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978-0-521-10201-8 - Parties and Political Change in Bolivia 1880-1952

Herbert S. Klein

Excerpt

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I

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE POLITICAL
PARTY SYSTEM

In the last days of the South American wars of independence, a group of delegates gathered in the southern Andean town of Chuquisaca to decide the fate of their region. Bolívar's troops had defeated the last remnants of the royalist forces in the provinces of Lower Peru; and these representatives from Upper Peru decided to declare themselves an independent republic. On 6 August 1825, they solemnly proclaimed, 'before the entire world that their irrevocable will is to govern themselves by themselves . . . and to sustain unalterable their holy Catholic religion, and the sacrosanct rights of honour, life, liberty, equality, property and security'.¹

With these fine sounding phrases, the Republic of Bolivia was born among the provinces which had made up the old Audiencia of Charcas. But for all the flourish and the bloodshed which preceded it, this declaration of independence was an anti-climatic affair, since the state which emerged was not essentially different from its predecessor. The oligarchy which had ruled before was the one which ruled now, only it was now no longer responsible for its actions to a distant crown.²

Unfortunately, the hope of these oligarchic republicans that they could carry on the glories of the past in new republican forms, were to be frustrated. For the nation which emerged after fifteen years of civil war in the Andean highlands was paradoxically an economically retarded area, despite its legendary colonial wealth and prominence.

Although the silver mining region of Potosí had been, in its

¹ Javier Malagón (ed.), *Las actas de independencia de América* (Washington, D.C.: Unión Panamericana, 1955), p. 17.

² On the conservative and propertied nature of the Independence Assembly, see Charles W. Arnade, *The Emergence of the Republic of Bolivia* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1957), pp. 183ff.

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time, the richest in the world, it was now in complete decay. From its founding in the mid-sixteenth century until the middle of the seventeenth century, Potosí had produced enormous quantities of silver and the city reached a population of over 150,000 persons.¹ Although the region declined in the eighteenth century, it was still the greatest single source of revenue in the viceroyalty of Peru, and was a key area of contention between the Buenos Aires and Lima viceroalties.² But by the last quarter of the eighteenth century this famous mining zone was in decay. The exhaustion of the richest and most accessible veins; the poverty of the miners and their ignorance of advanced technology; and the absorption of new colonial capital into the thriving international commerce of the late eighteenth century all contributed to its decline. This was further accentuated by the collapse of the auxiliary Huancavelica mercury mines after 1800, and by the fifteen years of civil war beginning in 1809 which had a disastrous effect on local miners.³

¹ According to the admittedly crude calculations made in 1879 by Adolf Soetbeer, Bolivian silver production reached its peak at the end of the sixteenth and first two decades of the seventeenth century. Production thereafter slowly declined until 1700, when it suddenly took a sharp downward plunge, only recovering moderately in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. A new downward plunge occurred after 1800 with the worst years of the new century being the period 1811–30, with a moderate increase in the period 1831–50 and a new severe depression in the period from 1851 to 1865. By the latter years of the 1860s the modern mining era had begun and production began to climb dramatically. Adolf Soetbeer, *Edelmetall-Produktion und Werthverhältniss zwischen Gold und Silber seit der Entdeckung Amerikas bis zur Gegenwart* (Gotha: Justus Perthes, 1879), pp. 78–9. For the first detailed modern analysis of silver production at Potosí, which covers the period so far only to 1600, see the pioneer study by Alvaro Jara, 'Dans le Pérou du XVI^e siècle: La courbe de production des métaux monnayables', *Annales, E.S.C.*, Année 23, No. 3 (Mai-Juin 1967), pp. 590–603. For a summary history of the city see Lewis Hanke, *The Imperial City of Potosí* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956), and the detailed articles accompanying the Hanke and Gunnar Mendoza edition of Bartolomé Arzáns de Orsúa y Vela, *Historia de la Villa Imperial de Potosí* (3 vols.; Providence: Brown University Press, 1965).

² In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Potosí was the single most important centre for government revenue, producing for the crown between 35 and 44 per cent of the total government income in the viceroyalty. Michel Colin, *Le Cuzco à la fin du XVII^e et au début du XVIII^e siècle* (Caen: Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de la Université de Caen, 1966), pp. 208–19, tables 10–12.

³ Guillermo Céspedes del Castillo, *Lima y Buenos Aires, repercusiones económicas y políticas de la creación del virreinato del Plata* (Sevilla: Escuela de Estudios Hispano-Americanos, 1947), pp. 10–11, 77, 80, 165. Also see Arthur P. Whitaker, *The Huancavelica Mercury Mine* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941), pp. 74ff.

