Bolivia: On Change, "Indigenous Peoples," and Racialized Structural Reactionary Violence Against the Indigenous Population (2006 - 2026)

Bolivia: de cambio, "indios" y violencia reaccionaria estructural racializada contra la población indígena (2006 - 2026)

Bolívia: Mudança, "Índios" e Violência Reacionária Estrutural Racializada contra a População Indígena (2006 - 2026)

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Abstract

This article focuses on the Bolivian socio-political period between 2006 and 2026. In this context, it examines the racialized structural violence perpetrated against the "original indigenous peasant" population, as an expression of the coloniality of power that does not cease to mark them as "Indians", with all the burden of inferiority that this word carries. Implemented by the Movement Towards Socialism, Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples (MAS-IPSP) in the government, headed by Morales, the process of change was carried out by the Constituent Assembly, to draft a new Political Constitution of the State (CPE), a process in which the hegemonic actor was the original indigenous peasant movement. In opposition, the civic-business-landowner coalition violated the constituent process. However, Bolivia had a new CPE (2009) that recognized it as a "Unitary Social State of Plurinational Community Law" and included, throughout its structure, the rights of the "original indigenous peasant nations and peoples". In the new scenario, the process of change had its turning point in Morales' re-election efforts. This led to a coup d'état (2019) against him and paved the way for the massacres of Senkata (El Alto) and Huayllani (Cochabamba) perpetrated by the forces of order against the followers of the deposed president. The MAS-IPSP returned to power democratically (2020), making Luis Arce president. The quarrels between him and Morales, together with the economic crisis unleashed, led to his debacle. Thus, a new government today aims to restore the neoliberal project in Bolivia.

Keywords: Bolivia, decoloniality, Evo Morales, Latin American politics, indigenous peasant peoples, critical sociology, decolonial theory, violence.

Resumen

El presente artículo se concentra en el período sociopolítico boliviano comprendido entre 2006 y 2026, examinando la violencia estructural racializada perpetrada contra la población “indígena originaria campesina”, como expresión de la *colonialidad* del poder que no deja de señalarlos como “indios”, con toda la carga de inferioridad que dicha palabra lleva. El Movimiento al Socialismo Instrumento Político para la Soberanía de los Pueblos (MAS-IPSP) en el gobierno, Evo Morales a la cabeza, llevó adelante la Asamblea Constituyente, para redactar una nueva Constitución Política del Estado (CPE), proceso en el cual el actor hegemónico fue el movimiento indígena originario campesino. En oposición, la coalición cívica-empresarial-terrateniente violentó el proceso constituyente. Con todo, Bolivia tuvo una nueva CPE (2009) que la reconoció como “Estado Unitario Social de Derecho Plurinacional Comunitario” e incluyó, en toda su estructura, los derechos de las “naciones y pueblos indígenas originarios campesinos”. En el nuevo escenario, el proceso de cambio tuvo su punto de inflexión en los afanes reeleccionistas de Morales. Esto derivo en un golpe de Estado (2019) en su contra, y habilitó el terreno para las masacres de Senkata (El Alto) y Huayllani (Cochabamba), perpetradas por las fuerzas del orden contra los seguidores del presidente depuesto. El MAS-IPSP volvió al poder democráticamente (2020), haciendo presidente a Luis Arce. Las reyertas entre este y Morales, junto a la crisis económica desatada, los condujeron a su debacle. Así, un nuevo gobierno hoy apunta a restaurar el proyecto neoliberal en Bolivia.

Palabras clave: Bolivia, decolonialidad, Evo Morales, política latinoamericana, pueblos indígenas originarios campesinos, sociología crítica, teoría decolonial, violencia.

Resumo

Este artigo foca no período sociopolítico boliviano entre 2006 e 2026. Nesse contexto, examina a violência estrutural racializada perpetrada contra a população "camponesa indígena original", como uma expressão da colonialidade do poder que não deixa de marcá-los como "índios", com todo o peso da inferioridade que essa palavra carrega. Implementado pelo Movimento ao Socialismo, Instrumento Político para a Soberania dos Povos (MAS-IPSP) no governo, liderado por Morales, o processo de mudança foi conduzido pela Assembleia Constituinte para redigir uma nova Constituição Política do Estado (CPE), processo no qual o ator hegemônico foi o movimento camponês indígena original. Na oposição, a coalizão cívico-negócios-proprietários de terras violou o processo dos constituintes. No entanto, a Bolívia tinha um novo CPE (2009) que o reconhecia como um "Estado Social Unitário de Direito Comunitário Plurinacional" e incluía, em toda sua estrutura, os direitos das "nações e povos camponeses indígenas originais". No novo cenário, o processo de mudança teve seu ponto de virada nos esforços de reeleição de Morales. Isso levou a um golpe de Estado (2019) contra ele e abriu caminho para os massacres de Senkata (El Alto) e Huayllani (Cochabamba) perpetrados pelas forças da ordem contra os seguidores do presidente deposto. O MAS-IPSP retornou ao poder democraticamente (2020), tornando Luis Arce presidente. As disputas entre ele e Morales, juntamente com a crise econômica desencadeada, levaram ao seu fiasco. Assim, um novo governo hoje visa restaurar o projeto neoliberal na Bolívia.

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Palavras-chave: Bolívia, decolonialidade, Evo Morales, política latino-americana, povos indígenas camponeses, sociologia crítica, teoria decolonial, violência.

Introduction

Bolivia is a country marked by the persistence of profound sociocultural diversity, shaped by a colonial history whose structures continued after the establishment of the independent Republic in 1825. The new ruling Creole-mestizo elite excluded Indigenous native peasant peoples -that is, the demographic majority- who were portrayed as an inferior, undesirable, and threatening "other"; consequently, they became an "imaginary common enemy" (Tejerina, 2014, p. 163), blamed for all the nation's problems, relegated solely to subordinate labor, and condemned to inhabit the margins of official territoriality. Within dominant thought, it was therefore considered impossible to recognize this "other" as a social force capable of self-determination, much less as one entitled to govern Bolivia.

