



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Bolivians win democratic control of the country's gas reserves, 2003-2005

Mid-September

2003

to: Mid-June

2005

Country: Bolivia

Location City/State/Province: *La Paz, Cochabamba, Warisata, El Alto, Oruro, Entre Rios, Bulo Bulo, Potosi, Yapacani, and Sucre*

Location Description: *Major cities and roads around Bolivia*

Goals:

The campaign's goals grew: first, the non-exportation of Bolivian gas (especially to Chile); then, the nationalization of Bolivia's natural gas reserves; and after that, the nationalization of the oil industry.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 062. Student strike
- 107. Sympathy strike
- 117. General strike
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings

- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 106. Industry strike
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 4th segment:

- 048. Protest meetings
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

Methods in 5th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 117. General strike
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 013. Deputations
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 106. Industry strike
- 116. Generalised strike
- 117. General strike
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Notes on Methods:

While unions organized most of the actions in 2003, other citizens performed more and more of the actions in 2004 without a larger group coordinating.

Roadblocks (which constitute the nonviolent obstruction here), seemed to take the form of both objects and persons blocking the road. Because persons and protests did play a role in the roadblocks, they are categorized here as nonviolent obstruction.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Miners
- Peasants
- retired workers
- teachers
- workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), Evo Morales, Felipe Quispe

Partners:

National Coordination for the Defense of Gas, Bolivian Labor Federation (COB), El Alto Regional Labor Federation (COR), Santa Cruz Departmental Labor Federation (COD), the Single Trade Union Confederation of Bolivian Peasant Workers (CSUTCB), the Mineworkers' Federation of Bolivia

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Bolivian Labor Federation (COB)
- National Coordination for the Defense of Gas

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- El Alto Regional Labor Federation (COR)
- Santa Cruz Departmental Labor Federation (COD)
- The Single Trade Union Confederation of Bolivian Peasant Workers (CSUTCB)
- the Mineworkers' Federation of Bolivia

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Felipe Quispe (exit)

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 3.5 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

The Bolivian government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

During the first demonstrations and strike, protesters clashed with police on multiple occasions, causing several deaths, and an anti-personnel mine injured five policeman. Demonstrating miners set off sticks of dynamite, but they only rarely intended to actually cause harm.

Repressive Violence:

Police regularly attacked demonstrators with tear gas, batons, and live ammunition. Police also attacked Indians who weren't directly involved with the protests.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Bolivia contains significant natural resources, but also has a long history of exploitation by foreign powers. One of these resources is natural gas. Just like the precious metals from Potosí, however, the gas was mostly exported (partially due to low demand within Bolivia) as a raw material, meaning very little wealth stayed in Bolivia, and the wealth that did remain was concentrated in a few, mostly white, hands. In protest of this policy tens of thousands of Bolivian activists, who mostly came from indigenous backgrounds, worked toward the nationalization of the nation's natural gas reserves between 2003 and 2005.

Significant political unrest upset the Bolivian political climate in the few years leading up to the protests. Multiple groups were vying for power. Indigenous groups worked toward the redistribution of land and an end to the attempt to eradicate the coca leaf. Businessmen in Santa Cruz campaigned for autonomy from the Bolivian constitution.

Beginning on September 19, 2003, 50,000 protesters descended on the capital, La Paz, and 30,000 showed up in Cochabamba to protest the exportation of the country's natural gas via a pipeline to Chile. Chile had taken Bolivia's Pacific coastline by force in the late 19th century, and many Bolivians still held a grudge toward Chile, their historic enemy. Many protesters walked for up to a week to reach the protests. They blocked streets, marched, and held demonstrations in La Paz and Cochabamba, effectively shutting down the cities. Protesters also set up roadblocks around Bolivia. In a few isolated incidents, demonstrators clashed violently with police. Six protesters died in demonstrations in Warisata. After a week of protests, President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, a University of Chicago-educated former mining executive and millionaire, called for dialogue, but demonstrators

largely ignored his plea.

In response to police violence and in order to further their demands, Bolivian unions initiated a general strike on September 29, which also called for the resignation of President Sánchez de Lozada. The unions expanded roadblocks and held marches (including one from Cochabamba to Warisata, a distance of more than 250 miles). A group of miners also began a hunger strike, and some students went on strike. Despite the initiation of the strike, the campaign's leaders had some tactical disagreements. Both the Bolivian Labor Federation and Felipe Quispe, a politician and member of the indigenous Aymara people, supported the strikes and roadblocks. Evo Morales, the leader of Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) and also Aymaran, objected to the roadblocks but promised that his followers would participate in certain marches. Morales supported the goals of the strikes and roadblocks, but urged caution, fearing a civil war. He also felt that more planning was needed before large-scale actions could take place successfully. A few days later, however, Morales pledged his support to the roadblocks, and MAS members began to participate.