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Whereas Potosí still had some forty *ingenios* (or mills) refining silver in 1803, it had only fifteen by the end of the wars of independence, with production declining in this same period by 81 per cent.¹ The depression in silver production was also reflected in the city's population, and in 1835 the famous French naturalist D'Orbigny estimated the population at only some 13,000 and was amazed by the large number of abandoned homes and mines.² Nor did the first quarter-century of republican rule bring any major change, for by the first complete national census of 1846 it was estimated that the lack of capital had forced the closing of some 10,000 mines in Bolivia since the late colonial period, and that at least two-thirds of these mines were still capable of being productive, though now abandoned and flooded.³

Besides the decadence of this preponderant national industry, the new republic also inherited a poorly integrated national territory, with population disproportionately concentrated. The bulk of the population was located on the inter-mountain Andean highlands known as the *altiplano* and in the tropical valleys of the eastern cordillera escarpment.⁴ Over two-thirds of the national population was concentrated in these two regions, according to the 1846 census, while the coastal department of Atacama contained only 0.3 per cent of the population. The fourth major region of Bolivia, the eastern lowlands, known as the *oriente*, and including the departments of the Beni and Santa Cruz, contained only 9.2 per cent of Bolivia's people.⁵ Even after adding the lowland provinces of the other departments to the *oriente* total, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of the Bolivian nation was located in the

¹ Edmond Temple, *Travels in Various Parts of Peru, Including a Year's Residence in Potosí* (2 vols.; London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830), I, pp. 308–10.

² Alcides D'Orbigny, *Viaje a la América meridional*, ed. S. Pastor and trans. A. Cepeda (4 vols.; Buenos Aires: Editorial Futuro, 1945), IV, 1496.

³ José María Dalence, *Bosquejo estadístico de Bolivia* (Chuquisaca: Imprenta de Sucre, 1851), p. 295.

⁴ The valleys included two major groupings, the so-called Yungas of the north-east, and the more open valleys of the Pilcomayo and Rio Grande rivers with the valley of Cochabamba being the richest and most populated of these latter. Oscar Schneider, *Geografía de América Latina* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1965), pp. 291–2; Jorge Muñoz Reyes, *Bosquejo de geografía de Bolivia* (No. 215; Rio de Janeiro: Instituto Pan-Americano de Geografía e Historia, 1956), pp. 26–30; Harold Osborne, *Bolivia, A Land Divided* (2nd ed.; London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1955), pp. 4–23.

⁵ Dalence, *Bosquejo estadístico*, p. 202.

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mountain highlands and valleys far from the sea and the neighbouring republics. In this populated core lay the bulk of the nation's farming and mining and all her important urban centres.

This core population was several days' journey by mule transport from the nearest seaports; moreover, the republic had only one serviceable port in the whole Atacama region. This was Cobija, which in the 1830s had a population of only about 700.¹ Although Cobija handled something like one-third of Bolivia's international trade by the 1850s, its own lines of communication with the interior population were controlled to an extent of over 90 per cent by foreign nationals. And it was the transportation cost from Cobija to the highland cities which accounted for over two-thirds of the price of imported goods. As one contemporary French economist concluded after a detailed study of Bolivia's trade in the 1850s, its archaic communications system had created a 'commercial blockade' which was causing 'the growing impoverishment of Bolivia'.²

Given these poor communications, it was impossible to export anything except the most valuable national products, and these of course were the precious minerals. Bolivia was rich in such metals, but the years of war and civil strife had drained the nation of capital, and without capital these resources could not be fully exploited. Nor was national agricultural production sufficient in either quality or quantity for exportation. Though close to 90 per cent of the population was listed as rural in this early period,³ Bolivia was not even agriculturally self-sufficient. There were fertile lands in many parts of the country, but a large part of the population lived on the impoverished lands of the altiplano, and

¹ [Dr. W. S. W. Rushenberger], *Three Years in the Pacific, Including Notices of Brazil, Chile, Bolivia and Peru* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea and Blanchard, 1834), p. 169.

² Adam Dunin Iundzill, *Du commerce bolivien, considérations sur l'avenir des relations entre l'Europe et la Bolivie* (Paris: G.-A. Pinard, 1856), pp. 10–14. Iundzill estimated that 68 per cent of the final price of European goods in Sucre, the chief highland city served by Cobija, was accounted for by mule transport from the coast.

