

Democracy Support and the Case of Bolivia

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June, 2018

- Democracy Support is an area where different theoretical approaches, assumptions and myths meet with the reality of political and economic development. Bolivia is an interesting case study given that its transformation has received attention of international debates since the beginning of its democratization process in the early 1980s.
- The predominant focus in democracy support programs has been on strengthening actors and institutions, combined with an idealization of civil society as an independent sphere creating counterbalance to the state. It is doubtful whether this practice has really contributed to the deepening of democracy in Bolivia, or rather sharpened the polarization of politics observed in recent years, if unintentionally.
- Against this background, the author develops some ideas and recommendations for donors and actors engaging themselves in supporting democracy in Bolivia and beyond. He emphasizes the need for understanding and supporting transformation processes and proposes to use different analytical approaches and instruments.
- In order to overcome a transactional political culture, broader platforms for intellectual discussions across political boundaries are needed. In Bolivia, this has to include a substantial debate about the different forms and notions of democracy established in the constitution, and its practical implications and experiences since 2009.



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The current political context in Bolivia – a brief overview

Bolivia has been the focus of debates around “democracy support” since it began its process of democratization in the early 1980s. During the 1990s, Bolivia was seen as the ‘darling’ of the international community for its adherence to the recommendations of the Washington Consensus, all the while depending heavily on the support of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. However, the political reforms and economic privatization agenda of the early 2000s led to a profound economic crisis and political instability. The strengthening of social movements – led by indigenous peasants and cocoa growers – prepared the ground for an unexpected paradigm shift in late 2005: Evo Morales, supported by a broad alliance of social movements called Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), became the first indigenous candidate to win presidential elections in Bolivia.

During the political crisis of 2003-05, the established political parties and state institutions suffered a huge loss of confidence and legitimacy amongst large sections of the population. Consequently, during the Morales’ first term, a constituent assembly established a new Political Constitution for the Plurinational State of Bolivia that completely redefined the relationship between the state and its territory, its citizens and its regions, its political organs and its different ethnic groups. In the Constitution, the concept of “democracy” is defined using the following categories:

- representative democracy: elections of representatives through universal, direct and secret elections.
- participative democracy: different means of direct consultation such as referendums,

civil legislative initiatives, and consulta previa (previous consultations in indigenous territories).

- communal democracy: through elections, designation or nomination of authorities and representatives at the level of indigenous communities.

This redefinition of democracy and political participation has led to a transformation of the political system, incorporating important elements of the Bolivian population. Despite two decades of formal “democratic” rule, this was the first time that representatives from indigenous and peasant groups in Bolivia found their ways into political institutions. These groups have brought a different, more collective logic of representation and participation to the various political institutions.

However, after more than 12 years in power, the *proceso de cambio* led by the MAS is facing some difficulties, both in terms of its discourse hegemony and concrete policy areas. Despite losing a 2016 referendum on the removal of presidential electoral term limits (currently set at two terms, as in most presidential systems), the governing party has still positioned Evo Morales as a candidate for the 2019 presidential elections. A November 2017 decision by the Supreme Court legalizing his possible candidature has confirmed a tendency to politicize the judiciary in Bolivia. The political opposition is framing this as an “authoritarian development”, and new middle class movements are emerging in defense of “democracy” and the Constitution. The tone of political debates is getting harsher and we are likely to see greater political polarization and confrontation in the coming years.



Some analysts are predicting the end of a progressive political cycle, considering the retreat of leftist political actors in recent elections throughout the region. At the policy level, the failure of the justice and penal code reforms in 2017/18 could mark the end of this progressive cycle in Bolivia.

Beyond polarization between left and right, we are also observing a changing political culture, with many young voters distancing themselves both from the oficialismo as well as narratives promoted by the traditional opposition. There's an increasing tendency to downplay and depreciate "the political" per se on Bolivia's social networks – important forums for public debate in Bolivia. Instead, we are likely to see a growing post-ideological culture which emphasizes "pragmatic" voices and actors.

Democracy Support: different approaches, myths and implications

In the following chapter, I will analyze some approaches to and myths about democracy support and their implications in Bolivia.

Most donors and development agencies claiming to promote democracy have tended to focus on strengthening certain actors through capacity building. This approach is combined with a romantic notion of a "good" civil society that would articulate its demands for further democratization against state institutions. Both capacity building and the notion of civil society relate to Samuel Huntington's concept of a "third wave of democratization", which has strongly influenced the practice of development actors since the early 1990s.

- Strengthening actors and institutions:
What's the purpose of capacity building?

