

Natural Resource Extraction vs. Indigenous Rights and the Environment in Latin America

The Politics of Pachamama

by Benjamin Dangl

When I sat down to an early morning interview with Evo Morales over a decade ago in Cochabamba, Bolivia, the then-coca farmer leader and dissident congressman was drinking fresh-squeezed orange juice and ignoring the constant rings of the landline phone at his union's office. Just a few weeks before our meeting, a nationwide social movement demanded that Bolivia's natural gas reserves be put under state control. How the wealth underground could benefit the poor majority above ground was on everybody's mind.

As far as his political ambitions were concerned in terms of Bolivian natural gas, Morales wanted natural resources to "construct a political instrument of liberation and unity for Latin America." He was widely considered a popular contender for the presidency and was clear that the indigenous politics he sought to mobilize as a leader was tied to a vision of

"...the indigenous people...are retaking power."

Bolivia recovering its natural wealth for national development. "We, the indigenous people, after 500 years of resistance, are retaking power. This retaking of power is oriented towards the recovery of our own riches, our own natural resources." That was in 2003. Two years later he was elected Bolivia's first indigenous president.

Fast forward to March of 2014. It was a sunny Saturday morning in downtown La Paz, and street vendors were putting up their stalls for the day alongside a rock band that was organizing a small concert in a pedestrian walkway. I was meeting with Mama Nilda Rojas, a leader of the dissident indigenous group CONAMAQ, a confederation of Aymara and Quechua communities in the country. Rojas, along with her colleagues and family, had been persecuted by the Morales government in part for their activism against extractive industries. "The indigenous territories are in resistance," she explained, "because the open veins of Latin America are still bleeding, still covering the earth with blood. This blood is being taken away by all the extractive industries."

While Morales saw the wealth underground as a tool for liberation, Rojas saw the president as someone who was pressing forward with extractive industries—in mining, oil and gas operations—without concern for the environmental destruction and displacement of rural communities they left in their wake.

How could Morales and Rojas be so at odds? Part of the answer lies in the wider conflicts between the politics of extractivism among countries led by

leftist governments in Latin America, and the politics of Pachamama (Mother Earth) and how indigenous movements have resisted extractivism in defense of their rights, land and the environment.

Since the early 2000s a wave of leftist presidents was elected in Latin America on platforms that included using the region's vast natural resource wealth to fund social programs, expand access to healthcare and education, redistribute wealth, empower workers, fight poverty, and build national economic sovereignty.

Within this shift, the state, rather than the private sphere, has taken up a greater role in extraction to benefit wider society, rather than to simply fill the pockets of a few CEOs of multinational corporations as had been the norm under neoliberal governments. The environmental and social costs of extraction are still present, but with a different economic vision. "Extractive activities and the export of raw materials continue as before, but are now justified with a progressive discourse," explains Puerto Rican environmental journalist Carmelo Ruiz-Marrero.

While many economies and citizens have benefited from the state's larger involvement in the extraction of these resources, extractivism under progressive governments, as it had under neoliberalism, still displaces rural communities, poisons water sources, kills the soil and undermines indigenous territorial autonomy. As Argentine sociologist Mar-

"Extractive activities ... are now justified with a progressive discourse."

istella Svampa writes, Latin American "progressivism's practice and policies ultimately correspond to a conventional and hegemonic idea of development based on the idea of infinite progress and supposedly inexhaustible natural resources." Buoyed by the progressive discourse and mandate of the Latin American left, this extractive trend has produced alarming results across the region.

Following Argentina's 2001–2002 crisis, the Nestor and Cristina Kirchner presidencies have

worked successfully to rehabilitate Argentina's economy, empower workers and apply progressive economic policy to make the country more sovereign. Following years of neoliberalism, where public services and state-owned enterprises were privatized, the Kirchners have put various industries under state control and used new government revenues to fund social programs and make the country less beholden to international lenders and corporations.

