crippling Bolivia's economy. Monetary inflation rates were in the thousands. The structural adjustment policies succeeded in bringing inflation down to a manageable rate but also threw unprepared industries and workers into the free market and reduced the traditional social service role of the state. Cholos were, and continue to be, disgruntled with the structural adjustment. They believe that the policies benefited primarily the white elites and failed to adequately promote economic growth.

In a 1995 compromise designed to ease the effects of structural adjustment, former President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada and the MNR oversaw the implementation of the Popular Participation Law which included provisions for the decentralization of the government. Where only 24 municipalities existed before, 327 were created by the law, and the state remitted 60 percent of tax revenues to them. At the same time, constitutional reforms

Indigenous Andeans rest after completing a 15 day march from their home in Cochabamba to the Bolivian capital of La Paz in order to petition the government.

continued on next page

# Bolivia: Rebellion From Within

continued from previous page



Photo by AP/Wide World.

Bolivian presidential candidate Evo Morales at a MAS campaign event.

presidential aspirations. If he manages to win the presidency, he will be the first cholo to do so. His leadership has been crucial to the efficacy of popular mobilizations.

Klein cited educational opportunities as another of the reasons for the emergence of cholos as a political force. Bolivia has made dramatic improvements in public education during the past 60 years, increasing access to education and improving literacy rates. This is particularly impressive given that Bolivia is the second poorest country in Latin America. Klein noted that the majority of graduates from public universities are now from the cholo class.

The economic and political development of Bolivia since 1999 has been increasingly impacted by cholo mobilizations. Popular protests in the city of Cochabamba in 2000 obligated the government to renege on an international contract to privatize the city's water system. In February 2003, just seven months into Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada's second presidency, cholo protesters objected to his energy policies and set government buildings aflame. In October 2003, mobilizations by cholos brought tens of thousands of people to the streets of La Paz. De Lozada was forced to resign and fled the country after violent clashes between protestors and the military resulted in several dozen deaths. Finally, the resignation of his successor, President Carlos Mesa, in June 2005 was the most recent example of the power of cholo popular movements to influence, if not dictate, the national agenda.

Like his predecessor, Mesa was a victim of dissatisfaction with the nation's energy policies. Nationalization is a central demand of the cholos. Under the rallying cry *el gas es nuestro* (the gas is ours), they have demanded state control of oil revenue and cholo participation in the administration of energy industries. However, Klein stressed that there are multiple cholo demands, and they are not always well articulated. Cholo platforms identified by Klein included: political participation, ethnic quotas, direct representation, ending of coca eradication,

opened the door for new political entities to emerge. Traditional parties such as the MNR believed that they would campaign and compete effectively in the local elections. However, they found themselves confronted with local cholo adversaries who were better able to identify and connect with the people. One of the many parties that emerged as a result of the reforms was the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS), led by Evo Morales, a cholo leader and president of the coca growers' union. He is currently a senator with

vague calls for a socialist government, ending the Washington Consensus and rejecting structural adjustment policies.

Mesa's departure left a power vacuum that has yet to be filled. An already deficient economy was battered by the disruptions caused by the protests. The future direction of the country rests immediately with the elections scheduled for December 18, 2005. There are myriad issues and challenges to be faced, and Klein was reluctant to speculate on the future. Whatever political formulation results, poverty reduction must be a governmental priority if Bolivia is going to enjoy stability.

One encouraging indication might lie in an image eloquently described by Klein that reflects the possibility of a fusion of cultures. As he walked by the main public university on a recent visit to La Paz, Klein noticed a chola dressed in traditional billowing skirts and long shawls with a bowler hat and braided hair. She was headed into the university with a laptop computer and books in tow. In the past, he noted, cholas would

have only been found outside the gates selling food. Klein remarked that he was the only one paying any mind to this. It seemed to be a common occurrence for the people of La Paz. Perhaps this is a sign of a hope for the future.

What can be said for certain is that cholo political parties and popular mobilizations are not a flash in the pan sparked by foreign meddling and external instigation. They will continue to demand an influential role in the development and administration of Bolivia on terms that reflect their cultural heritage and not solely the values of the dominant white elites.

**Herbert Klein is Professor of History and Director of the Center for Latin American Studies at Stanford University. He is also a Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution. He spoke at CLAS on October 10, 2005.**

**Michael Shanks is a graduate student in the Latin American Studies program at UC Berkeley.**

Protestors beat a man masked as toppled president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada at an October protest.



Photo by AP/Wide World.