

Savina Cuéllar and Bolivia's New Regionalism

by
Miguel Centellas

The social forces that brought Evo Morales to power reshaped the dynamics of politics in Bolivia. Although partly driven by ethnic or socioeconomic differences, regional movements have support beyond a narrow elite base and reflect changes in Bolivia's political landscape stemming from 1990s political reforms, older historical legacies, and recent political developments. The June 2008 election of Savina Cuéllar, an indigenous woman, as prefect of Chuquisaca highlights the complex and evolving nature of political identities. Identities constructed on the basis of regional claims are as important as—and analytically distinct from—identities constructed on the basis of ethnicity or socioeconomic class and challenge our preconceptions of politics in contemporary Bolivia.

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On June 29, 2008, Savina Cuéllar became Bolivia's first indigenous woman elected prefect.¹ The announcement came shortly after 7:30 p.m., as preliminary counts gave her a decisive lead. Cuéllar gave a press conference in Sucre, the capital of Chuquisaca Department, answering questions in her native Quechua. Dressed in a simple grey *pollera* (the layered skirt worn by indigenous women), a pink *manta* (a traditional Andean shawl) around her shoulders, Cuéllar joined her supporters in dancing a *cueca* (an Andean folk dance) in Sucre's Plaza 25 de Mayo. Across Bolivia, news media told the story of her rise from humble used-clothing vendor to *prefecta indígena*. The media, her political rivals, and supporters alike recognized her election as a historic watershed.

That evening's celebration contrasted with recent events in Sucre. The site of the Constituent Assembly, Sucre had become a scene of frequent confrontations between supporters of Evo Morales's Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement Toward Socialism—MAS) and its political opponents. Things became more complicated after several Chuquisaca delegates began pushing to move the country's capital back to Sucre. Over time, this grew into a powerful opposition movement. Surprisingly, a number of MAS delegates broke with their party over the "Capitalía" issue. Savina Cuéllar was one such defector.

Miguel Centellas is Croft Visiting Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Mississippi. His dissertation analyzed the relationship between institutional reforms and Bolivia's 2003 political crisis and was supported by a Fulbright Institute of International Education grant. His current research looks at the effects of electoral system reform on candidate recruitment as part of a collaborative cross-national study supported by the National Science Foundation. He thanks Katherine McGurn Centellas, Rosalind Bresnahan, and especially Ben Kohl for their comments and advice.

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Cuéllar's election challenges assumptions about Bolivia under Morales. An indigenous woman of humble origins, Cuéllar looks like Morales, but she represents a new trend in the (re)formulation of political identity in contemporary Bolivia, where regionality complicates ethnic and class identities and subnational politics play a more complex role. The story of Bolivia under Morales is not simply one of long-delayed access to official political power by a subaltern indigenous majority. Bolivia's indigenous are not a homogeneous mass.

Bolivia under Morales is today deeply divided between so-called *Media Luna* lowland and highland Andean regions.² This division is often subsumed under a one-dimensional framework that defines Bolivian politics as a struggle between established traditional elites and (fused) indigenous-popular social movements. This article uses Cuéllar's election to challenge that perspective. While it is impossible to deny the importance of class and ethnicity, regional identities deserve more attention, and they do not coincide neatly with a indigenous-nonindigenous dichotomy. Of course, class, ethnic, and regional cleavages often overlap, but sometimes they intersect and identities are rearticulated in surprising ways. Institutional reforms (municipal decentralization and the adoption of a mixed-member electoral system) in the 1990s privileged local concerns inflected by local narratives of struggle, belonging, and relational identities. In this context, political identities constructed along ethnic or class lines were only two of many possibilities; another was the construction of regional political identities.

Cuéllar's victory was a setback for Morales. In 2005, he had carried Chuquisaca (with 54 percent of the vote), and David Sánchez's plurality win (42 percent) had given the MAS one of its three prefecture victories.³ In the 2006 Constituent Assembly election, Chuquisaca had again backed the MAS (with 54 percent), and it had voted decisively against regional autonomy (by 62 percent) in the accompanying referendum. Recently, support for Morales has increased in rural Chuquisaca but has been offset by a substantial decline in support in Sucre. In the August 2008 recall referendum, 67 percent of Sucre voters rejected a continuation of Morales's presidency, about the same as in the city of Santa Cruz (66 percent). In three short years, Sucre went from an urban pro-MAS constituency to an important center of opposition, leaving Chuquisaca highly polarized between city and countryside.

A close look at contemporary Bolivia shows a complex picture in which regional identities are increasingly important. I begin by showing that regional movements are not merely reactions to Morales but are rooted in, draw upon, and expand historical regional identities. Here as elsewhere, political entrepreneurs cultivate and mobilize regional sentiments. This was clearly the case in Sucre, where middle-class and business elites propelled the *Capitalía* discourse, turning it into a key wedge issue to mobilize a political opposition movement.⁴ But even those who see identities as "constructed" recognize that identities are not constructed "out of thin air" (Gellner, 1964: 168).⁵ The construction of regional identities in Bolivia has received little attention. I focus on Cuéllar's emergence as the face of Sucre's opposition to Morales, following her break with the MAS to join the *Capitalía* movement, as a way to approach this question. I argue that both indigenous and regional

movements emerge from the forces unleashed by democratization (broadly defined) and that Cuéllar represents the multidimensionality of Bolivia's indigenous-popular actors.