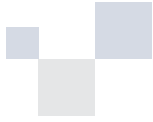
The broad term <democracy support>

covers numerous (often contradictory and competing) theoretical concepts and practical approaches. "Classical" approaches to the promotion of democracy in Bolivia, prevalent during the 1990s and early 2000s, focused on strengthening the most relevant political institutions and actors.

According to such theories, a combination of financial support, capacity building and education would turn these institutions into democratic actors, in turn leading to freer and cleaner democratic processes. Since elections were regarded as the basic essence of democracy, a lot of effort was put into the preparation, organization and monitoring of elections at different levels. Many public agencies received some kind of capacity building, and most international donors and international agencies invested in campaigns to raise awareness and understanding of democratic reforms.

Despite a great deal of international support for democracy, Bolivia's political system underwent a deep crisis between 2003 and 2005. The complete political system – including the state institutions and the established political parties – imploded. There were numerous accusations of corruption and nepotism, and huge levels of popular mistrust, even by Latin American standards.

The main problem with the mentioned "classical" approaches of capacity building for institutions and political actors in Bolivia was that the political class had disconnected itself from whole swathes of the population, exercising politics as a purely technocratic game without understanding the political culture itself. In many cases, capacity building had become a goal and a justification in itself. It was detached from broader concerns for society or public goods, and was unable to create or integrate democratic processes



outside the state institutions.

This contradiction should lead us to redefine our approaches and objectives when it comes to “democracy support”.

- The romantic notion of “civil society”

Apart from the predominant focus on institutions and actors – representing the mainstream “liberal” understanding of democracy – there has also been strong enthusiasm with the support for “civil society actors”.

It was, and is¹ widely believed that civil society actors may act as a counterbalance to the state, as well as a control mechanism for political actors, providing the basis for a democratic political culture rooted in the broader society.

Ironically, the now governing Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) also has its foundation in numerous “civil society organizations” and social movements. Many of these groups were poor and rural, having received less support from international donors (with some exceptions). Even after 12 years in power, the MAS government still sees itself as the political arm of a national platform (Conalcam) composed mainly of the following social movements: the Confederación Sindical de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia (CSUTCB), the Confederación Sindical de Comunidades Interculturales (CSCIB) and the Confederación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas Indígenas Originarias de Bolivia Bartolinas Sisa (CNMCI OB-BS).

¹ For instance, most global EU calls for proposals in the context of “democracy support” have the aim to “strengthen civil society” in some way. In the case of Bolivia those calls had different thematic entry points, such as on “participatory planning mechanisms” in 2016, or on “gender equality and women’s empowerment” in 2017, to cite some examples.

Therefore, we need to ask ourselves what kind of “civil society” we want to foster; which interests are being represented through actions and programs; and which notions of “democracy” are being represented and articulated.

Currently, the concept of civil society in Bolivia is unclear and contested. Organizations referred to as “civil society” in public debate originate almost exclusively from the urban middle and upper classes. Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) implementing social and environmental projects are funded exclusively by foreign donors, leading the government to fear “foreign interference” in some sensitive areas.

The unclear internal structures of NGOs in Bolivia means they are often perceived to lack accountability and political legitimacy. Nevertheless, many international donors and agencies still focus on supporting civil society, with the idealist image of a separate, “clean and innocent” sphere, set apart from government and politics.

- Polarization of politics

As discussed in previous chapters, two conflicting notions prevail: support for public institutions and actors, versus an idealistic and widely-held belief in civil society as a counterbalance. However, the political reality is much more complex, with a high level of interdependence between the two spheres. By dealing with them separately, or by financing them as opposed actors in order to create “balance”, donors risk further exacerbating polarization and confrontation between the two spheres in Bolivian politics. The government claims that many NGOs represent foreign agendas and thus do not have political legitimacy at home. Many NGOs, on the other hand,



lack confidence in the government and thus have developed by and large strong anti-state attitudes.

Instead of bringing those political spheres together, many intellectual debates have been privatized in recent years. Some of the best experts are attracted to the NGO sector, where discussions on relevant political topics are taking place. Seminars and workshops in private offices and hotels often have access to more resources than other agencies trying to promote public deliberation.

However, polarization goes well beyond the political parties of government and opposition. It affects huge parts of society, dividing them into separate camps of “pro” and “contra” Evo Morales and his attempts to run for the 2019 presidential elections. As the tone of political debate becomes increasingly aggressive, yet lacks any political substance, Bolivians’ distrust of the political parties is growing. Many are even questioning the existing system of political representation.

