

**INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS**

WLM-15

31 May 1989  
La Paz, BOLIVIA

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Dear Peter,

On 6 May, the day before Bolivia's presidential elections, I drove around the Aymara-populated Palco River Valley southeast of La Paz. The gigantic massif, Mt. Illimani (6,240 meters) dominates the lesser mountains of the valley, rising up in silent majesty over the eucalyptus and pine shrouded streams that meander through adobe villages. I wanted to talk to the Aymara about the elections. For many of them, and for Bolivians as a whole, the presidential election -- the second successive free election held since 1982 -- is something of a rarity in this country more often identified with violent and unpredictable "golpes de estado".

In the town of Paica, I stopped to lunch in a small "pensión" and found myself eating in the company of the local police force. We had just begun to exchange ideas about the various presidential candidates when the charango music on the radio ceased and the crackling voice of the disc jockey announced with some gravity, "Beginning at 12:01 a.m. Sunday, 7 May, all vehicular traffic will be suspended. National bus fleets and rail lines will not serve the public. Lloyd Aero Boliviano has cancelled all national and international flights. No liquor will be sold. And there will be no service for mourners at the Buenos Aires Cemetery in La Paz."

One of the policemen winked at me and laughed, "Democracy, eh? Not even the dead get a break tomorrow."

Indeed, most of Bolivia seemed to shut down for the long awaited day. On Saturday, gasoline rationing had gone into effect. Motorists, including this writer, were prohibited from buying more than 20 liters of gasoline to insure that noone strayed too far from home. When Sunday rolled around, only diplomats, election officials and the international press corps were allowed to drive. Bolivian voters were forced to walk to the polls in a measure calculated to reduce the temptation and ease of voting twice in distinct locations.

I visited a few polling places to observe the voting and was surprised greatly by the spectacle I witnessed. Accustomed as I am to the sober

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ambience of voting stations in the American South, I was little prepared for the animated politicking that went on even as Bolivians cast their votes. Bolivians seemed to console themselves for the loss of their cars by donning campaign buttons, hats, and T-shirts. Party propagandists were out in force, leading fight songs for their favorites and cat calls against their rivals.

At one polling site in my neighborhood of Sopacachi, the Izquierda Unida (United Left) candidate, Antonio Aranibar, dropped in. He was surrounded quickly by enthusiasts who shouted, "Presente, Presente, 'Tonio Presidente!'" Shortly after Aranibar left, his antithesis, Alianza Democratica Nacional (ADN) and right-wing presidential hopeful General Hugo Banzer Suarez arrived. Militants of Izquierda Unida lost no time in denouncing Banzer with cries of "Asesino! Fuera Asesino!" The leftists were referring to Banzer's former years as "de facto" president from 1971-1978. The General, who came to power via a "golpe de estado", was criticized throughout the campaign for his less than impeccable human rights record in the 1970's. Campesinos suspected of being Communists were hounded or simply disappeared. Journalists who protested were arrested or fled the country in fear. Two elderly women of opposing views came close to hitting each other with their handbags. In the end, peace prevailed when less emotional bystanders separated the two.

For all the commotion I saw, the presidential election generally proceeded with remarkable civility. In the election's wake, editorialists congratulated themselves and the country on the strides that democracy has made in this Andean country since 1982. And the vote seemed to confirm complacency with the last four years of economic stability. Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada, principal architect of the New Economic Policy that halted astronomical hyperinflation, squeaked in as the winner with a narrow victory margin of just over 5,000 votes. Locked in a virtual three-way tie with the former MNR Planning Minister are the candidates General Banzer and Jaime Paz Zamora, the latter representing the Movimiento Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR). Paz Zamora was Vice-President during the disastrous years of the UDP government from 1982-85, presiding over that administration's "de-dollarization" policy [See WLM-13]. The MIR candidate confused voters in his campaign by proclaiming first one day to discard the fiscal and monetary controls that have been the trademark of the present government -- notably Supremo Decreto 21060 -- and then the next, promising to modify MNR policies but asmidgen.

Commented one Bolivian friend of mine, "I am not a 'Movimientista', but I voted for 'Goni' (as the MNR candidate is commonly known). Rich or poor, at least people have been able to buy bread every day knowing that there would still be some tomorrow and the price would not go up. I have a family to feed."

On the Altiplano, Aymara friends in Cumana expressed the same sentiment. Opined one Aymara farmer of "Goni's" promise to create 250,000 new jobs, "Now that I voted MNR, I hope the party doesn't forget about us for the next four years."

Interestingly, the electoral outcome in La Paz reflects a certain disenchantment among the urban poor for traditional parties like MNR. Out of 593,624 ballots marked in the department of La Paz, 26.7% opted for Carlos Palenque and his CONDEPA party. CONDEPA, which stands for "Consciencia de Patria", is built around the enigmatic personality of

Palenque, a former folksinger who rose from humble origins to own both a radio and television station. By offering social services like a counselling center for battered wives and a radio talk show that voice the complaints of the mainly Aymara poor, Palenque earned the nickname "Compadre." CONDEPA's victory in La Paz means that the new party will occupy two Senate seats and sit 11 deputies in the Camara de Diputados.