BOLIVIAN REGIONALISM AND INTERNAL COLONIALISM

Discussions of internal colonialism in Bolivia typically address the relationship between indigenous communities and the state. This is particularly true of those adopting a left perspective (e.g., Webber, 2005; Fuentes, 2007; Hylton and Thomson, 2007), which tend to privilege indigeneity over social class (or to fuse the two and treat them as synonymous). Building upon the works of Xavier Albó (1989), Silvia Rivera (1986), and Brooke Larson (2004), such perspectives borrow Marxist understandings of imperialism to describe a postcolonial Bolivian reality in which a modernizing, neoliberal state perpetuates racialized structures of exploitation and exclusion. Indigenous movements themselves use the discourse of internal colonialism when articulating social, economic, and political demands.

Regional movements borrow the rhetoric of internal colonialism. The success of new regional political movements across the Media Luna, seen in their ability to put tens (and even hundreds) of thousands of supporters in the street and the substantial electoral support for autonomy in both the 2006 and 2008 autonomy referenda, suggests that similarly articulated regionalist claims resonate with large segments of the population.⁶ Regional movements have shifted the modes of identity construction. The recent rapid shift in Sucre is one example.

In the 1970s, the Katarista cultural-political movement mobilized the rural indigenous people of the altiplano as such, rather than as campesinos.⁷ By the late 1980s, some middle-class political activists (such as Álvaro García Linera) had begun to see the Kataristas as a substitute for the labor movement (which had collapsed as an effective political instrument in the aftermath of the 1985 neoliberal structural reforms) and were crafting new political movements that used indigeneity—not class—to challenge the neoliberal state. Regional movements worked in another direction, anchoring political mobilization in a specific regional cultural identity to challenge the centralist state.

Regional identities are “constructed imaginaries” as described by Gellner (1964), Hobsbawm (1990), and Anderson (1991). Of course, political imaginaries have material bases, drawing on social and economic relationships that link members of the community together and distinguish them from others. As do indigenous movements, regional movements build upon preexisting traditional communal identities that idealize rural folk communities, promoting regional folklores (music, food, clothing, dialect, and local folk heroes) that accent the region's cultural difference and establish it as an Other relative to an (equally *imagined*) Andean Bolivian.

Cruceño regionalism provides a clear example: Since the 1980s, the city of Santa Cruz has witnessed a monument-building spree, erecting statues to regional heroes or martyrs such as the Unión Juvenil Cruceñista's Jorge Roca and Gumercindo Coronado.⁸ Other monuments are more inclusive, such as

the Madre India monument, described as representing the “enduring cultural values that *Cruceño society* practices” (Acuña, 1996: 40, my translation and emphasis). That monument—like other representations of lowland indigenous peoples and the shouting of the Guaraní “*iOre jae iyambe!*” (We have no masters!) at pro-autonomy rallies—connects Santa Cruz society with a precolonial, indigenous past but one different from that of the Andean highlands. Others, such as a mural depicting the 1957–1959 Once Por Ciento movement, memorialize earlier regionalist movements.⁹ Beyond emphasizing difference, these present the image of a prolonged struggle with a distant, foreign, centralist government. Similar logics are at work in Sucre, where, in a remarkably brief transformation, city residents politicized their latent identity as *capitalinos*, residents of Bolivia’s “true” capital.

Of course, such imaginaries gloss over numerous details. While historically Bolivia has been a highly centralized unitary state, public spending and infrastructure building in the Media Luna increased dramatically after 1952 as the new, integrationist Bolivian state sought national socioeconomic development to integrate its interior regions. Increases in public spending and state loans to local entrepreneurs were accompanied by a significant population shift as Andean Bolivians migrated in search of new economic opportunities. One of the most remarkable features of Media Luna regionalism is that so many second- (and even first-) generation immigrants embrace their new *camba* or *chapaco* identity.¹⁰

In the 1979 introduction to *Fisonomía del regionalismo boliviano*, José Luis Roca asserted: “The history of Bolivia is not the history of class struggle. It is instead the history of regional struggles” (2007: li). Roca rejected “Marxist” explanations of Bolivian history and instead pointed to a history of conflict dating from the colonial period among three regions dominated by their cities: La Paz in the North, Sucre in the South, and Santa Cruz in the East (2007: 9–18). While his account is reductionist, discounting class, ethnic, and other cleavages, it is nevertheless a seminal piece of Bolivian historiography. Recently there has been renewed attention to regional histories and identities, particularly as the discourse of decentralization has shifted from the municipal to the departmental level. By the early 2000s, Bolivian intellectuals were regularly meeting to discuss the issue, believing that regional decentralization was inevitable (see ILDIS, 2003). These conferences built upon the successes and limits of the 1994 Law of Popular Participation.¹¹ As the idea of regional-level decentralization began to take hold, some proposed radical territorial reorganizations: Rodolfo Becerra (2006), for example, proposed reorganizing the country into at least 24 departments, each based on an urban center (e.g., Villamontes, San José, Tupiza) and its own historical regional aspirations.

By the 2000s, in the context of a new “pluricultural” consensus, neoliberals and *indigenistas* alike agreed that the existing Bolivian state was too “centralist,” and regional movements began articulating their demands. Their discourse had three common elements: (1) claims of a unique cultural or historic heritage both different from and marginalized by the dominant national one, (2) remembrances of specific historical “humiliations” or injustices, and (3) criticism of the state’s “smothering centralism” and calls for a new political system that respects cultural communities. The first two were similar to the concerns of the indigenous movements with exclusion, exploitation, and denigration by

the Bolivian state, and, while the third was more pronounced in regional movements, indigenous movements also increasingly sought autonomy for their communities.