As a part of this shift, in 2012 the Argentine state obtained 51% control of the hydrocarbon company Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales (YPF),

Correa expanded the mining industry and criminalized indigenous movements....

which was privatized in the 1990s. In 2013, however, Argentina's YPF signed a deal with Chevron to expand natural gas fracking in the country, operations set to proceed on Mapuche indigenous territory. In response, indigenous communities to be affected by the fracking took over four YPF oil rigs. "It's not just the land they are taking," Lautaro Nahuel, of the Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén, explained to *Earth Island Journal*. "All the natural life in this region is interconnected. Here, they'll affect the Neuquén River, which is the river we drink out of." Protests against YPF-Chevron fracking plans are ongoing in the country.

Uruguayan President José "Pepe" Mujica, who has garnered international attention recently for his government's legalization of marijuana, abortion and same sex marriage, and his offer to host released Guantanamo detainees, is moving forward with a deal with Anglo-Swiss mining group Zamin Ferrous for a major open-pit mining operation that would involve the extraction of 18 million tons of iron ore from the country over the next 12–15 years. Aside from the mining operation itself, the plan includes the construction of pipelines to ship the ore to the country's Atlantic coast. Critics have pointed out that the plan would wreak havoc on the region's biodiversity and displace local farmers. In response to the plans, a national movement is currently underway to organize a referendum to ban open pit mining in Uruguay.

While Brazil's President Luiz Lula da Silva and his successor Dilma Rousseff, both of the Workers' Party, have helped expand the middle class in the country and initiated successful social programs aimed at eliminating poverty and hunger, their administrations have also presided over a vast economy of extractivism that leaves no place for small farmers or environmental concerns. Brazil is home to the largest mining industry in the region: in 2011 it extracted more than twice the amount of minerals than all other South American nations combined and is the world's largest producer of soy, a GMO crop rapidly expanding across the continent with a mixture of deadly pesticides that are killing the soil, poisoning water sources and pushing small farmers out

of the countryside and into Latin America's urban slums.

Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa has famously championed the environment in his country, aiding it with the passage of a 2008 constitution that gave rights to nature, and beginning an initiative in 2007 to keep the oil in Ecuador's Yasuní National Park in the ground. In exchange for not drilling the oil in this area rich in biodiversity, the plan called for international donors to contribute \$3.6 billion (half of the oil's value) to the UN's Development Program for global programs in healthcare, education and other areas. Last August, with only \$13 million donated and \$116 million more pledged, Correa announced that the initiative had failed and that oil extraction would proceed in Yasuní. In a televised address, the president said, "The world has failed us."

Yet while Correa rightfully spoke of the obligations of wealthier nations to contribute to solving the dilemmas of the global climate crisis, at home he expanded the mining industry and criminalized indigenous movements who protested extractive industries in their territories. Under his administration, numerous indigenous leaders organizing against mining, water privatization measures and hydrocarbon extraction have been jailed for their activism.

Criminalization of indigenous activists fighting against mining in Peru has also become the norm for this mineral-rich nation. Under the presidency of Ollanta Humala, mining has boomed, and with it so have conflicts where local communities are fighting to defend land and water rights.

In Bolivia, President Evo Morales has spoken widely of respecting Pachamama, fighting against the world's climate crisis and utilizing indigenous

In Bolivia the government led brutal repression against families marching in protest of the highway.

philosophies such as *Buen Vivir* (Living Well) for living in harmony with the earth. His government has enacted progressive policies in terms of creating more governmental revenue through the state management of natural resource extraction and using that revenue for wage increases, national social programs in healthcare, pensions, education and infrastructure development. The Morales administration and his party, the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS), have also pressed forward with constitutional changes and laws that protect the environment, empower indigenous communities, and make access to basic utilities and resources a right. Yet the rhetoric and promise of many of these changes contradict the way MAS policies have played out on the ground.

The government has advocated for a plan to build a major highway through the TIPNIS indigenous territory and national park. Protests against the government plans galvanized a movement for indigenous rights and environmentalism. In response, the government led brutal repression against families

marching in protest of the highway in 2011. Government violence left 70 wounded; victims and their families and allies are still searching for justice.