Aníbal Quijano (2020) referred to the "coloniality of power," which continues to persist in contemporary societies such as Bolivia. This concept describes a racialized socioeconomic classification -simultaneously "patriarchal," as Rita Segato (2010) argues- that constitutes the basis of the hegemonic colonial-capitalist order and reproduces a societal pyramid of "ethnic classes" (Orellana, 2024). Indigenous native peasant peoples -the indiada, in its derogatory sense- were relegated to the lowest level of this hierarchy, particularly when they were also women or gender-sex dissidents. By contrast, the uppermost position remained reserved for white, property-owning, Judeo-Christian, heterosexual men and heads of household, who came to embody the paradigm of the "respectable people" (*gente decente*) (Orellana, 2016), characterized by intolerance and contempt toward those positioned below them.

Coloniality is expressed through the relationship established by those at the top -and by those who identify with them- toward the "Indians," a relationship mediated by structural violence manifested in discourses, images, and concrete practices. In everyday life, this violence often takes subtle or low-intensity forms; however, it becomes explicit, extreme, and reactionary -perhaps even neo-fascist in the twenty-first century- during moments when subordinate groups dare to challenge and subvert their assigned position. This article aims to examine such racialized structural violence in Bolivia during the period from 2006 to 2026, situated within the context of the so-called "process of change" (proceso de cambio) and its subsequent collapse.

This work does not escape the disputes over meaning and critical memory surrounding the period under examination. Within academia -as in the streets and cyberspace- a wide range of interpretations emerged concerning Bolivia's experience during the "process of change," marked by the rule of the Movement Toward Socialism–Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples (MAS-IPSP), led by Evo Morales as president. For the sake of synthesis, these positions may be grouped into four broad perspectives:

a) To Refound: interprets Morales's governmental cycle as a transformative project aimed at overcoming the neoliberal colonial state through the inclusion of the "Indigenous native peasant" subject, economic redistribution, and institutional reform embodied in the multinational state.

b) The progressive critical perspective, which argues that the MAS-IPSP government instrumentalized or co-opted the historic demands of Indigenous native peasant and urban-popular sectors; alternatively, it critiques the counterproductive and reified idealization of these groups, detached from their changing realities and aspirations.

c) The liberal institutionalist perspective, which interprets the process of change as a period marked by concentration of power, weakening of republican institutions, authoritarian populism, and even "reverse racism."

d) The complex critical perspective, which analyzes Morales's government as a multidimensional process marked by both advances and limitations, conditioned by the historical possibilities and constraints of the period. This article aligns primarily with the latter perspective.

Methodology

From a methodological standpoint, this article is based on a descriptive and historical approach to the topic, drawing upon a review of press archives and documentary sources, as well as direct observation conducted by the author through her work providing technical support to Indigenous native peoples in relation to the exercise of their educational and territorial rights across different spaces and historical moments.

Interpretations of reality always emerge from -and/or imply- a particular standpoint, whether explicit or implicit. In our case, this standpoint is situated alongside those "from below," as understood through the lens of coloniality. It is a position that is simultaneously theoretical, political, and affective, acknowledging that human knowledge intertwines reason and emotion, closely aligned with Eduardo Galeano's notion of the *sentipensante* ("feeling-thinking") subject (1989, p. 89).

Results

1.- The Course of Change and Reaction

During the 1990s, Indigenous native peasant peoples (IOC) began to profoundly challenge the colonial continuity of the Nation-State, which at the time had adopted a neoliberal form implemented in Bolivia beginning in 1985 (Postero, 2006). The neoliberal project entered into crisis at the beginning of the new century and ultimately collapsed as a result of a popular uprising that took place between September and October 2003. The uprising was triggered by the actions of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, then president of Bolivia, who eventually resigned and fled to the United States. This event, known as the "Gas War" or "Black

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October," had its epicenter in the Aymara city of El Alto -adjacent to La Paz, the seat of government- where the mobilized population was subjected to brutal military repression that left more than 60 people dead and at least 400 injured (Opinión, 2023).

The Gas War, as the culminating moment of a broader cycle of anti-neoliberal social mobilization that had begun earlier, enabled Bolivia's popular sectors to consolidate, from below and through street-level struggle, a transformative political program for the country. This program was embodied in the "October Agenda," which envisioned a society grounded in social justice, equality, decolonization, and sovereignty over national territory and natural resources.

Within this context, Bolivia experienced an unprecedented event in December 2005. Evo Morales, an Indigenous peasant leader and social activist[1], was democratically elected president of Bolivia and remained in office until November 2019. The political party that brought him to power was the MAS-IPSP, a type of "movement party" (Kitschelt, 2006) founded in 1995 as the "political arm" of Indigenous native peasant organizations, grounded in the political horizon of "land-territory." This characteristic enabled the party to establish an effective territorial presence throughout the country and to become the dominant force within Bolivia's political system between 2009 and 2019 (Mayorga, 2022).

In the discourse of supporters of former president Morales, his rise to governmental power marked the beginning of the "process of change," initially guided by the October Agenda. As expected, this generated fierce opposition from the traditional elite, which, with the MAS-IPSP in power, had lost direct control of the state apparatus. In response, this elite promoted its own political agenda through demands for "departmental autonomies," grounded in criticism of the centralized state and aimed at securing control over natural resources, land, and territory. Around this autonomist program, the so-called "Media Luna" emerged: a political, civic-business-landowning coalition hegemonic in Bolivia's eastern departments, particularly in Santa Cruz. The Media Luna succeeded in polarizing the country through a racialized regionalist discourse structured around the cleavage of east/camba versus west/colla. The former pole was associated with whiteness, beauty, modernity, and progress, while the latter was linked to indigeneity, the Andes, ugliness, "Upper Peru," and backwardness.