Sucre's regionalism, though unique, fits this pattern. The city's political identity reflects its claim as the country's "first" capital city. Ironically, the key moment for Sucre's Capitalía movement was also a key moment for Bolivia's indigenous movement: the 1899 Federal War. Overall, the war differed little from the frequent interelite "revolutions" of Bolivia's early republic and left no meaningful institutional political changes other than moving the country's capital to La Paz. The conflict, however, mobilized previously peripheral indigenous communities. Allied with the "federalist" Liberals, Zárate Willka's "Indian" army played a decisive role. Modern indigenous movements draw inspiration from Willka and bitterly remember his betrayal (see Condarco Morales, 1983) by the victorious Liberals, who massacred their indigenous allies. In Sucre, the civil war became a source of long-standing tension. After 1899 Sucre, once the center of political, economic, and cultural power, became merely another interior city. At its root, Sucre's claim is revindicationist. During her campaign, Cuéllar emphasized this particular historical claim even while acknowledging her indigenous, poor, and female status.

THE OPPOSITION'S INDIAN: SAVINA CUÉLLAR AND THE COMITÉ INTERINSTITUCIONAL

It is tempting to call Cuéllar a puppet of Sucre's traditional elite or to dismiss her as an Uncle Tom, but such arguments neglect agency and the complex lived reality of identity formation and presume a priori knowledge of actors' "true" interests. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Cuéllar's support for moving the capital back to Sucre, the centerpiece of her campaign (*Correo del Sur*, June 22, 2008). She was a vocal Capitalía supporter within the Constituent Assembly (as were other MAS delegates from Chuquisaca, many of whom later joined her in "defecting") as early as 2006, when there was little to be gained by breaking with the overwhelming MAS majority. Throughout the campaign, Cuéllar argued that Capitalía represented the aspirations of the whole department—that it was a *regional* demand. Yet efforts to equate the interests of the city with those of the department ultimately failed. This striking difference—a new development in Chuquisaca—is driven by emerging political realities.

Cuéllar's electoral victory challenges static, thin models of Bolivian identity formation that privilege the indigenous over other sources of political identity. As a candidate for prefect, Cuéllar campaigned on a platform emphasizing Sucre's status as the republic's constitutional capital and promising to end Chuquisaca's "historical humiliation." This positioned her within the regionalist opposition's discourse. Yet Cuéllar, as an indigenous woman, also had a historical trajectory within indigenous-popular social movements, including her 2006 election as Constituent Assembly delegate for the MAS, that made it difficult to portray her in the same way as nonindigenous traditional elites elected prefects in the Media Luna.

A biography of "Savina del Pueblo" appeared as the cover story in the Sunday supplement to the Santa Cruz newspaper *El Deber* two weeks after her

election (*Extra*, July 13, 2008). The cover was a portrait of Cuéllar, smiling, her neck wrapped in a hand-woven manta. Inside were pictures of Cuéllar and her children, including a family portrait of them standing on the steps of their humble, unfinished house in one of Sucre's poorer districts. The pictures and narrative presented her as a "typical" *chola* (an urban-indigenous woman) who was more comfortable speaking Quechua than Spanish; it emphasized her rural origins (born to a "humble campesino" family in a village near Tarabuco), her low socioeconomic status (as a used-clothing vendor in the local market), and her dedication to work and family. The narrative included much of the biographical information circulated throughout the campaign: Cuéllar became politically active during the most turbulent days of Bolivia's democratic transition (1978–1982). At seventeen she was a leader in Chuquisaca's local Federación Bartolina Sisa (the country's largest indigenous women's organization) during Lidia Gueiler's presidency (1979–1980). She was persecuted during Luis García Meza's dictatorship (1980–1981), lost her husband, and moved to the city as a single mother to seek a better life for her children. Of her 11 children, only 7 survived; her oldest, an agronomy student at Universidad de San Francisco Xavier,¹² accompanied her throughout the campaign. In 2004, the MAS recruited Cuéllar for its Sucre municipal candidate list.¹³ She worked for the MAS throughout 2005 and helped install a literacy program (in which she reportedly learned to read) before winning a Constituent Assembly seat representing one of Sucre's two electoral districts. But she publicly broke with the MAS in August 2007 over the Capitalía issue and within weeks became the darling of Sucre's regional movement.

Even before the Constituent Assembly was installed (on August 6, 2006), the Comité Cívico de Intereses de Chuquisaca (Civic Committee for Chuquisaca Interests—CODEINCA), an umbrella organization for various civil society organizations (including labor and campesino organizations but dominated by urban, middle-class and entrepreneurial civic associations), began lobbying to move the presidency and legislature back to Sucre. Until then, the Capitalía issue had been largely absent in the national debate, which instead focused on regional autonomy (the principal issue in the Media Luna) and whether the MAS would honor its agreement that all decisions would require a two-thirds supermajority. Yet the fact that a popular assembly promising to "refund" Bolivia was meeting in Sucre, a city that celebrated its role as the country's first (and "true") capital, reignited local sentiments.¹⁴ Street demonstrations in favor of Capitalía became increasingly frequent throughout late 2006. By mid-2007 protesters in Sucre began marching with departmental flags. Soon the red Burgundian cross on a white field was ubiquitous throughout the city.