³ In the first complete republican census, that of 1846, the eleven cities and thirty-five towns made up only 11 per cent of the population. But this listing included many rural centres of a few hundred persons, and the largest single town, La Paz, contained only some 42,000 persons. Dalence, *Bosquejo estadístico*, pp. 199–200.

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the rest were cut off from the national market by poor internal communications. With the single exception of quinine, no agricultural products were exported and few products even left their local regions.¹ As one expert noted in the 1840s, 'cereals are commonly sold and consumed in the same departments in which they are produced'.² In fact, Bolivia not only imported cereals, meats, and pack animals from abroad, but even imported from Peru such typical locally produced foodstuffs as potatoes and *chuño*, the famous dried root food indigenous to the Andean highlands.³ Given this agricultural underdevelopment, and the depression of the mining sector, Bolivia became, for the first time in its post-conquest history, a net importer of goods and ran an unfavourable balance of trade until well into the middle of the century.⁴

This stagnation of the private sector was also reflected quite clearly in the public economy. Whereas the prime sources of government income under the crown had been mining, production, and sales taxes, the republican government obtained the bulk of its funds from a head tax on Indian landowners, and received only a minor income from production, trade, or mining and smelting. Thus in the budget of 1846, the head tax on Indians was the largest single source of government revenue and accounted for 43 per cent of government income. If the tax on coca production, which was a product consumed only by Indians, is added to this figure, then direct taxation on Indians accounted for 50 per cent of all government revenues, while mining and smelting taxes together brought only 11 per cent of government funds.⁵ Even as late as 1868, a contemporary observer noted that the

¹ Though quinine bark was constantly exported throughout the nineteenth century, it was always a minor export crop. In 1846, for example, it accounted for only 6 per cent of the value of total national exports and contributed but 7 per cent of the government income in taxes. Dalence, *Bosquejo estadístico*, pp. 305–5, and Dr H. A. Weddell, *Voyage dans le nord de la Bolivie . . .* (Paris: P. Bertrand, 1853), pp. 235–46, 249. Despite extreme cycles of prosperity and depression, it still contributed 8 per cent of the value of exports in 1881 (André Bresson, *Bolivia, sept années d'explorations, de voyages et de séjours dans l'Amérique australe* [Paris: Librairie Coloniale, 1886], p. 248), but by 1900 it was only an insignificant export due to the competition of plantation production of the bark in both Colombia and the Far East. Luis Peñaloza, *Historia económica de Bolivia* (2 vols.; La Paz: n.p., 1953–4), II, 3–16.

² Dalence, *Bosquejo estadístico*, p. 314.

³ *Ibid.* pp. 278–9, 309–31, 315–16.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 302ff.

⁵ Dalence, *Bosquejo estadístico*, pp. 361–2.

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discriminatory head tax on Indians provided 'the best and most secure source of government income'.¹

Equally indicative of the backwardness of the government economy was central government expenditure in this early republican period. In a nation desperately in need of a basic communications network, the government in the 1846 budget supplied virtually no funds for national road construction or other major public works. Rather, some 45 per cent of the government's expenditures went to maintain the standing army (a figure astronomical even by the standards of the day), another 10 per cent for funding the public debt, and fully 12 per cent for clerical salaries and church support. This left but 43 per cent of the budget for simply administrative expenses, and virtually nothing for development.²

Along with this depressed public and private economy, the new republic also emerged with one of the most backward social systems in the western hemisphere. Its population, which in 1825 was estimated at 1,100,000, was bitterly divided along racial lines between an Indian population estimated at 73 per cent of this total, and a non-Indian minority.³ Thus Bolivia was probably

¹ Ramón Sotomayor Valdés, *Estudio histórico de Bolivia bajo la administración del General D. José María de Achá . . .* (Santiago de Chile: Imprenta Andrés Bello, 1874), p. 527. In the budgets published (i.e. 1845, 1847, 1860, and 1864) the Indian head tax income never fell below 37 per cent of the budget and was always the largest single source of income. Casto Rojas, *Historia financiera de Bolivia* (La Paz: Talleres Gráficos 'Marinoni', 1916), pp. 182-3, 222-3, 246-7.

² Dalence, *Bosquejo estadístico*, pp. 364-5. As one scholar concluded after a survey of the first fifty years of republican financial history, 'from 1825 to 1879 the development of government income was in significant. The country, given over to continuous revolts which sterilized the most important fiscal reforms, did not advance much either in its financial organization or in the development of public or private wealth'. Rojas, *Historia financiera*, p. 412.