The strike soon expanded, and multiple industries, including transport workers, joined in. Farmers blocked highways into La Paz, virtually cutting off the food and petrol supply. The strike effectively cut off La Paz from the rest of Bolivia. In response, the government stationed soldiers between the El Alto International Airport (less than ten miles from La Paz and the center of the protests), which was one of the last ways for supplies to enter La Paz, but the airport closed anyway on October 11. Bolivian authorities also sent soldiers to occupy zones of protest, to break up roadblocks, and declared martial law in El Alto on the 13th. These expeditions often resulted in battles with protesters, causing many deaths. Some police, however, defected to the protesters' side.

On October 14, after about three weeks of strikes and roadblocks, President Sánchez de Lozada announced that he had halted the plan for the pipeline to Chile and called for a referendum on the exportation of gas. He did not, however, resign his office.

Campaigners continued to call for the president's resignation and MAS members constructed new roadblocks in the Chapare region. Striking tin miners from the Bolivian South, plus peasants from the Yungas jungle lowlands, marched into La Paz in two columns. The United States came out in support of President Sánchez de Lozada, saying that he had legitimacy as a democratically elected leader, and warned against "undemocratic practices." The president's approval rating declined to 9% within Bolivia.

Four days after he made his concessions, the president resigned. The campaign took a toll on demonstrators: police killed dozens of people just during the three weeks. The final death toll rests between sixty and seventy protesters. A few policemen also died in the violence.

Carlos Mesa, the former vice president, came to power and promised to stop violence against civilians, a promise he kept. He also reiterated former President Sanchez de Lozada's promise of a referendum on the issue of gas, appointed a non-partisan cabinet, and called for earlier-than-normal elections.

Protesters responded in varying ways to Mesa's presidential appointment. Evo Morales acknowledged that Mesa needed a "grace period", but said supporters would continue to block some roads. Felipe Quispe, however, vowed to continue the strike and roadblocks until President Mesa fulfilled the seventy-three demands he had submitted to the President. Even Morales, and other protesters, made it clear that if Mesa did not fulfill his promises, he would be overthrown in the very same manner as Sánchez de Lozada. On October 19, protesters lifted their blockade of La Paz, allowing supplies to enter the city for the first time in weeks.

President Mesa did not meet the demands of the indigenous and urban workers. Five months after Mesa became president, on March 18, 2004, activists marched into La Paz to begin the next phase of the campaign. A week later, Jaime Solares, the Executive-Secretary of the Bolivian Federation of Labor (COB), personally led a march in La Paz, which called for the reversal of government policies and Carlos Mesa's resignation. Factory workers and rural workers both held their own marches.

Police interacted in a primarily friendly and professional manner with demonstrators, and did not commit any acts of violence

against the marches.

Protests continued in April. President Mesa asked protesters “to be reasonable” and stressed that, while he was trying, many obstacles blocked his path. On April 19 the use of roadblocks was resumed.

On April 21, President Mesa signed an agreement that would export gas to Argentina, despite his promise to hold a referendum to decide the issue. The next day, 20,000 demonstrators converged on downtown La Paz, demanding the resignation of Carlos Mesa. The protest brought La Paz to a virtual standstill. Transport workers and street vendors across the country also held a strike with the same goal.

The April protests did not attain the scale of the October protests, partially due to a divided leadership. Evo Morales and his followers did not participate in the protests, and he said that striking would be “suicide”. President Mesa’s approval ratings remained at seventy percent.

On May 8, the Single Trade Union Confederation of Bolivian Peasant Workers began a new round of roadblocks, which slowly spread around Bolivia. The day before, Felipe Quispe warned foreigners to leave the country, as roadblocks could strand them in the country.

The two major campaign leaders were split on the need for a referendum on the export of natural gas. Felipe Quispe argued that the October campaign had made plain the people’s will and there was no need for a referendum. Evo Morales, on the hand, regarded the referendum as important to legitimize the withholding of natural gas from export and also important for eventual nationalization of the natural gas.

On May 24, thousands of protesters once again descended on La Paz, this time to demonstrate both in favor of the nationalization of the nation’s gas industry and against the proposed referendum on the issue. People from all around Bolivia and from all different professions joined in the protests. Quispe then mobilized roadblocks to impede the referendum, which was to take place July 18.

All five questions on the referendum received majority “Yes” votes, meaning that while the government took a greater role in the sale of natural gas, natural gas would still be exported.

The referendum calmed the nation down for about six months. Protests largely ceased, but some roadblocks continued. On October 22, somewhat unexpectedly, the Bolivian Parliament passed a bill that gave the state partial ownership over its oil and natural gas resources.

The direct action campaign resumed on January 10, 2005, when COB called a general strike demanding Mesa’s resignation and the full nationalization of the gas industry. The Mineworkers’ Federation of Bolivia constructed several roadblocks. For the next four days, activists in El Alto demonstrated in support of the goals of the COB strike, partially cutting off access to La Paz. The protests also effectively shut down El Alto itself.

During this period, right-wing protesters in Santa Cruz, Bolivia’s wealthiest city, protested against high fuel prices and demanded autonomy, increasing pressure on the Mesa administration.