In August 2007, after the MAS delegates (joined by La Paz delegates from opposition parties) voted to table any discussion of moving the capital, local civic leaders called an open-air *cabildo* (popular assembly) and installed a number of hunger-strike pickets.¹⁵ Capitalía supporters frequently clashed with MAS supporters, disrupting the Constituent Assembly's proceedings. Both sides mobilized groups from beyond Sucre and Chuquisaca: MAS supporters arrived from rural communities in Oruro, Potosí, Cochabamba, and La Paz; groups from Santa Cruz and Tarija came to support the Capitalía movement.

On August 24, 2007, prominent civic leaders and municipal government representatives formed the Comité Interinstitucional por la Capitalidad (Interinstitutional Committee for Capitalhood—CI), bringing together civil society organizations with public institutions such as the university and the municipal government. The university's rector, Jaime Barrón Poveda, headed the new organization; its executive committee included Aydeé Nava (Sucre's mayor) and Fidel Herrera (the president of the municipal council), both of the center-left Movimiento Bolivia Libre (Free Bolivia Movement—MBL), which had allied itself with the MAS in the 2006 Constituent Assembly election. Whereas *comités cívicos* (civic committees) like CODEINCA are supposedly nonpolitical, the CI was an openly political organization. From the start it worked closely with Sucre's municipal government, which dedicated a section of its web site to the organization.

In August 2007 the paralyzed Constituent Assembly concluded a full year with no visible progress toward a draft constitution. From September through November, tensions mounted. On November 23, 2007, the MAS and its allies (supported by La Paz opposition delegates) voted to shelve any further discussion of the Capitalía issue, prompting a massive protest led by university students. Violent clashes between Capitalía and MAS supporters turned the city into a battlefield. Amidst the chaos, 139 (of the total 255) delegates from the MAS and allied parties secluded themselves in a guarded military school and hastily voted on a preliminary draft of the new constitution, while outside protests escalated. Throughout November 24–26 Capitalía supporters—who now also claimed to be defending the democratic legitimacy of the Constituent Assembly process—clashed with police and pro-MAS groups, leaving 3 dead and more than 100 injured (AIN, 2008). On December 8 the Constituent Assembly (without any opposition delegates) moved to the city of Oruro and approved the full text of the draft constitution in a late-night marathon session that ended the following morning.

"Black November" finally broke David Sánchez, the MAS prefect. He had already resigned once before, on August 30, stating that he was unwilling to use violence to repress protests and criticizing Morales for his inability to find a political solution to the crisis, but he had soon been called back. On November 22 he wrote Morales and Silvia Lazarte (the Constituent Assembly president) asking them not to move the Constituent Assembly's meeting, fearing that it would lead to violence. On December 4 he fled to Peru, where he reportedly sought political asylum.¹⁶

The CI quickly rejected Morales's appointment of Ariel Iriarte as interim prefect until new elections could be held in June.¹⁷ In another cabildo (on March 6, 2008) in the Plaza 25 de Mayo, Capitalía supporters publicly acclaimed Cuéllar as their prefect (*El Deber*, March 7, 2008). She was described in a local press editorial as a "regional icon" known for her "human warmth and firm convictions" as a Constituent Assembly delegate (*Correo del Sur*, March 7, 2008): "On August 17 [2007] she shed tears on the Plaza 25 de Mayo when in a cabildo, and in *Quechua*, she asked for the defense of democracy and legality in the Constituent Assembly" (my translation and emphasis). This simple phrase explains Cuéllar's appeal to the CI leadership. Other opposition leaders also claimed to defend democracy and constitutionality, but the fact that she addressed the cabildo in *Quechua* was noteworthy. While other

regional movement leaders have difficulty claiming to represent a broadly inclusive social movement, Cuéllar is an indigenous urban Sucre resident.

As a Constituent Assembly delegate, Cuéllar had met Sucre's important political players, among them John Cava (businessman and president of the CODEINCA), Juan Luis Gantier (president of Sucre's business association), and Arminda Morales (president of Sucre's federation of neighborhood associations), all of whom were on the CI executive committee. Gantier was frequently seen with Cuéllar throughout her campaign (in the cabildo that had declared Cuéllar prefect he had been named executive secretary). Cuéllar's identity as an indigenous woman with Capitalía sympathies made her an appealing figure for a movement seeking to demonstrate pluralism and inclusiveness to the broader electorate, appealing to those who prioritized their regional identity. The election results suggest that they were at least marginally successful: Cuéllar's appeal did not extend to the rural countryside, but it did include a broad cross-section of Sucre voters.

Public celebration of the election of a female indigenous Quechua-speaker in the same plaza where only a month earlier indigenous campesinos had been forced to grovel before an angry mob suggests a possible moment of reconciliation. On May 24–25, 2008, Capitalía supporters prevented Morales from arriving in Sucre to commemorate the anniversary of the city's 1809 revolt (often cited as the first pro-independence revolt in Spanish America). In the process, Capitalía protesters (primarily university students) attacked a group of indigenous campesinos who had come to Sucre for the president's visit, forced them to march to the plaza, taunted them with racist epithets, and then forced them to kneel and apologize to the city (*Correo del Sur*, May 25, 2008). The event, recorded by the media and presented in a recent documentary (Brie, Álvarez, and Brie, 2008), symbolized the racial dimensions of Bolivia's current political crisis.