In the city of Cochabamba, then-prefect Manfred Reyes Villa openly supported the autonomist cause and, within this context, triggered an unusual confrontation on January 7, 2007, between the city's privileged sectors and Indigenous native peasant organizations. On that day, crowds from the northern and central districts of Cochabamba -primarily young people armed with baseball bats, metal rods, chains, and other objects- attempted to expel Indigenous peasant delegations from the city center. These delegations, accompanied by residents from the densely populated southern zone of the city, had traveled from rural areas to demand the resignation of the prefect, whose overt alliance with the Media Luna had outraged

[1]He had previously gained notoriety as a leader of the "coca growers'" organizations, based in the tropics of Cochabamba, that is, of peasants who produced the coca leaf, at that time, faced with the policies of eradication of that crop, with North American advice.

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them. The clashes resulted in the death of one young urban resident and two rural community members, one of whom was killed by gunfire (Rodríguez, 2018; Vaca, 2007).

As part of the process of change, the government succeeded in convening the Constituent Assembly in the city of Sucre -the historical capital of Bolivia- from August 2006 to December 2007. From the very beginning of the assembly, signs of political intolerance and "ethnic, racial, and gender discrimination" became evident. For example, a downtown hotel refused accommodation to several Indigenous native peasant women, some of whom had been elected as constitutional delegates. Likewise, a group of individuals assaulted two female MAS constituent delegates in Plaza 25 de Mayo while shouting insults such as "cholas" and "Indians" at them. Such incidents became increasingly common. Silvia Lazarte herself -the president of the Constituent Assembly and a peasant leader from the coca-growing region of the Cochabamba tropics- was repeatedly insulted in the streets as a "fucking chola" (Defensor del Pueblo, 2008, pp. 105–106). The situation became so hostile that MAS-IPSP delegates found it nearly impossible to rent housing in the city, particularly in its colonial historic center.

Within this adverse sociopolitical climate, the Constituent Assembly drafted the proposal for a new Political Constitution of the State (CPE), based largely on the proposal advanced by the "Pact of Unity" formed by the country's Indigenous native peasant organizations through a broad deliberative process. Because of this participatory dynamic and other forms of interaction with the population, the Constituent Assembly was described as the "most democratic experience ever lived in the Americas" (Clavero, 2022, p. 4). Nevertheless, the process of concluding the Assembly and subsequently approving the new Constitution through a national referendum became dramatically conflictive. In addition to tensions generated by the Media Luna, a mobilization emerged in Sucre demanding "full capital status" for the city, that is, the return of all branches of government to Sucre, since the Executive and Legislative branches had been transferred to La Paz at the end of the nineteenth century during the Federal War.

The mobilization in Sucre was led by the Interinstitutional Committee of Chuquisaca and relied heavily on the participation of university and teacher-training students, many of whom came from Indigenous backgrounds. The movement began in March 2007 with a demand directed at the Constituent Assembly: to restore Sucre's status as Bolivia's "full" capital. When this demand was not met, explicit violence against "Indians" erupted among sectors of the city's population. MAS-IPSP assembly members -both women and men- as well as anyone associated with the party became daily targets of aggression. The hostility eventually obstructed the work of the Constituent Assembly directly.

One of the most critical moments occurred on May 24, 2008, when delegations of rural community members gathered in Sucre to participate in an official event with the MAS-IPSP government commemorating the anniversary of the department of Chuquisaca. That morning, enraged "capitalinos" took to the streets to prevent Morales from arriving and to stop MAS supporters from assembling. After neutralizing police and military personnel through negotiation, they violently pursued rural community members both physically and

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verbally, shouting insults such as: "'Indian, you have no right to be in Sucre,' 'stinking Indian,' 'escaped from the corral'"; "why did you come here, damned Indian woman? We're going to kill you now" (Defensor del Pueblo, 2009, p. 32). Those attacked attempted to defend themselves and flee the city. However, as documented in César Brie's film Humillados y Ofendidos (Humiliated and Offended) (ArtesAndesAmericas, 2017), several men were captured by city residents and dragged to the main square amid beatings and humiliation. They were forced to kiss the Sucre flag and publicly denounce the MAS-IPSP and its leader. Arriving shirtless at the square, they were made to kneel, kiss the ground, and witness the burning of the Wiphala -the emblematic flag of Indigenous native peasant peoples in Bolivia, especially those from the highlands- while the surrounding crowd sang the anthem of Sucre. Three years later, this event led to the establishment of the National Day Against Racism and All Forms of Discrimination, commemorated every May 24.

The year 2008 became a period of intense violence during the constituent process, driven by elites opposed to the process of change who sought to prevent the approval of the new Constitution by the broader citizenry, while simultaneously gaining time to consolidate their autonomist agenda in the Media Luna through unilateral referendums approving their own autonomy statutes. In an attempt to resolve the conflict, the government called for a "recall referendum" on August 10 for the president, vice president, and the prefects of Bolivia's nine departments. The results confirmed public support for the continuation of the president and vice president, who received 67.41% approval. Regarding the prefects, two were removed from office (La Paz and Cochabamba), while seven were ratified (Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando, Tarija, Chuquisaca, Oruro, and Potosí), including the prefects associated with the Media Luna.

These prefects continued acting against both the constituent process and the government. Within this context, they called for an indefinite "civic strike" accompanied by road blockades, demanding that the central government transfer to the departments the funds collected through the Direct Hydrocarbons Tax (IDH). During the strike, shock groups intimidated anyone demonstrating against the measure, occupied several offices belonging to the central government, and attacked the headquarters of Indigenous organizations, media outlets, and non-governmental organizations. In the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, the Unión Juvenil Cruceñista (UJC) operated openly, even patrolling the streets "with sticks and baseball bats to force compliance with the strike" (Opinión, 2008). On other occasions, they assaulted and beat MAS-IPSP supporters while insulting them for their "colla" identity. This violent behavior by the UJC can be understood in light of its origins: since its founding in 1957, it had functioned as a shock group for the Pro Santa Cruz Civic Committee (CCPC), grounded in an identity centered on "Cruceño-ness" (cruceñidad) and opposition to the "centralist" state based in "colla" territory (La Paz). Within the polarized context surrounding the constituent process, this "other" became condensed in the figure of the "MAS Indians" (indios masistas) (Tórrez, 2009, p. 95), that is, in the governing movement-party and its leader occupying the presidential office.