On March 5, Evo Morales and MAS began a mini-campaign of roadblocks in protest of the government’s eighteen percent government royalty rate on the sale of hydrocarbons (natural gas). Activists blocked roads to Potosí, Cochabamba, Oruro, and Santa Cruz, and continued to expand the scope over the next few weeks. At this point in the campaign, many of the campaign’s leaders and participants were also involved in a campaign aimed at ending the privatization of water utilities around the country, and the two campaigns overlapped considerably.

On March 7, President Carlos Mesa offered his resignation to the Bolivian Parliament, citing popular protests making governing the nation impossible as the reason for his resignation. One newspaper estimated that, on average, forty protests took place a day in opposition to Mesa’s government. While he remained popular in opinion polls (his popularity declined steadily afterwards),

he said that he felt constrained by the radically different ideologies of those around him in government. Despite his offer to resign, the Bolivian Parliament unanimously voted it down, and Mesa remained in office. Nine days later, he proposed elections in August.

National trade unions called a national strike on March 15 and 16 in protest of the government's royalty rate on the sale of hydrocarbons. Tin miners struck for four days, beginning on the 15th.

In order to defuse the situation, President Mesa and Evo Morales held a series of negotiations over the sale of hydrocarbons, and received external mediation. The two failed to come to an agreement, however, although Morales did call off some protests.

On May 18, a bill created by the lower house of Bolivia's Congress that raised taxes on hydrocarbon exports (but not to the level Morales and his followers demanded) reached the desk of President Mesa, but he refused to sign or veto it, and it passed to another government official, who did sign it.

In response to the new law, protesters held a march in La Paz, as well as a town hall meeting on May 23. Roadblocks continued around the country. The next day, miners and Indians marched from El Alto to La Paz to demand the nationalization of hydrocarbons. Once in La Paz, speakers denounced the governments' measures and the policies of the Bush administration in the United States. Many waved the Wiphala (as they had throughout the entire campaign), the multi-colored flag representative the Aymara people. Protest leaders promised that the protests would continue all week. On the 25th, thousands gathered in San Francisco Square in La Paz demanding the full nationalization of the country's oil and gas industries. Residents of El Alto declared an indefinite general strike designed to force the government into nationalizing the nation's gas and oil industries.

On May 31, protesters descended on La Paz in the thousands, preventing Congress from holding its session. For the first time during the Mesa administration, both protesters and police used significant violence. Some protesters lobbed dynamite at police, who responded with tear gas and water cannons, but no one died. Protesters also attacked some shops and cars in the wealthy areas of the city, causing property damage. The next day, even more protesters joined the demonstrations. Health care workers also began an indefinite strike in support of nationalization. Similarly, transport workers went on strike. Soon after, El Alto as a whole embarked on a generalized strike.

By June 3, protesters had shut down sixty percent of the nation's main roadways, including the road from the El Alto airport to La Paz and the roads surrounding a gas plant in La Paz. Fuel shortages were prevalent in the capital, and the protesters had virtually shut down the city. Protesters also blocked the road to Arica, Chile, a major port, and the main route of tin exportation.

Peasants in the lowlands of Santa Cruz, in eastern Bolivia, occupied seven oil fields beginning on June 3 in order to force the Bolivian government to nationalize the oil industry. Most of the actions previously had taken place in western Bolivia, while Santa Cruz (largely white and wealthy) had resisted nationalization.

In response to protests coming from both the left and the right, Carlos Mesa called for the formation of a citizen assembly to write a new constitution and a national referendum on regional autonomy on June 3, but neither side was satisfied. Without seemingly anywhere left to turn and protests continuing, Mesa again offered his resignation to Congress on the 7th; this time it was accepted. After his resignation, he pleaded for calm and for the acceptance of his successor. 80,000 protesters in La Paz continued to demonstrate, demanding the full nationalization of the nation's hydrocarbon and oil reserves. The protests varied between peaceful marches and violent clashes between police and demonstrators.

After a few nervous day of indecision, the Bolivian Congress finally announced Eduardo Rodriguez as their nomination for President on June 9. Rodriguez was the respected head of the Bolivian Supreme Court without political affiliations, and his appointment pleased protesters. Most Bolivians saw his role as solely a placeholder until elections could be convened. The same day, police fatally shot a protesting a miner, the first death of a demonstrator since Sánchez de Lozada left office.

With Rodriguez's appointment, roadblocks and demonstrations downsized dramatically. On June 10, protesters staged a single march in recognition of activists' contributions to the campaign. Supply shortages continued to persist in La Paz.

On June 13, Rodriguez met with protest leaders in El Alto, and the two groups agreed on a truce, ending the campaign.

Elections in December 2005 led to the decisive election of MAS leader Evo Morales. On May 1, 2006, he signed a law fully nationalizing the nation's hydrocarbon industry.

Research Notes

Influences:

The 2000 Cochabamba water protests (see "Bolivians demonstrate against water privatization in Cochabamba 'Water War', 2000") influenced the protesters' methods in this campaign (1).

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