I remember conversing with a fire-brand Socialist months ago who classified Palenque as "dangerous" because "he lets the people talk." My acquaintance must be lapsing into fits of apoplexy now, considering that one of CONDEPA's 11 deputies will be an Aymara woman, "Comadre" Remedios Lopez. The Aymara deputy admits that she has no political experience. Evidently, that did not bother a significant number of Aymara voters. For the first time in Bolivian history, a female Aymara will walk the corridors of power in the Plaza Murillo. What is more: Comadre Remedios will wear proudly her "pollera", derby hat, and distinctive alpaca shawl characteristic of Aymara women living all over the Altiplano.

Perhaps more surprising than CONDEPA's La Paz victory is the behavior exhibited by politicians of MNR, MIR, and ADN in the three weeks since Bolivians voted. Self-acclamation has turned now to recrimination. MNR officials have complained of electoral fraud in the departments of Potosí and the Beni. Today MNR lawyers presented the Bolivian Supreme Court in Sucre with a petition to annul the 7 May election results.

MNR is not the only party to contest the election. Izquierda Unida and the Partido Socialist-1 have drawn up their own legal briefs arguing for annulment. Yet it is MNR's petition that is most worrisome. The brief is based on the illegal transfer of "anforas", or ballot boxes, from the provinces mentioned to the city of La Paz for "recounting". Bolivian electoral law requires that votes be counted in the locale where voting took place, since manipulation can occur during shipment. MNR contends that such changes did happen, costing them valuable votes and legislative seats that will be crucial as the parties align themselves to form coalitions that will name the new president before the inauguration slated for 6 August.

Take for example the voting in the Beni. Initial press reports indicated that MNR could count on a clear victory in this northern jungle department. The reports were based on eyewitness accounts of the official vote tally. Strangely enough, this victory turned into defeat once the anforas were transferred to La Paz. It must be noted that Electoral Court jurists all over the country engaged in questionable practices. An estimated 10% of all votes cast on 7 May were nullified and discounted from the official election results. That is a whopping number.

One would think CONDEPA's strong showing in La Paz would have signalled to the traditional parties that they no long hold a monopoly on Bolivia's poor. Instead it seems that the desire to govern in 1989 overrides considerations of the future. Some political commentators here see MNR's petition as the result of what looks like a move by MIR and ADN to leave Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada out in the cold. Jaime Paz and General Banzer are negotiating seriously to govern jointly in one of the oddest coalitions that this country has seen in recent years. It was, after all, the left that suffered so dramatically during the "Banzerato". Speculation centers on an alliance that would put General Banzer in the Palacio Quemado while MIR's leaders will occupy important ministerial posts such as those

that oversee the state oil company, YPFB, and the state mining concern, COMIBOL. Given Jaime Paz's waffling on economic policy during the campaign, the prospect of an ADN-MIR coalition is nothing short of alarming. A return to the era of artificial subsidies for Bolivia's energy and mining sectors will probably delight organized labor. But policies that bear little relation to the reality of the international marketplace will likewise fuel inflation and stunt GDP growth.

MNR's petition to nullify the election is based on a couple of intriguing twists. In the 1985 election, there was no clear winner either. General Banzer, though he obtained a simple majority of votes, agreed to back the nomination of Victor Paz Estenssoro as president. It was a gesture meant to foster national unity. Paz Estenssoro was seen as the only figure capable of directing a bi-partisan government that could put the brake on hyperinflation and restore public confidence. The accord was known as the "Pact for Democracy". On a more utilitarian level, MNR traded away control of the electoral courts for the presidency. The electoral courts were filled with ADN and MIR appointees. So it is not too shocking that MNR has now cried foul. The votes were counted, in the main, by their political opponents. Whether, in fact, MNR has been robbed of the presidency this time is another matter.

Nevertheless, MNR officials are determined to press their case before the Supreme Court. It makes sense. In the power play that ceded the majority in the electoral courts to ADN and MIR in 1985, MNR packed the Supreme Court with its own men. In addition to being a good lawyer, the Chief Justice, Dr. Edgar Oblitas Fernández is also an MNR activist. In the event that the Supreme Court approves MNR's brief, Dr. Oblitas will assume the post of interim president and fix a date for future elections. Dr. Oblitas has stated publicly that he is ready to take on the responsibility.

Aside from upsetting a populace that feels as if it complied with its democratic duties in voting peacefully, this late-in-the-game move by MNR to annul the election could produce consequences still more grave. Bolivian Armed Forces Commander-in-Chief, Army General Edwin Peredo Camacho, insisted this week that politicians drop their "radical attitudes" and get on with the business of naming a constitutional president. Asked whether the Armed Forces will support an interim government, General Peredo only noted that the Armed Forces stand behind the Constitution. He added that officers were prohibited from participating in political activity. But one Bolivian with close links to the Bolivian high command told me, "If the election is annulled, we run the risk of annulling democracy in Bolivia. You can bet there are generals filing their fingernails in the barracks, just waiting for the politicians to foul up."

Maybe the Commander-in-Chief speaks for all of his charges. And maybe not. Few observers would have divined the accusations of fraud three weeks ago. Historically speaking, the "golpe de estado" is much older than democracy in Bolivia. Should the politicians slip and fall in their present jockeying for the presidency, the real victims will be the Bolivians who went to the polls on 7 May with such expectation. Then the only winners will be the dead who rested in peace, undisturbed by mourners and unaware of politics, on election day.

As ever,

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Received in Hanover 6/20/89