Many in Sucre no doubt hoped that Cuéllar's election would remove the stigma of racism. Yet the election was fraught with irony. Cuéllar ran as the candidate of the CI, an organization led by members of the city's middle-class and business elite and linked to figures such as Branco Marinkovic, the divisive leader of the Comité Cívico Pro Santa Cruz (Pro-Santa Cruz Civic Committee). Thus, her candidacy—which focused almost exclusively on Sucre's status (neither she nor her MAS opponent addressed specifically "indigenous" issues)—exacerbated existing urban-rural differences. Cuéllar received 73 percent of the vote in Sucre but carried only 3 of the department's 27 rural municipalities. Wálter Valda, the MAS candidate (a mestizo sociologist with established non-governmental organization connections), racked up impressive victories across rural municipalities but could not overcome the fact that Sucre accounted for 60 percent of the electorate. In the end, Cuéllar won with 52 percent as opposed to Valda's 44 percent. Although she promised to represent all of the department's voters, her election represented a clear victory of city over countryside.

In the months following her election, Cuéllar became a key figure in the Consejo Nacional Democrático (National Democratic Council—CONALDE), the organizational umbrella joining the country's opposition prefects. In July 2008, only two weeks after her election, Cuéllar hosted the organization's first meeting, in Sucre, where members coordinated strategies for the recall referendum (*Correo del Sur*, July 17, 2008). In September 2008 she backed Pando's

prefect (Leopoldo Fernández) in his confrontation with the central government.¹⁸ Without proposing specific measures, she also joined CONALDE in demanding that the draft constitution controversially approved in Oruro in December 2007 be opened to revisions. Meanwhile, she surrounded herself with two kinds of advisers: members of Sucre's traditional political class, with ties to the CI, and other dissident members of the MAS such as Rodolfo Rivas and Epifania Terrazas (both former Constituent Assembly delegates).¹⁹

In Chuquisaca, regional civil society organizations that previously cooperated are now bitterly divided, primarily along an urban-rural divide. After Cuéllar named new subprefects and other authorities, the pro-MAS Federación Única de Trabajadores de Pueblos Originarios de Chuquisaca (Federation of Workers of Originary Peoples of Chuquisaca—FUTPOCH), the department's largest campesino organization, protested as "provocations" her naming of new authorities without consulting the campesino sector and argued for their own "subregional" autonomy (*Correo del Sur*, July 22, 2008). Since then, the FUTPOCH has tried to prevent subprefects from assuming their positions in the provincial capitals and blocked various prefectural development projects in rural areas. Already before the prefect election, the FUTPOCH and the Central Obrera Departamental (Departmental Workers' Central—COD) had withdrawn from the CODEINCA (after it began to focus almost exclusively on the Capitalía issue), though the COD (which includes a number of middle-class, professional unions) has maintained a more ambiguous stance. Perhaps the most confrontational group has been the staunchly pro-MAS Federación Bartolina Sisa, which actively campaigned against Cuéllar's candidacy and publicly declared her a traitor.

DRIVING A WEDGE BETWEEN CITY AND COUNTRY

The prefect campaign was intensely polarizing, with both sides preventing their opponents' supporters from campaigning in rival areas (*Correo del Sur*, June 26, 2008). Such sharp polarization is a relatively recent phenomenon in Chuquisaca. Though urban-rural voting differences have always existed, these have become much sharper. Throughout the 1990s, support for left-of-center parties such as the MBL and Izquierda Unida (United Left—IU, of which the MAS was a member) was higher in Sucre than in other cities. In 2005 Sucre backed the MAS (52 percent) over PODEMOS (36 percent), and in 2006 support for PODEMOS fell in the city of Sucre (to less than 20 percent). As late as 2006, a majority of Sucre voters (53 percent) voted *against* regional autonomy. Yet in 2008 Sucre swung suddenly toward the regionalist opposition. It is difficult without sophisticated survey data to say much about voting behavior, but aggregate data suggest that a considerable number of Sucre's poor and indigenous voters supported Cuéllar, while both indigenous and nonindigenous rural voters were equally likely to oppose her.

Looking at 2001 census data, Sucre can be described as an indigenous city: More than 61 percent of Sucre residents 15 years or older identified themselves as members of an indigenous community (mostly Quechua), compared with 32 and 19 percent in the cities of Santa Cruz and Tarija and 61 and 81 percent in the cities of La Paz and El Alto.²⁰ The percentage of self-identified

indigenous residents in Sucre is comparable to the departmental figure (65 percent) and is higher than in 12 of Chuquisaca's 27 rural municipalities.²¹ A superficial view of Sucre's class structure using census statistics is possible: While the city is less underdeveloped than the surrounding countryside, 40 percent of its residents live in poverty, compared with 19 and 31 percent in the cities of Santa Cruz and Tarija. Thus, about half of Sucre voters come from the lower socioeconomic classes. Still, the level of poverty in urban Sucre is substantially lower than in Chuquisaca's rural municipalities, where the average poverty rate is 90 percent.²²

In 2008 Sucre residents voted differently from their rural counterparts, but this should not be surprising. Why should urban and rural voters vote the same way? Looking beyond ethnicity and poverty, one notes that rural Chuquisaca is, not surprisingly, overwhelmingly agricultural: The average proportion of residents who work in agriculture (or related activities) in the department's rural municipalities is more than 55 percent and (in almost all cases) far outdistances all other occupational categories. In contrast, Sucre (like any urban community) has a diversified labor population, with three fairly equal occupational sectors (industry, services, and "professional")²³ accounting for more than two-thirds of the working-age population. Perhaps socialization forces can explain why urbanized voters (nearly two-thirds of whom are indigenous) would vote differently from rural voters. But, if so, why would Sucre voters break decisively from their rural counterparts and oppose Morales in 2008 and not sooner? And why would voters in La Paz (a far more urban environment) not follow a similar trajectory?