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The pressure tactics employed by the Media Luna against Morales's government and its social bases escalated to unprecedented levels. One of the clearest examples was the "El Porvenir Massacre," which took place in the department of Pando on September 11, 2008. On that day, a group of rural community members -men and women, many accompanied by their children- were traveling to a meeting of the Single Trade Union Federation of Peasant Workers of Pando to discuss the consequences of the occupation of the departmental office of the National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA) by groups aligned with the departmental prefect, Leopoldo Fernández, a member of the Media Luna coalition. Along the way, they were ambushed and violently attacked by prefectural officials, resulting in the deaths of more than ten community members -along with two officials- dozens of injured people, and an undetermined number of disappeared persons. Survivors later testified to the terror they experienced while hiding from the attackers: "I heard them saying, this is how these fucking peasants should die, this is how they're going to die. Since they fight so much for land, well, now they'll become land themselves" (AribibiTv, 2011). According to investigations conducted by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Bolivia, most of those killed were community leaders who "appear to have been individually pursued and executed" (Urgente24, 2009).

The day after the massacre, Amnesty International (2008) stated that the violence had emerged during different stages of the constitutional reform process initiated in 2006, noting that regional sensitivities surrounding the issue of autonomy had intensified polarization. The organization further emphasized that discrimination and racism against Bolivia's Indigenous population constituted a common thread underlying these tensions. In the days that followed, the Media Luna effectively suspended its protest measures, largely due to mediation efforts by Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), while growing evidence indicated that the Porvenir Massacre constituted a "crime against humanity" committed by officials and supporters of the prefect of Pando (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2008; ONU, 2009; UNASUR, 2008).

2. The New Constitution

On January 25, 2009, the Constituent Referendum was finally held, through which the Bolivian population approved the new Political Constitution of the State (CPE) with 61% of the vote. Prior to the plebiscite, however, the original constitutional text drafted by the Constituent Assembly underwent modifications to at least one hundred articles as a result of negotiations between the government and the Media Luna. Officially, these changes were justified as necessary to overcome the political crisis affecting the country. Even so, Bolivia's new Constitution came to be regarded as one of the most advanced of its kind, a "decolonizing constitution" (Clavero, 2022) and "a historical milestone in the evolution of Bolivian constitutionalism" (Sánchez, 2025).

According to its content, the new Constitution defines Bolivia as a "Unitary Social State of Plurinational Communitarian Law, free, independent, sovereign, democratic, intercultural, decentralized, and with autonomies," founded upon "political, economic, juridical, cultural, and linguistic plurality and pluralism

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within the integrative process of the country" (Art. 1). In keeping with this spirit, the Constitution incorporates Indigenous Native Peasant Nations and Peoples (NPIOC) throughout its structure, beginning with the recognition of their "precolonial existence" and their "ancestral dominion over their territories." On this basis, it "guarantees their right to self-determination within the framework of state unity," including rights to autonomy, self-government, and the preservation of their cultures, institutions, and territorialities (Art. 2). This recognition is reflected in the autonomous system established by the Constitution, which creates three territorially based forms of autonomy of equal hierarchy: departmental, municipal, and Indigenous native peasant autonomies.

Recognizing that Bolivia "is composed of all Bolivian men and women, Indigenous native peasant nations and peoples, intercultural communities, and Afro-Bolivian communities, who together constitute the Bolivian people" (Art. 3), the new Constitution adopts for its system of government a "participatory, representative, and communitarian democratic form, with equal conditions between men and women" (Art. 11.I). This model would later be conceptualized in electoral legislation as "intercultural and parity democracy."

In economic matters, the Constitution adopts a "plural" economic model aimed at improving the quality of life and vivir bien ("living well") of Bolivians (Art. 306), under the direction and regulation of the State (Art. 316). Regarding agrarian issues, the Constitution establishes that the State "recognizes, protects, and guarantees individual as well as communal or collective ownership of land, insofar as it fulfills a social or socio-economic function, as appropriate" (Art. 393). "Communal or collective property" includes Indigenous native peasant territories, intercultural communities, and peasant communities, all of which are "indivisible, imprescriptible, unseizable, inalienable, and irreversible, and exempt from taxes on agrarian property." At the same time, the Constitution allows communities to receive collective land titles while "recognizing the complementarity between collective and individual rights, respecting territorial unity with identity" (Art. 394).

Concerning natural resources, the Constitution establishes that they "are the direct, indivisible, and imprescriptible property of the Bolivian people, and their administration shall correspond to the State in accordance with the collective interest" (Art. 349). Resource exploration within a given territory "shall be subject to a process of consultation with the affected population, convened by the State, which shall be free, prior, and informed. In Indigenous native peasant nations and peoples, consultation shall take place in accordance with their own norms and procedures" (Art. 352). The Bolivian people "shall have equitable access to the benefits derived from the exploitation of all natural resources. Priority participation shall be assigned to the territories where these resources are located and to Indigenous native peasant nations and peoples" (Art. 353). Likewise, "it is the duty of both the State and the population to conserve, protect, and sustainably utilize natural resources and biodiversity, as well as to maintain environmental balance" (Art. 342), a principle that later contributed to the recognition of "Mother Earth" (Madre Tierra) as a subject of environmental rights.