³ This racial breakdown is based on the informed calculations of the Englishman, Joseph Barclay Pentland, who visited Bolivia in 1827 on a scientific mission for the British government. His estimates were 800,000 Indians, 200,000 whites, and 100,000 cholos, giving a total of 1,100,000 which seems to be quite a reasonable guess when compared to the 1,373,896 persons counted in the first complete republican census of 1846. For these figures see R. A. Humphreys (ed.), *British Consular Reports on the Trade and Politics of Latin America, 1824-1826* (Camden 3rd Series, Vol. LXXIII; London: Royal Historical Society, 1940), p. 176 n6, p. 208 n4.

It is interesting to compare these 1827 figures with those of the 1900 census, which is the first complete census in Bolivia to give a detailed breakdown of population by racial categories. The breakdown of the whites and Indians in total numbers was almost identical to that of 1827, being 213,088 and 792,850 respectively. The cholo population, however, had more than quadrupled in this half-century to some 484,611. Oficina Nacional de Inmigración, *Estadística y Propaganda Geográfica, Censo nacional de la población de la república, 1° de setiembre de 1900* (2 vols.; La Paz: José M. Gamarra, 1902-4), I, 31.

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the most predominantly Indian of the new American republics,¹ and its stratification along racial lines was unquestionably one of the most rigid. The Bolivian Indians were almost totally unaware of the nation's existence and formed a separate society with their own languages and culture. Their relations with the non-Indian society were confined to the economic sphere, and even here, they were almost exclusively rural, and largely subsistence farmers, leaving the urban centres overwhelmingly to the whites and the mixed Indian-white population known as the *cholos*. These two societies were hierarchically arranged; and the non-Indian minority, the only part of the nation truly aware of national existence, totally exploited the Indian majority, both through the discriminatory taxing system, and even more importantly in its growing control over the land.

In early nineteenth-century Bolivia, the land was divided between an expanding *latifundia* system controlled by the white élite, and a village communal pattern of land ownership used by both the Quechua and Aymara Indians. The Indian communities comprised several categories of land-owning and landless families (*originarios*, *agregados*, and *forasteros sin tierra*), and in 1846 they accounted for an estimated 621,468 persons. The white *hacendados* and their families made up another 23,107 persons, while the landless estate Indians known as *colonos* or *pongos* numbered some 360,000.² Though the 5,000 hacendado families were only 2.3 per cent of the total rural population, they were an aggressive and expanding minority which throughout the nineteenth century utilized the laws of the state to destroy Indian communal property ownership and to exploit the lands for their own ends. Since the republican laws initially conceived of private property as an absolute individual right, all laws denied the legal right of the community to hold land and thus permitted the whites and cholos to use both the courts and the state police power to destroy *comunidad* holdings.

Rapidly absorbing the richest lands in each area, the hacendados

¹ For a rough comparison with other nations at this time, see Angel Rosenblat, *La población indígena y el mestizaje en América* (2 vols.; Buenos Aires: Editorial Nova, 1954), I, 199–200.

² These estimates are taken from data given in Dalence, *Bosquejo estadístico*, pp. 234–5.

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were able to extract free labour from the previous landowning Indians in return for use of usufruct soil on the newly-created estates. In what was unquestionably the most exploitative Indian peasant-hacienda system in the New World in the nineteenth century, the landowners extracted both free farm labour and free personal service (*pongueaje*) from their colonos in return for the simple use of land for their own crops. Often they forced the colonos, when working for the landowner, to provide their own tools, seed, and animals.¹

Though the majority of the nation's Indians in these early days of the republic were free *comunidad* Indians, the lack of capital and the primitive level of technology, together with the progressive subdivision of the meagre soil resources where the communities were located, made for a level of existence little better than the landless estate Indians. There were no rural schools, no rights to citizenship—since literacy was the primary qualification²—and an exploitative system of local *corregidor* government which retained all the abuses of the royal era and provided none of its benefits. The office of *corregidor*, usually held by a cholo, was one of the most abused in nineteenth-century American government. The *corregidor* was in charge of collecting the onerous discriminatory head tax on *comunidad* Indians, as well as *corvée* labour for public works and even for private exploitation. The *corregidores* at times even controlled the price of such basic imported commodities as salt and coca.

Faced by a diminishing supply of land and a near starvation level of subsistence agriculture which often resulted in famine cycles, it was the *comunidad* Indians who, from the first days

¹ A good survey of the relations of nineteenth-century Indians with non-Indians is contained in the pioneering study by Ramiro Condarco Morales, *Zarete, el 'Temible' Willka, historia de la rebelión indígena de 1899* (La Paz: Talleres Gráficos Bolivianos, 1966), pp. 23–59; also see Arturo Urquidí Morales, *La comunidad indígena, precedentes sociológicos, vicisitudes históricas* (Cochabamba: Imprenta Universitaria, 1941), pp. 79ff. For a more detailed analysis of the colono and the hacienda system, see below, ch. 6.