Interestingly, Sucre's new regionalism is mirrored by a shift among voters in the city of La Paz that favors Morales. As in Sucre, 61 percent of La Paz residents 15 years or older identified themselves as indigenous (mostly Aymara); poverty rates were only slightly lower (35 percent), and La Paz is more urban.²⁴ Yet just as the Capitalía issue pushed Sucre's voters into the arms of the opposition, it mobilized Paceños to defend their city's status. Beginning with a mass rally in July 2007, held symbolically at the intersection where the cities of La Paz and El Alto meet (*La Razón*, July 21, 2007), large sectors of the La Paz middle class joined with indigenous-popular movements to counter Sucre's Capitalía demands.

INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS AND REGIONALIZED POLITICS

Bolivia's regional movements are not merely reactions to indigenous-popular social movements. The two are twins of democratization, emerging from an altered landscape that privileges identity rather than traditional left-right dichotomies. Like social movements that emphasize indigenous identity, regional movements emphasize the importance of place, common history, and folk traditions; both are ethnic identities in the broader sense of the word. Beginning with their country's transition to democracy in 1982, Bolivians have begun to imagine a better political community, one markedly different from their previous experience. A democratic transition is, therefore, a process of political imagining (Anderson, 1991: 6–7). But democratization—a process of social and

political change—is *destabilizing* because it opens up new spaces of contestation. One way to understand the situation of contemporary Bolivia is as a struggle in the public sphere between competing imaginaries, whether defined in socio-economic, ethnic, or regionalist terms. Recognizing this helps us to understand the difficult compromises that may be required to repair Bolivia's social fabric.

Bolivian politics became both ethnicized and regionalized after the institutional reforms of 1994 and 1995, which aimed at deepening the country's democracy. Ironically, Bolivia became politically unstable after reforms that improved the political system's representativeness and embraced multiculturalism.²⁵ Municipal decentralization allowed local spaces for communitarian indigenous models of democracy (Van Cott, 2008). Changing from a purely proportional representation electoral system (using party lists) to a mixed-member system that introduced uninominal (single-member) districts to which voters elect lower-house representatives by simple plurality transformed voters from partisans into constituents. Both reforms gave Bolivians—particularly rural ones—a greater voice. The 1995 constitutional reforms went further, proclaiming the country a “multiethnic and pluricultural” republic. These participatory, pluricultural trends were expanded in the subsequent 2004 and 2009 constitutional reforms.

Municipal governments and uninominal districts became incubators for new political actors as they moved from local social movements to the national political stage (Albó, 2002; Van Cott, 2005). One cannot understand the rise of the MAS and Morales without considering these reforms. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, support for left-socialist parties like IU steadily declined. Yet the MAS dominated municipal elections in the Chapare starting in 1995 (the first year of municipal elections), gaining political capital and institutional resources to launch a national movement. Morales first became a national presence as an IU uninominal representative in 1997 (the year uninominal districts were introduced), even though IU received less than 4 percent of the national vote. Another who benefited from the reforms was Felipe Quispe, leader of Movimiento Indígena Pachakuti (Pachakuti Indigenous Movement—MIP). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, indigenous parties (such as the Movimiento Revolucionario Tupaj Katari de Liberación [Tupac Katari Revolutionary Liberation Movement—MRTKL]) never surpassed 2 percent of the vote in general elections and had never won more than one seat in any election. In 2002, the MIP won all five rural uninominal districts in La Paz and picked up another “plurinominal” (list) seat, making it the fifth-largest parliamentary bloc.

Politics also became regionalized. Whereas prereform politics showed a tendency to gravitate toward a “systemic” center, postreform politics increasingly showed a centrifugal tendency marked by political fragmentation and appeal to particular (rather than national) electorates (Centellas, 2007; 2009). The change benefited geographically concentrated social movements, whether cocalero unionists, Katarista activists, or Cruceño regionalists.²⁶ Already by 2002, national parties increasingly recruited candidates from outside their rank and file, enrolling leaders of local civil society organizations. In 2004, another round of constitutional reforms ended political parties' monopoly of

electoral representation. That year's municipal elections did not require that candidates represent nationally recognized parties; they could represent local civic groups or indigenous communities. The result was a disintegration of Bolivia's party system as more than 400 such groups (many with highly localized platforms) ran candidate lists.

Politics also became movement-based. Bolivia's parties were historically poorly institutionalized or "inchoate" (Gamarra and Malloy, 1995), but this accelerated. Organizationally, the MAS umbrella covers numerous social-movement organizations first brought together by the *Asamblea por la Soberanía de los Pueblos*, then the *Instrumento Político por la Soberanía de los Pueblos*, and now the *Coordinadora por el Cambio* (Coordinator for Change—CONALCAM). Similarly, PODEMOS was merely an electoral label for an assortment of traditional political figures, civic leaders, and pro-business organizations (another was Samuel Doria Medina's *Unidad Nacional*). As party organizations, the MAS and PODEMOS are ineffective and undisciplined. Instead, both government and opposition rely on their ability to exert direct social pressure through street mobilizations, rather than the institutional mechanisms of representative democracy.