The Constitution also established the right to "access to education and the continued participation of all

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citizens under conditions of full equality" (Art. 82), defining education as the supreme function and primary responsibility of the State (Art. 77). It guarantees free education through the higher education level (Art. 81), grounded in an "intracultural, intercultural, and plurilingual" approach (Art. 78), and guided by values such as "gender equity, the non-differentiation of roles, nonviolence, and the full realization of human rights" (Art. 79). It further guarantees freedom of conscience and religion (Art. 86), in accordance with the secular nature of the State—that is, a State that respects and guarantees religious freedom and spiritual beliefs while remaining "independent of religion" (Art. 4). This framework is also connected to the constitutional commitment to eradicate all forms of discrimination, whether based on sex, color, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, origin, culture, or any other condition intended to undermine individual rights (Art. 14.II), as later codified in Law No. 045 Against Racism and All Forms of Discrimination.

Much of this process was facilitated by the broad and uncontested hegemony achieved by Morales, who led a government sustained by the movement-party MAS-IPSP, of which he became the central articulating figure. Following the promulgation of the new Constitution, this hegemony was reflected, for example, in Morales's two valid electoral victories (2009 and 2014), in which he secured the support of more than two-thirds of the national electorate. Under these conditions, Morales was able to maintain political stability in the country, alongside economic stability and significant improvements in living conditions. According to official data, for example:

- The Human Development Index (HDI) increased from 0.688 to 0.729 between 2012 and 2019 (United Nations Development Programme, 2025, p. 16).
- Moderate poverty declined by 26 percentage points and extreme poverty by 23 percentage points during the 2005–2018 period (National Institute of Statistics, 2019).

The governmental achievements of the MAS-IPSP, however, came at a cost. Drawing on Luciana Jauregui's thesis (Centro de Estudios Superiores Universitarios UMSS, 2025), the hegemony achieved by the MAS-IPSP rested upon its establishment of a pact with business elites and its partial adoption of the autonomist agenda. This gave rise to a tripartite and corporatist power arrangement. On one side were Indigenous native peasant and urban-popular organizations; on the other, private business sectors (particularly mining and agro-industrial elites), both mediated by the State through the figure of Morales. In this way, a pact emerged between redistributive policies and the promotion of private capital. Simultaneously, this process shifted the MAS-IPSP from the left toward the political center, as it increasingly sought to represent Bolivian society as a whole, including business interests.

Some scholars warned early on of a process of "deconstitutionalization" affecting the new Constitution, particularly through the enactment and implementation of certain laws that undermined the rights of Indigenous native peasant peoples and of Mother Earth (Gregor, 2022; Gudynas, 2018; Rojas, 2012; Servindi, 2012). One particularly explicit warning sign was Supreme Decree No. 2366, enacted in 2015,

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which authorized hydrocarbon exploration and extraction within protected areas, subject only to environmental impact assessments and mitigation measures. Within this framework emerged the conflict surrounding the Indigenous Territory and Isiboro Sécure National Park (TIPNIS), when the government sought to construct a highway through its most ecologically sensitive zone, thereby violating the inhabitants' right to "free, prior, and informed consultation", namely, the Yuracaré, Chiman, and Moxeño-Trinitario communities. In response, these communities organized two marches to the city of La Paz (2011 and 2012), supported by their main representative organization, the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Eastern Bolivia (CIDOB), and accompanied by the National Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyu (CONAMAQ). During the first march, to the surprise of many observers, the protesters were violently repressed by police forces in the area of Chaparina (Izurieta, 2012). This episode called into question the Indigenous character of Morales's government, and Morales himself later attempted to apologize by arguing that, at some unclear point, the chain of command within the security forces had broken down.

The construction of a highway through TIPNIS would have weakened the Indigenous communities' political control over their territory in favor of the expansion of the agricultural frontier, particularly coca cultivation, while also encouraging the privatization and fragmentation of forest commons. It would have directly benefited two oil concessions granted by the government to the state hydrocarbon company in joint ventures with transnational corporations (Cabitza, 2011; Pbfcc, 2019; Porto-Gonçalves & Betancourt, 2018). These concessions were formalized through Law No. 3672 of April 2007 and Law No. 3911 of April/July 2008, disregarding environmental regulations concerning protected areas and violating the decision of Indigenous organizations to shield TIPNIS from oil exploitation. The Indigenous struggle in defense of TIPNIS achieved partial success, as Morales ultimately withdrew the highway project. However, the cost was significant: government intervention contributed to the fragmentation of both CIDOB and CONAMAQ, producing parallel factions in each organization, an "organic" faction, critical of and distant from the MAS-IPSP, and a pro-government faction.

As Paz (2012) argues, the reason Morales's government acted in this way regarding TIPNIS lay in its economic development strategy, which prioritized an extractivist energy model as the central axis of public policy. Under this logic, not only TIPNIS but also other emblematic ecosystems were placed at risk, such as Tariquía, in the department of Tarija. In addition to being officially recognized as Indigenous Communal Land (TCO) or Indigenous Native Peasant Territory (TIOC), Tariquía also holds the status of a Biosphere Reserve. Since 2015, the communities of Tariquía have maintained ongoing resistance and, despite sustained governmental pressure, continue to impede the advance of Petrobras, operating in association with the state-owned company Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Bolivianos (YPFB) Chaco (Atahuichi, 2026).

3. Coup d'État and the Failed Return of the MAS-IPSP

The hegemony of the MAS-IPSP reached a turning point with Morales's insistence on reelection. On

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February 21, 2016, Bolivia held a national referendum promoted by the government to amend the new Constitution in order to enable Morales to run in future elections. The electorate voted “No,” with 51.3% of the vote. Once this path was closed, Morales achieved his objective through a ruling of the Plurinational Constitutional Tribunal, based on arguments that were widely questioned from a legal standpoint. This fueled growing social discontent against him and gave rise to increasing citizen mobilization, capitalized upon by the country’s most reactionary sectors. These groups rallied under the banner of the “defense of democracy,” portraying the MAS-IPSP government as a “dictatorship” seeking the indefinite reelection of its caudillo. The situation created fertile ground for the open expression of racist hate speech directed at Morales and anyone perceived as his supporter. Polarization intensified sharply, especially in urban areas, between “masistas” -supporters and sympathizers of the MAS-IPSP- and “anti-masistas,” whose most radical sectors called for a return to the Republic, that is, to the state order preceding the Plurinational State. Anti-masista narratives also appropriated criticisms of government policies described as “ecocidal,” referring to measures seen as harmful to the environment.