We are therefore likely to see a paradigm shift within the political culture over the next few years, with a younger generation redefining the “political” and questioning the current “left-right divide”.

Unfortunately though, democracy support doesn’t play a constructive role in forming and supporting the ongoing transformation of political culture. Rather, it sticks to old concepts. By ignoring the correlation of forces, democracy support programs are likely to sharpen polarization, if unintentionally.

Some ideas and recommendations

As a response to the abovementioned approaches, their wrong assumptions and their doubtful implications for political

culture, I would like to present some alternative ideas and entry points. These are recommendations for donors and actors engaging themselves in supporting democracy in Bolivia and beyond. I will emphasize the need for understanding and support for transformation processes which use different analytical approaches and instruments.

- More analysis, different concepts and methods

In order to understand a changing political culture, more background analysis is needed. Political Economy Analysis (PEA) could help to emphasize the correlation of forces in the political process, to assess different actors and their respective interests, discourses and resources. This goes far beyond the institutional understanding of democracy and looks into the characteristics and contradictions within such categories as “government”, “political parties” and “civil society”. Conceiving politics as a struggle for power helps visualize concrete conflicts and identify entry points for constructive political projects. This requires different sets of analytical tools, but also working methodologies and skills that are more oriented towards facilitating the process. Even the formulation of objectives and indicators – the core of development planning and evaluation – would need to be reconsidered and would have to reflect the evolution of such longer and complex deliberative processes.

This implies that international donors and agencies would be able to question and redefine their own assumptions and concepts surrounding “democracy support”. More than 20 years after the third wave of democratization, the international context has changed. But has the international community also adapted to these changes?



In terms of utilizing Political Economy frameworks, more adaptive capacities to specific contexts could also translate into a stronger focus on discourse analysis and dialogue-orientation. In contexts of high political confrontation, international cooperation could help to design and create spaces of mutual confidence and trust, where actors of different political spheres could express their respective, legitimate concerns and observations. The presence of relatively neutral “outsiders”² could help overcome perceived deadlocks and enable different standards of political communication. These are extremely delicate steps, aimed at transforming the political culture rather than changing the internal constitutions of actors or institutions.

- Transformative Change Making

What is needed in a transactional political culture, dominated by mental “friend-enemy” schemes, is a more transformative approach to democracy support. Instead of aiming to improve “capacity building” for specific actors, the focus should be on building platforms for intellectual discussions, and creating coalitions for change across political boundaries. Rather than raising awareness of certain topics or reforms, the objective should be to proactively (re)value the creation and expansion of public spaces so much needed for political deliberation. A similar transformation would strengthen the strategic and communicative capacities of pro-democracy actors and groups, and enable them to work for a different development paradigm, going beyond purely

technical assistance. Such an understanding of “democracy support” would change the role of international donors and agencies quite dramatically, but also empower local partners to work in more innovative and effective ways. But this only works if we go beyond the categories of “state” and “civil society” and look into the political correlations of forces for change.

In Bolivia, this could include the formation of different spaces for political analyses and reflection, attempting to overcome the actual confrontation between “left” and “right”. In a deadlock political situation, the discussion of a new common, long-term vision shared by a broad group of actors could help to abstract from the current situation.

Beyond the instrumental understanding of “democracy”, it would be useful to facilitate a substantial debate about the different forms and notions of democracy established in the Bolivian Constitution (as mentioned in the first chapter). The lack of trust in political institutions might be indicative of the need for another political culture. In the meantime, it might also be useful to consider socio-economic aspects: one reason why the support for democracy is falling in Bolivia³ might be that the government is no longer able to fulfill the expectations of the changing population. Therefore, we also need a different debate about the provision of and access to public goods in the context of the vision of *vivir bien*. In order to support the evolution of new coalitions for change, we need to involve younger actors other

² In the current context of Bolivia, the EU has the potential to play such a constructive role through its various actors and its access at different levels. This might also apply for some other external actors; the German political foundations have done this in their engagements for democracy, human rights and justice in a number of contexts.

³ According to the latest reports from Latinobarómetro, the support to “democracy” in the Bolivian population has fallen 5 per cent from 2016 to 2017 (from 64% to 59%), but is still slightly higher than the overall regional average (53%).



than the “usual suspects” of urban middle class NGOs. By applying the aforementioned analytical frameworks and processes, it is likely that more innovative proposals for transformative projects and narratives will emerge.

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Pie de imprenta

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Bolivia

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La Paz - Bolivia

ISBN: 978-99974-0-163-2

DL: 4-4-1496-18

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