

U.S. Democracy Promotion in Bolivia

By Arnold August, April 2012

A fully documented and detailed article, entitled “Unpacking US Democracy Promotion in Bolivia: From Soft Tactics to Regime Change” and published in 2012 by Neil Burron, exposes the role of the U.S. through its front organizations, such as USAID. First, the U.S. attempted to *avoid* destabilization before the 2005 victory in order to maintain the government in power. However, after 2005, the U.S. *promoted* destabilization and the overthrow of the Morales government. From 2001 to 2009, USAID *democracy assistance* had a budget of \$101,078,000 and the total USAID program was at \$881,432,000. There are many others listed in the Burron piece, including the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which had allotted the sum of \$1,292,217 for the year 2009 alone. It is imperative to take note of how USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) was active in Bolivia’s internal affairs. In certain regions where the gas wars (control over natural resources) brought down governments before 2005, USAID’s OTI program aimed at “reducing conflict.” However, after the 2005 elections, USAID’s OTI “retargeted” its program toward “supporting NGOs, the private sector and non-executive branch entities of the government to combat the ‘erosion of democracy.’”¹ When it was a question of supporting a neo-liberal, pro-U.S. government, the U.S. interfered to smother conflict that could result in a revolt by the people. Once Morales and the MAS were in power, the U.S. fostered destabilization in an effort to change the regime.

The Burron investigation, which also comprised field research in Bolivia, indicates clearly that the U.S. works with any group or individual, from Indigenous to “moderate alternatives” to fascist-like elements who oppose Morales.²

The Morales government has complained on several occasions since the 2005 triumph that the U.S. was interfering in Bolivian affairs by assisting separatist elements in Bolivia, especially the white elite based in the Santa Cruz department. In April 2009, the Bolivian government discovered a plot by five individuals, three of whom were killed in a shootout in a Santa Cruz hotel after police were targeted by firearms. Both the Santa Cruz right-wing militants and the U.S. administration deny involvement. However, by consulting two sources from the U.S., *Time Magazine* and *The Wall Street Journal*, observers can reach their own conclusions. For example, *The Wall Street Journal* includes a photo of one of the alleged assassination plotters, a Bolivian of Hungarian origin, posing with guns and ammunition; another photo exhibits an

individual from Ireland posing with weapons as well. One of the wounded had been trained in Croatia. The Croat enclave in Santa Cruz, in addition to having accumulated experience in divisive and racist policies from the former Yugoslavia, is very strongly opposed to the new Morales political system.^{3; 4} Although this tradition of U.S. interference cannot be blamed for all of the problems facing the Morales government, it cannot be discounted either. Morales is one of the most outspoken and severe critics of U.S. policy, not only in Latin America, but in other regions of the world, and leads the people in safeguarding their natural resources from foreign control.

Aside from U.S. meddling as such, there are nevertheless real strains, not originally related to U.S. prying. These tensions exist between, on the one hand, some Indigenous groups who helped catapult Bolivia out of five centuries of foreign and domestic colonization and, on the other, the new government. For example, in 2010, when the government decided to eliminate subsidies for gas, which would have increased the cost of many daily needs, including food, this provoked mass demonstrations by the people against this measure. The government backed down.

A most important issue arose in 2011. Indigenous peoples marched to La Paz, the capital city, to oppose the proposed government construction of an inter-departmental highway cutting through the Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro-Sécure (TIPNIS — Isiboro-Sécure National Park and Indigenous Territory). The TIPNIS Indigenous peoples fear that the highway would cause environmental damage and harm their traditional hunting and gathering, as well as the biodiversity in their eastern region of Bolivia. There is also a concern that the road may be used for oil exploration in the western Bolivian highlands, which also interests the government in order to diversify and improve its economy.⁵

The local TIPNIS Subcentral is the legal bearer of the TIPNIS collective land title that is the territory of three Indigenous peoples. Indigenous leaders raised the lack of consultation and their concerns over the impact the road could have on local communities. The march quickly gained support from two important indigenous organizations, the most important of which is the Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas del Oriente Boliviano (CIDOB — Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia), comprising 34 lowland Indigenous peoples. A countermarch had been initiated by other Indigenous peoples' mass organizations, including some within TIPNIS and in a zone within TIPNIS, but not part of the legal bearer of the TIPNIS collective land title. The countermarch's population is far greater than that of local Indigenous peoples within the rest of TIPNIS. This area is mainly

home to outside indigenous *campesinos* (peasants) who, in search of land to till, have settled in the area. The countermarch was supported by the three main national indigenous *campesino* groups and nearby coca-growing unions. They claim that the highway is necessary to provide “their communities with access to basic services and markets at which to sell their produce.... [The highway issue] has polarised Bolivian society and divided indigenous groups that are the heart of the Evo Morales government’s social base.”⁶