In October 2019, Bolivia held new general elections, the results of which again favored the MAS-IPSP. Morales was this time accused of committing “monumental” electoral fraud, prompting the anti-masista bloc to take to the streets and demand his immediate resignation. Amid their protests, this bloc deployed a striking and unprecedented Christian performative discourse in Bolivia. In La Paz, for example, groups of citizens knelt outside military barracks praying for army intervention against the alleged electoral fraud. In Santa Cruz, Christian churches marched under the leadership of pastors, while mass civic assemblies (cabildos) took place beneath Christian symbols and invocations to God, with leaders carrying images of the Virgin Mary and other religious icons (García, 2021; Iglesias, 2019; Opinión, 2023).

In the city of Cochabamba, authorities and students from the Bolivian Catholic University (UCB) sang the national anthem and prayed outside police headquarters. Meanwhile, violent groups referred to themselves as “angels of the Lord.” This was the case of the Cochala Youth Resistance (RJC), also known as the “motorcyclists,” who organized themselves as “paramilitary-style forces” and “adopted a strategy of intimidation and aggression against people identified as ‘masistas,’ including women in pollera” (GIEI-Bolivia, 2021, p. 54). They also attacked members of feminist collectives who denounced their violence and contested their occupation of public space (Fiscalía General del Estado, 2024; Ochoa, 2022).

The situation shifted decisively in favor of the anti-masista mobilization when the Tactical Police Operations Unit (UTOP) in Cochabamba mutinied. This action soon spread to other parts of the country and was accompanied by rhetoric invoking God, rosaries, and crucifixes. Two days later, on November 10, 2019, senior police and military commanders -as well as the top leader of the Bolivian Workers’ Central (COB), historically allied with the MAS-IPSP- joined the call for the president’s resignation “for the good of Bolivia.” At the same time, the Organization of American States (OAS) demanded the annulment of the recent presidential elections based on its electoral audit (Página12, 2019). Under these circumstances, the

president and vice president announced their resignations through the media and immediately left the country for Mexico. Among their supporters, the news sparked protests that, in some locations, included attacks on police stations. Among their opponents, euphoric groups burned the Wiphala flag while chanting “yes, we did it,” provoking massive mobilizations by Indigenous and popular sectors, particularly in the department of La Paz, demanding respect for the symbol and for the “women in pollera.”

Meanwhile, then-senator Jeanine Añez proclaimed herself president of Bolivia, producing a rupture of constitutional order while flanked by military and police forces, holding a Bible and declaring that it was “returning to the palace” (Aristegui, 2019). She promised that, as head of a transitional government, she would soon call new general elections, given that the October vote had been annulled.

In the days that followed, the “self-proclaimed” Añez government was responsible for the massacres of Huayllani (Cochabamba) and Senkata (El Alto), when security forces opened fire on unarmed demonstrators demanding Morales’s return and rejecting the coup d’état (Atahuichi, 2023). The official narrative -supported and amplified by anti-masista sectors- claimed that no massacres had occurred and that “the masistas shot each other.”

Subsequently, Añez’s government deployed political persecution against social sectors that opposed her administration and against anyone considered “masista.” These individuals were portrayed as “arbitrary,” “violent,” and “savage,” while the government openly justified extreme acts of racist violence committed against Indigenous peasant sectors (Sánchez, 2020). In effect, this discourse sought to deny them both citizenship and humanity by constructing them as “enemies.” Even before the coup, in line with her Christian fundamentalist position, Añez had described Indigenous cultural and spiritual practices as “satanic” (La Razón, 2019), echoing rhetoric commonly heard during religious gatherings in both evangelical and Catholic churches throughout the process of change.

Añez’s attempts to extend her stay in power, combined with poor management of the COVID-19 pandemic, allegations of severe corruption, and repression in regions aligned with the MAS-IPSP, led rural and peri-urban organizations across the country to block highways during quarantine in order to demand “elections now” from the “coup government.” Against this backdrop, general elections were held in October 2020. Once again, the MAS-IPSP emerged victorious, obtaining 55% of the vote and making Luis Arce president. Arce had been designated as the party’s candidate by Morales while in exile, despite the fact that grassroots sectors within Bolivia had agreed upon David Choquehuanca and Andrónico Rodríguez as the preferred presidential ticket.

Arce remained in office from November 2020 to November 2025, during which time he engaged in an intense struggle with Morales for control of the party and the presidential candidacy for the upcoming elections. Eventually, Arce succeeded in politically immobilizing his rival through criminal accusations (related to alleged statutory rape and human trafficking), and simultaneously stripped him of formal control

over the party label while disqualifying his candidacy through the Plurinational Constitutional Tribunal. Amid this conflict, the hard core of “evismo” -Morales’s loyal followers- founded a new “political instrument” called “Evo Pueblo,” seeking to secure their leader’s presidential candidacy. On the one hand, they pursued legal actions that yielded no favorable outcomes; on the other, they organized nationwide road blockades. This latter strategy also failed to achieve its intended effect and resulted in four deaths in Llallagua, north of the department of Potosí, in June 2025 (Gutiérrez, 2025).