Within the legislature, partisan divisions are increasingly less salient than divisions between regional legislative caucuses. As Bolivia moves forward under Morales, emerging regional divisions will continue to gain importance, especially as the number of regional cleavages increases. This is likely to happen under provisions in the 2009 constitution that recognize municipal, indigenous, departmental, and regional (subdepartmental) autonomy and allow any territorial region to propose its own autonomy referendum.²⁷

THE COMPLICATED ROAD AHEAD

Over the past few years, several established indigenous-popular leaders have challenged Morales: Víctor Hugo Cárdenas, Felipe Quispe, Roberto De la Cruz, Marcial Fabricano, Alejo Véliz, and Roman Loayza. Morales's bitter break with Véliz (cofounder of the *Asamblea por la Soberanía de los Pueblos*) came before the 2002 general election, as the two wrestled for control over the movement. The break with Loayza (the MAS delegation leader in the Constituent Assembly) came only in 2008 and has degenerated into vicious personal accusations. After brief rapprochements, both Quispe and De la Cruz (leader of El Alto's labor federation and a key figure in the 2003 gas war) have become openly critical of the Morales government, accusing it of continuing neoliberal and colonial state policies.

Others challenge the Morales government's commitment to liberal-pluralism. After Víctor Hugo Cárdenas (leader of the MRTKL and vice president during the 1993–1997 Sánchez de Lozada government) launched a television campaign against the new constitution, he was declared a traitor. In March 2009, pro-MAS demonstrators forcefully took over his house, injuring his wife and son in the process (*La Razón*, March 8, 2009). The attack generated sympathy, particularly in the Paceño middle class, turning Cárdenas into a possible presidential contender in the December 2009 election. The public defection of Fabricano, the Guaraní leader of Bolivia's lowland indigenous Confederación

de Pueblos Indígenas de Bolivia (Bolivian Confederation of Indigenous Peoples—CIDOB), who organized the 1990 March for Dignity, is equally problematic. In April 2009, the CIDOB formally withdrew from the CONALCAM over disputes related to the new electoral law (*La Razón*, April 15, 2009).²⁸ The following month, Fabricano was seized and whipped until unconscious by pro-MAS demonstrators, who also seized his house (*La Razón*, May 11, 2009). Growing tensions between highland and lowland indigenous organizations open the door to a possible alliance between the CIDOB and the Media Luna regionalist movement.

Such divisions complicate the political landscape of Bolivia. Indigenous peoples have grievances that are both universal (and unite them as similarly subaltern groups facing ethnic, cultural, and economic discrimination) and particular (and may divide them along linguistic, regional, religious, ideological, or other dimensions). They should not be viewed as a constant (or captured) pro-MAS constituency. This, of course, only means that indigenous people are as complex and multidimensional as any other *homo politicus*. But it also means that indigenous leaders and voters can mobilize in different ways. If so, Cuéllar's election is a harbinger of more complex political developments to come.

The likelihood of such regional complexities has only increased in the wake of the December 2009 elections. While Morales won reelection with a powerful mandate, voters in each of the country's nine departments approved regional autonomy at the polls. In addition, voters in the Gran Chaco provinces of Tarija Department approved a subregional autonomy referendum. Voters in 11 municipalities also backed declaring themselves autonomous indigenous regions (interestingly, voters in Oruro's Curaguara de Carangas rejected indigenous autonomy). The April 2010 municipal, subregional, and regional elections—which included the creation of new regional, popularly elected legislative assemblies—suggested that Bolivia's political system will continue to fragment. Whether this will be good for democracy or socioeconomic development remains an open question.

Savina Cuéllar did not seek reelection in the April 2010 elections. That election was won by the MAS candidate, Esteban Urquizu, who also happens to be Savina's nephew. The mayoral race was won by Jaime Barrón, the head of the CI.

NOTES

1. Prior to April 2010, prefects headed Bolivia's departments, or prefectures, and were roughly equivalent to regional governors. Unlike governors in federal systems, prefects in unitary systems (e.g. France) are appointed. Elections of prefects took place in Bolivia for the first time in 2005. The 2009 constitution granted departments regional autonomy, which now have popularly elected governors and regional legislative assemblies.

2. The departments of Santa Cruz, Tarija, Beni, and Pando.

3. These and all other figures (unless otherwise noted) come from the Corte Nacional Electoral (<http://cne.org.bo>).

4. A number of the individuals involved and their affiliations are identified here. While their class status certainly played a role, particularly in the timing of the Capitalía mobilization, it is not the focus of this paper. My argument is that regional identities are becoming increasingly

politicized, becoming dimensions along which voters position themselves regardless of other identities such as ethnicity, class, or gender. In focusing on observed mass behavior (particularly in elections), I am less concerned with and skeptical of the idea of a priori understanding the internal motivations of individual actors.

5. Theorists of constructed ethnic or national identities (e.g., Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990; Anderson, 1991) argue that they are modern products of the same socioeconomic forces that create social classes. For Anderson, such communities are “imagined” because individuals accept a cultural bond (based on common cultural discourse and symbols) with a broader community, most of whose members they will never know or meet.

6. Voters in Santa Cruz and Tarija backed regional autonomy by wide margins (71 percent and 61 percent) in 2006. In the 2008 “wildcat” autonomy referendums, voters in Santa Cruz and Tarija again backed regional autonomy by wide margins (86 percent and 79 percent, as reported by departmental electoral courts).