² In 1846, 100,000 persons, or only 7 per cent of the population, were considered literate (Dalence, *Bosquejo estadístico*, p. 242). By 1900 the percentage of literates had only risen to 17 per cent of the total population (*Censo nacional de 1900*, II, Primera Parte, p. 33), and by 1950 it was 31 per cent. Dirección General de Estadística y Censos, *Censo demográfico 1950* (La Paz: Editorial 'Argote', 1955), p. 112.

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of the republic until the middle decades of the twentieth century, provided labour for the mines of the Oruro and Potosí regions. But exporting labour was not always a successful means of relieving the harsh exploitation of government and a diminishing supply of land; and in almost every decade of republican history local *comunidad* Indians rose up in senseless and brutal caste wars of extermination against the oppression of the *corregidores* and clerics and the expansion of the white *élite*. Every time they rebelled, they were violently suppressed by government troops.

This harsh world of the *comunidad* Indians, as well as that of the *hacienda colonos*, was a world apart from the national life of Bolivia. The only avenue of mobility open to the Indian across this social and almost caste-like barrier was through rejection of his rural and/or communal life and migration to the cities, where he could learn an urban trade or skill and the Spanish language. These transplanted and re-educated Indians became in effect a new 'racial' group, the so-called *cholos* or *mestizos*. While the *cholos* formed the lower class urban proletariat, and became a conscious part of national life, they nevertheless remained, under the oligarchic governments of the nineteenth century, a disenfranchised group which was denied access to power or even a voice in its own destiny. Forming the lower ranks of the armies and of the unskilled and artisan workers, they often served as political instruments in mob action for the various factions of the oligarchy. Though a few demagogic governments, such as that of Belzu, made appeals for their support, and others permitted talented individuals to rise into the oligarchy, the *cholo* masses were in general denied access to office, to power, and to the vote. But the number of these urban *cholos* in the early part of the century was relatively small, probably no more than 100,000 to 200,000, and this inhibited their ability to find self-expression in political terms. However, their constant increase in numbers throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the new economic opportunities which developed with the rebirth of mining, created by the third decade of the twentieth century a pivotal, self-conscious and powerful middle group, between the inarticulate and non-participating Indian masses and the formerly all-powerful white oligarchy.

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But until then, national political life was the exclusive monopoly of the small and relatively stable number (approximately 200,000) of racially and culturally defined whites. This European-dressed, Spanish-speaking, literate élite based its intellectual leadership on the almost exclusive possession of literacy and European culture, and its economic power on the latifundia system. Despite its firm economic base in agriculture, this white oligarchy was overwhelmingly an urban group, for except in the Cochabamba valley, absentee ownership was the prevailing rule of the latifundias, and almost every white hacendado had an urban residence and a liberal profession.¹ But so long as the nation was barely self-supporting in agriculture, and the principal export and capital-obtaining industry of mining was completely disorganized, the economic strength of this élite was severely limited. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, in fact, the government itself was one of the most lucrative sources of income in the nation. Thus, despite its social and economic leadership in regard to the other classes and *castas* of the nation, the Bolivian oligarchy lacked the economic strength and independence to control its own destiny.

Although the white creoles had succeeded in suppressing cholo and Indian uprisings during the wars of independence, and emerged by 1825 with exclusive control over the new government, they were incapable of maintaining that control and creating instruments of power which would guarantee their peaceful dominance. The long years of civil wars which led to independence left the nation and the oligarchy in an economically depressed condition and sapped the vital reconstructive energies of the creole élite, leaving it a passive and essentially parasitic class. Because of the population settlement pattern and the difficult terrain, the republic also inherited a major problem of extreme localism, with provincial élites more interested in the *patria chica* than in the problems of the entire nation. Finally, the new republic unfortunately inherited a strong tradition of militarism and

¹ The 1900 census listed 49,647 persons engaged in liberal professions, or only 4 per cent of the labour force (*Censo nacional de 1900*, II, Primera Parte, p. 46). This percentage hardly changed in the next fifty years for by 1950, when the category was also made to include personal servants, the liberal professions made up only 5 per cent of the work force. *Censo demográfico 1950*, p. 142. The number of lawyers actually declined in this period from 1,546 to 1,103. There had been only 449 lawyers in 1846. Dalence, *Bosquejo estadístico*, p. 230.