Llallagua had historically been home to the influential Siglo XX mining union movement and constituted a center of Bolivian popular resistance, as well as of state repression expressed through repeated military massacres against workers, Indigenous peoples, and other sectors. The last major massacre there occurred in 1996 and became known as the “Christmas Massacre” (Cárdenas, 1998; Orellana, 2000), when the urban population massively supported Indigenous communities and mining workers who rose up against transnational corporations controlling two gold mining sites. Campurunas (people from the countryside) and llajtarunas (people from the town) resisted military troops together. In June 2025, however, events unfolded differently.

Residents of urban Llallagua -including dozens of students from the National University of Siglo XX (UNSXX), founded in 1985 by the Bolivian Mine Workers’ Federation (FSTMB) and still influenced by it- took to the streets in frustration to dismantle nearby road blockades that had been installed days earlier by the Ayllu Chullpa. Their protests focused on rising food prices and the increasing cost of essential goods, which they attributed to the Arce government’s mismanagement of the national economy. The Ayllu Chullpa is one of the ancestral peoples of the region, self-identified as part of the “warrior ayllus of Northern Potosí,” maintaining ongoing social and territorial ties with the tropical region of Cochabamba -the political stronghold of former president Morales- through contemporary forms of discontinuous territoriality based on dual residence and multiple economic activities. On that day in June 2025, the Ayllu Chullpa confronted the residents of Llallagua directly in an extremely violent clash. In order to “pacify” the situation, the government deployed police reinforcements followed by military troops, who were welcomed enthusiastically by local residents. At the same time, the government promoted a hostile official narrative about the Ayllu Chullpa, amplified nationwide by the media. The aim was to associate this Indigenous group and neighboring communities with drug trafficking, allegedly responsible for financing the “evista” road blockade in what was then described as a “red zone” harboring a “Little Mexico” soon to be “intervened” by the State (Bolivia.com, 2025). In Bolivian police terminology, “Little Mexico” refers to an area controlled by illicit organizations linked to drug trafficking and smuggling.

As a consequence of this narrative, political scientist Julio Córdoba (2025) argued that, following the events in Llallagua, the Indigenous peasant movement “ceased to represent the expression of the ‘national-popular’ in pursuit of inclusion and justice, and instead came to be associated with criminal groups linked to drug trafficking willing to massacre innocent people.”

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Such was the legacy of Arce's attempt to defeat Morales and, on that basis, compete electorally for a second presidential term. This objective, however, proved unattainable, largely because of his inability to prevent the economic crisis that erupted in the country, which significantly contributed to the collapse of his public image. At the same time, what had once been the MAS-IPSP -a robust and victorious coalition that articulated Indigenous native peasant and urban-popular masses- ended in an unprecedented implosion and political debacle. Its remnants attempted to remain electorally relevant in the August 2025 general elections (first round) through two figures who achieved limited resonance at the ballot box: the official candidate Eduardo Castillo (MAS-IPSP) and Andrónico Rodríguez (Popular Alliance). Neither received Morales's support; on the contrary, both were publicly condemned by him, particularly Rodríguez, who had once been considered the second-ranking leader -after Morales- within the coca-growers' organization of the Cochabamba tropics. Rodríguez was eventually expelled during the pre-electoral context and branded a "traitor," since, for evismo, no one other than "Evo" himself could legitimately be the presidential candidate.

Under these circumstances, and seeing himself excluded from the electoral contest, former president Morales called for a "null vote," arguing that none of the political forces appearing on the ballot genuinely represented the Indigenous peasant and popular movement. He therefore hoped that 50% of the electorate would cast null ballots. His call did have an impact, although not to the extent he expected. Null votes reached nearly 19.87% of the total vote, slightly more than the third most-voted political party. It should be noted, however, that in Bolivia, records from general elections between 2005 and 2020 show that null voting had previously reached a maximum level of only 4% (Visor21, 2025).

Although the results of the 2025 elections led to a runoff between the two most-voted political forces to determine who would occupy the presidency, they also defined the composition of the Bolivian legislative branch, which this time became dominated by right-wing and far-right parties. Victory ultimately went to the Christian Democratic Party (PDC), which defeated far-right former president Jorge ("Tuto") Quiroga, candidate for Libre. On November 8, 2025, the long governmental cycle of the MAS-IPSP -known as the process of change- came to a close, as Bolivia witnessed the presidential oath sworn 'for God, family, and the nation.

Conclusions

The historical trajectory spanning the period from 2006 to 2026 -from the moment the MAS-IPSP assumed government under the leadership of Evo Morales, to its decline during the administration of Luis Arce and the beginning of a new regressive political cycle-, allows us to trace a series of conjunctures in which structurally racialized violence against "Indians" manifested itself in different forms.

An unavoidable precursor to the period under study was the Gas War (2003), which gave rise to the October Agenda. This agenda articulated diverse demands for transformation and served as the prelude to the so-called "process of change" led by the MAS-IPSP. That process was itself inaugurated through a large-scale

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military massacre directed against the densely populated Aymara city of El Alto and its surrounding rural areas, the price paid for bringing the neoliberal cycle imposed since 1985 to an end from below.

Once the process of change began under the leadership of former president Morales, the constituent process aimed at drafting a new Constitution (2006-2008) effectively became a stark experience of violence directed against its principal actor: the Indigenous native peasant movement. This violence emerged as a reaction from the civic-business-landowning coalition to its loss of direct control over the central state apparatus, as well as from the opportunism of anti-masista authorities in the city of Sucre, who sought to pressure the Constituent Assembly through their intransigent and extremist -essentially racist- demand for full capital status. Consequently, the approval of the new Constitution by the Bolivian people in January 2009 bore the marks of this reactionary offensive, including episodes such as the humiliation of rural populations in Sucre, the Porvenir Massacre in Pando, and the violence in Cochabamba on January 11, 2007, among others.