7. The Kataristas drew inspiration from Túpac Katari, who led an indigenous revolt in 1781.

8. The UJC was founded during a 1957 revolt against the land reform policies of the government of the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (National Revolutionary Movement—MNR). That revolt (in which Roca and Coronado died) was put down by a combination of military forces and Andean campesino militias.

9. The 1957–1959 Once Por Ciento movement demanded that producing departments retain 11 percent of oil and gas rents.

10. The term *camba* (Guaraní for “friend”) is used to refer to those regionally identified with Santa Cruz, Beni, and Pando Departments; the term *chapaco* derives from *chacopampeana* (referring to the Chaco pampas) and is used to describe those from Tarija Department. Sociological studies of Santa Cruz regionalism include Antelo et al. (2005), C. Peña and Boschetti (2008), and P. Peña et al. (2003). A similar study of Tarija is L. Peña et al. (2003). I am unaware of any such study of Sucre or Chuquisaca.

11. The Law of Popular Participation municipalized the country, creating 314 (today 327) independent municipal governments, each with a popularly elected mayor and municipal council with fiscal responsibility (20 percent of the national budget earmarked for the new municipalities).

12. The only university in Sucre and one of the country’s 12 public, nationally funded universities.

13. In Sucre’s 2004 municipal election, the MAS placed fourth (with 8 percent of the vote), winning only one seat on the 11-member municipal council. Cuéllar was tenth on the party list.

14. During his campaign for the vice presidency on the 2002 MNR ticket, Carlos Mesa promised that he would work to move the capital back to Sucre (*Correo del Sur*, February 26, 2002). After Mesa became president in October 2003, civic leaders pushed him to honor his campaign promise (*Correo del Sur*, January 31, 2004). That was the first time in recent memory that a (serious) proposal to move the country’s capital had been made.

15. This is a common formula employed by various social movements in Bolivia, including indigenous-popular and regional movements.

16. The Sánchez case is a puzzle: His flight to Peru was announced by Roger Pinto (a PODEMOS senator from Pando and member of the evangelical organization that helped Sánchez flee). Pinto presented a letter in which Sánchez expressed frustration with the political situation and the lack of police protection (his home had been attacked and burned) and claimed that he and his family were unable to return to Sucre, hinting at government complicity (*El Deber*, December 18, 2007). The MAS denounced Sánchez, and state prosecutors began an investigation into his tenure as prefect. In June 2009 Sánchez reappeared (in La Paz), giving a press conference in which he blamed opposition supporters for manipulating the “legitimate sentiments” of Sucre’s residents to derail the Constituent Assembly process and claimed that Capitalía supporters had prevented him from returning to his home in Sucre (*Los Tiempos*, June 30, 2009).

17. Until the 2009 constitution was ratified, Morales had constitutional authority to name (and replace) prefects. It is noteworthy that he accepted elections as the legitimate way to select new prefects.

18. Strikes in the Media Luna and in Chuquisaca (which threatened to cut gas pipelines to Brazil) had erupted over the government’s plan to divert hydrocarbons revenues (earmarked for departments) toward a national pension plan. Tensions had escalated until September 10, 2008, when violent confrontations in Pando left at least a dozen dead and hundreds injured, resulting

in the government's imposition of martial law and the prefect's arrest and prosecution (for a chronology of events, see AIN, 2008).

19. Rivas, a used-car dealer and restaurant owner, was a delegate to the Constituent Assembly from the city of Cochabamba; he now serves as Cuéllar's chief of staff. Terrazas, a lawyer and leader of her neighborhood association, was a delegate from Sucre who early backed the Capitalía movement and is now director of social services in Sucre; she was accused (along with John Cava) of instigating the attack on indigenous MAS supporters in May 24, 2008. Neither is indigenous, though some other MAS "defectors" were.

20. All figures from Instituto Nacional de Estadística (<http://www.ine.gov.bo>).

21. Rural indigenous population rates average 66 percent but range from 14 percent (Las Carreras) to 97 percent (Yamparáez). Nine municipalities have a rate of 90 percent or higher, but those municipalities also have small populations.

22. Rural municipal poverty rates range from 71 percent (Camargo) to 99 percent (Poroma). Fifteen municipalities have a rate of 90 percent or higher. Though it is tempting to assume that poverty or illiteracy can explain urban-rural voting differences, Centellas and Buitrago (2009) found no statistical evidence for such a relationship.

23. Industry and services account for 23 percent and 21 percent. The "professional" sector combines four categories: scientists and intellectuals (11 percent), technical workers (7 percent), office workers (5 percent), and administrators (2 percent).

24. Only 17 percent of La Paz city residents work in industry; 25 percent work in services and 34 percent in the "professional" sector.

25. Political stability is relative. Bolivia today is less unstable than in 1978–1982. Perhaps it is returning to a pattern of "interminable revolutions" (Brienen, 2007) after a period of "pacted" democracy.

26. While Media Luna leaders no doubt have economic interests at stake, they prefer a discourse of identity politics (see Sivak, 2007).

27. The first such referenda will take place sometime next year in Tarija's Chaco Province and in 12 rural municipalities seeking special "indigenous autonomy" recognition.

28. The original MAS proposal called for the creation of 14 "reserved" seats in the 130-seat Chamber of Deputies, while indigenous movements demanded 25. The final law negotiated in the legislature reduced these to only 7, one for each department except Chuquisaca and Potosí.

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