In February 2012, the debate and conflict arose again. Morales led the parliament to pass a law to consult Indigenous peoples within TIPNIS about the roadway. Following rights enshrined in the constitution, the Morales government also called on Bolivia’s main mass organizations to help draft a new law to set the legal scaffold for future consultations. The aim is to establish a framework to deepen participation by the people and overcome the increasing number of local conflicts over development projects. These plans may assist to surmount unresolved tensions and ruptured alliances, and “expand forms of participatory democracy.... [Alternatively,] they may deepen rifts among Morales supporters. A key factor will be how well the government isolates increasingly intransigent forces on both sides of the debate.” Morales said that, on enacting the law, his government was following its motto of “governing by obeying.” However, critics of the new law, such as CIDOB, claim that the purpose of the consultation is to overturn the government’s decision and thus allow the road to be built. CIDOB has pledged to organize another march to La Paz to oppose the recent moves. They have refused to participate in drafting a general law on consultations.⁷

The Morales government, for its part, has insisted that its change of heart on the gas price increase in 2010 and the 2011 highway conflict are both reflections of what they call “governing by obeying.”

Referring to Morales’ Vice-President Linares, Fuentes reveals the importance of participatory democracy in the debate. On February 4, 2012, Linares said that the government had made two mistakes. The first consisted of not consulting the communities about the highway. The second was not getting the input from the grass roots on the law that banned any highway through TIPNIS. “We have to correct both errors, and what is the best way to correct both errors? Let the [people] that live there decide ... that is the most democratic, the most just manner.”⁸

Fuentes also documents the latest moves by CIDOB in collaborating with the right-wing elite, such as in Santa Cruz, the hotbed of anti-Morales, violent and provocative activity. In his

piece on U.S. “democracy promotion” in Bolivia, Burrton indicates that an NGO founded by CIDOB was part of U.S. efforts for a “new strategic focus [based] on building a moderate indigenous movement as a counterweight in the East.” He also documents that the CIDOB NGO was selected to play this role, given its close ties to the Santa Cruz departmental government. For example, the NGO had already received huge USAID grants before the Morales government came to power. The leader of the CIDOB NGO had boasted about having met a known CIA agent, Roger Noriega. The NGO leader “openly opposed the MAS and called for getting rid of party leaders from indigenous associations.”⁹

This situation lends credibility to Morales’ claim that the U.S. is sparking the TIPNIS highway protest through their Indigenous and other benefactors. Morales, providing evidence of phone calls between Indigenous leaders and the U.S. Embassy, said, “It’s a strategy of imperialism and the United States through its agencies to prevent national integration and provoke a confrontation between the people of western Bolivia and those from the east.”¹⁰

¹ Burrton, Neil. 2012. “Unpacking U.S. Democracy Promotion in Bolivia: From Soft Tactics to Regime Change.” *Latin American Perspectives* (January), Issue 182, 39:1, p. 119, 122–23.

² *Ibid.*, p. 122–27.

³ Regalado, Antonio, Aaron O. Patrick and Margit Feher. 2009. “Accused Assassins Lead Bolivia to Target Enemies.” *The Wall Street Journal* (May 26). At <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124303885741749039.html>>.

⁴ Friedman-Rudovsky, Jean (La Paz) and Tim Padgett. 2009. “A Plot to Kill Bolivia’s Leftist President?” *Time World* (April 16). At <<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1891852,00.html>>.

⁵ Shahriari, Sara. 2011. “Bolivia’s President Accuses U.S. of Sparking Protest.” *The Christian Science Monitor* (August 22). At <<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/Latin-America-Monitor/2011/0822/Bolivia-s-president-accuses-US-of-sparking-protest>>.

⁶ Fuentes, Federico. 2012. “Bolivia: Challenges Along Path of ‘Governing by Obeying the People.’” *Bolivia Rising* (February 19). At <<http://www.boliviaring.blogspot.com/2012/02/bolivia-challenges-along-path-of.html>>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Burrton, op. cit., p. 122–23.

¹⁰ Shahriari, op. cit.