The period inaugurated by the implementation of the new Constitution brought with it legislation against racism and all forms of discrimination (Law No. 045 of 2010), as well as rights such as free, prior, and informed consultation in Indigenous native peasant territories where the State intended to develop natural resource extraction projects, activities that always pose risks to ecosystems. Nevertheless, the Bolivian State did not abandon its primary-export extractivist development model; rather, this model was deepened under MAS-IPSP governments themselves. Several Indigenous native peasant peoples continued to experience violations of their territorial rights, although the cases of TIPNIS (2011-2012) and Tariquía (2015 to the present) demonstrate that Indigenous resistance has managed, at least partially, to halt the advance of extractivism. Perhaps this helps explain why Morales's government promoted divisions within several Indigenous organizations, thereby weakening them. Undoubtedly, the extractivist orientation of the process of change also contributed to its own downfall, as it provided arguments later appropriated by anti-masista mobilizations that ultimately succeeded in forcing Morales from office in November 2019.

Morales's fall occurred, it should be remembered, within a sociopolitical context in which the legitimacy of his leadership had already been eroded because he refused to respect the outcome of the February 2016 constitutional referendum, which denied him the possibility of another presidential candidacy. Despite this, he persisted and ultimately secured authorization to run again through a maneuver carried out by the Plurinational Constitutional Tribunal. Against this backdrop, when he won the October 2019 election, he was accused of electoral fraud, enabling an intense mobilization of his opponents that culminated in a coup d'état led by the most hardline sectors of the right, who elevated then-senator Añez as "self-proclaimed" president.

Añez, a politician aligned with Christian fundamentalism, embodied the same religious imagery displayed during anti-MAS-IPSP protests prior to the coup, when she entered the presidential palace holding a Bible. Her Christian discourse, however, did not prevent her from facilitating the massacres of Huayllani

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(Cochabamba) and Senkata (El Alto) days later against popular sectors supportive of Morales, whom she and her allies apparently regarded as savage people capable of killing one another.

The explicit hostility of Añez's government toward popular sectors, together with corruption scandals and the inefficiency of her administration during the coronavirus pandemic, contributed to the MAS-IPSP's return to power in November 2020, when Arce became president as the candidate chosen by Morales while in exile. In the struggle between Arce and Morales for control of the party and the presidential candidacy for the 2025 elections, Arce moved aggressively against the hard core of evismo, which sought to reverse the official disqualification of its leader through legal actions and radical social protests, albeit without sufficient public support. As of May 2026, Arce himself was imprisoned (Melgar, 2026).

President Paz represents the beginning of a new political cycle in Bolivia centered on an oligarchic neoliberal structural adjustment agenda. Unlike the preceding process of change—which, despite its extractivist primary-export orientation, never managed to transcend that model—this new cycle does not seek to transform extractivism but rather to deepen it through private-sector "initiative." Since the territories targeted by extractivist expansion are largely the habitats of Indigenous native peasant peoples and environmentally sensitive areas associated with Mother Earth, the deterioration and collapse of the MAS-IPSP has left popular organizations weakened and significantly reduced their capacity for effective rearticulation within the current conjuncture.

Violence against Indigenous peoples, structurally racialized in nature, acquires specific forms depending on time and place; yet in every case physical violence is accompanied, in one way or another, by symbolic violence. Through gestures and language, such violence humiliates and repositions the victims in an inferior social place. In moments of aggression, they are no longer referred to as "Indigenous" -a term suitable for politically correct discourse- but instead as "Indians" or cholos, terms associated with servitude, savagery, subhumanity, and animality.

This is hardly surprising: state brutality is repeatedly exercised against Indigenous peoples who firmly defend their legitimate spaces of life. Since the colonial era, the massacre of rebellious "Indians" has remained in Bolivia a recurring language of punishment, through which dominant power violently inscribes its message of supremacy, not only upon those massacred, but even more profoundly upon the bodies and memories of survivors.

After nearly twenty years of MAS-IPSP rule, social and state violence directed against "Indians" or those "from below" increasingly associates them with what is considered ethically suspect. They are portrayed as corrupt, parasitic, or dependent on the State, but also as participants in what Rita Segato (2025) terms the "second State" or "hidden economies": drug trafficking and smuggling. Under this logic, any rebellious Indigenous territory risks being labeled a "Little Mexico." The discursive association between popular struggles and drug trafficking is not new in Bolivia, particularly regarding coca-producing organizations in

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the Cochabamba tropics -the political stronghold of former president Morales- where cocaine production has likely existed since the 1970s. What is new is that this association no longer remains confined to that region; drug trafficking activities now appear to have spread far beyond their traditional enclaves. Consequently, governmental discourse concerning the fight against illicit economies may function as a mechanism legitimizing renewed offensives against Indigenous peoples and their territories in favor of contemporary neoliberal restructuring.

Finally, the performative deployment of religion -specifically Christianity- cannot be overlooked. In moments of sociopolitical conflict, religion consistently functions as an instrument of reactionary sectors. Yet the Christianity mobilized in these contexts is a conservative and rigid form, now combined with narratives of individual prosperity, used to justify violations of rights against the “enemy,” who is associated with evil and therefore with the “satanic.” At the same time, religion serves as a mechanism for generating identity, cohesion, fervor, and even financial support around political “crusades” framed as redemptive missions. In a society such as Bolivia’s, where an overwhelming majority believes in the Judeo-Christian God (according to Diagnosis (2023), Catholics and evangelicals together comprise nearly 75% of the population) the strategic deployment of religious performance for political purposes poses a profound risk to democratic life. Precisely for this reason, the process of change introduced state secularism through the new Constitution, thereby stripping the Catholic Church of its status as the official religion and provoking sustained hostility in response. Within this context, evangelical churches became increasingly institutionalized and multiplied rapidly, although Catholicism remains the majority religion despite its continuous decline. Both traditions maintain influence across all social strata and spheres of life, including education, disseminating forms of fundamentalist discourse. From this perspective, Christian fundamentalism operates as a mechanism of the coloniality of power and its associated violence. The November 2019 coup d’état constitutes a clear example of this dynamic.

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