Most recently, the MAS promise of respecting Mother Earth and indigenous and small farmer rights clashed against another of its plans: the Mining Law, which was passed by the MAS-controlled congress in March 2014 and was on its way to the Senate, when protests against the law forced the government to suspend its passage pending more input from critics. While private cooperativist mining groups, notorious for their lack of concern for the environment and local communities impacted by mining,* protested the law because it did not grant them the right to sell their resources to foreign and private entities without sufficient government oversight, other groups with different demands have put forth their critiques. Separate from the cooperativist miners, these farmer and indigenous movement critics are more concerned with issues such as water access and the right to protest.

The Mining Law gives the mining industry the right to use public water for its water-intensive and toxic operation, while disregarding the rights of rural and farming communities to that same water. Furthermore, the law criminalizes protest against mining operations, leaving those communities that would bear the brunt of the industry's pollution and displacement without any legal recourse to defend their homes. In response to the law, a number of indigenous and small farmer organizations have taken to the streets in protest.

I spoke with CONAMAQ indigenous leader Mama Nilda Rojas about her view of the Mining Law. "The Morales government has told us that it 'will govern by listening to the bases' and that 'the laws will come from the bottom-up.'" But this is not what happened with the Mining Law, Rojas said, which was created without sufficient input from representatives of communities impacted the most by mining. "This is a law which criminalizes the right to protest. With this law we won't be able to build road blockades, we won't be able to march [against mining operations]," she explained. "We're well aware that it was the same Evo Morales who would participate in marches and road blockades [years ago]. And so how is it that he is taking away this right to protest?"

"This government has given a false discourse on an international level, defending Pachamama, defending Mother Earth," Rojas explained, while the reality in Bolivia is quite a different story.

Meanwhile, outside of Latin America, governments, activists and social movements are looking to places like Bolivia and Ecuador as examples for overcoming capitalism and tackling climate change. The model of Yasuní and respecting the rights of nature can and should have an impact outside these countries, and wealthier nations and their consumers and industries based in the global north need to step

up to the plate in terms of taking on the challenges of the climate crisis.

In many ways, much of Latin America's left is a major improvement on their neoliberal predecessors and have helped forge an exciting path toward alternatives that have served as inspirations across the world. Overall, they have brought countries out of the shadow of the International Monetary Fund and US-backed dictatorships and toward a position of self-determination. For the sake of these new directions, the neoliberal right hopefully will not regain power in the region any time soon, and Washington will be unable to further meddle in an increasingly independent Latin America.

Yet as the march toward progress continues in its many forms, and election years come and go, the losers of Latin America's new left are often the same as before—the dispossessed rural communities and in-

igenous movements that helped pave the way to these presidents' election in the first place. In the name of progress, Mother Earth, *Buen Vivir*, and 21st century socialism, these governments are helping to poison rivers and the land and displace, jail and kill anti-extraction activists. Solidarity that is blind to this contradiction can do a disservice to various grassroots movements struggling for a better world.

If an alternative model is to succeed that truly places quality of life and respect for the environment over raising the gross domestic product and expanding consumerism, that puts sustainability over dependency on the extraction of finite raw materials, and that puts the rights to small scale agriculture and indigenous territorial autonomy ahead of mining and soy companies, it will likely come from these grassroots movements. If this model is to transform the region's wider progressive trends, these spaces of dissent and debate in indigenous, environmental and farmer movements need to be respected and amplified, not crushed and silenced.

"We are on our feet, marching against extractivism," Rojas said. "Mother Earth is tired."

Benjamin Dangl has worked as a journalist throughout Latin America, covering social movements and politics. He is the author of *Dancing with Dynamite: Social Movements and States in Latin America* and *The Price of Fire: Resource Wars and Social Movements in Bolivia*. Dangl edits UpsideDownWorld.org and TowardFreedom.com. Email: BenDangl@gmail.com.

Note

* Cooperative mining groups were originally coops formed by miners to pick up the pieces when private employers abandoned the mines. With time and official subsidies they have become the dominant mining establishment, accounting for half of all exports. Their cooperative nature has eroded until they resemble private mining groups with exploited employees and a disregard for environmental issues. They have now formed alliances with private mine companies to convey to them their special legal benefits, though that law is expected to be voided soon. — Ed.

Dissent and debate in indigenous, environmental and farmer movements need to be respected and amplified.
