



INDIGENOUS TERRITORIAL AUTONOMY AND SELF-GOVERNMENT IN THE DIVERSE AMERICAS

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Indigenous Autonomy in Bolivia: From Great Expectations to Faded Dreams

John Cameron and Wilfredo Plata

The recent story of Indigenous autonomy in Bolivia has followed a path from political struggle to high expectations to faded dreams. Indigenous autonomy was a central demand of Indigenous protest movements in Bolivia in the 1990s and early 2000s. Hopes for Indigenous self-government and territorial control were high when Evo Morales was elected as the first Indigenous president of Bolivia in 2005 and the country implemented a new ‘plurinational’ constitution in 2009. However, although Morales and the Movement to Socialism (MAS) political party highlighted Indigenous autonomy as a central pillar of plurinationalism, in practice the government seriously constrained Indigenous rights to self-government through secondary laws and complex bureaucratic procedures.

In this chapter, we analyse the evolution of the institutional framework for Indigenous autonomy in Bolivia, the political and economic forces that shaped that framework, and the responses of Indigenous peoples to it. Our central argument is that the political and economic imperatives of the Morales government to control extractive resources and rural voters took priority over the implementation of the right to Indigenous autonomy. In this context, some Indigenous communities have continued to struggle for self-governance and

territorial control, but many others chose to pursue pragmatic and hybrid strategies to govern themselves through already existing State institutions in ways that did not directly challenge the MAS government.

We develop this argument in four sections. In Section 1 we explain the research methods and our positionality in relation to the Indigenous communities with which we have worked. Section 2 provides a very brief history of political struggles for Indigenous autonomy in Bolivia. Section 3 analyzes the tensions and contradictions between the legal and policy framework put in place by the Morales government between 2005 and 2019 to promote Indigenous autonomy while simultaneously expanding its control over extractive resources and consolidating its rural political support base. In Section 4 we explore the diverse responses of Indigenous communities to the legal framework for Indigenous autonomy – with some seeking to take advantage of the new, albeit limited, political opportunity for self-governance, some ignoring it, and others explicitly rejecting it. In the concluding section, we speculate on the possible futures of Indigenous autonomy in Bolivia in the context of the 2019-20 political crisis and the return of the MAS to political power following the elections of 2020.

Research Methods and Positionality

Like many other researchers and supporters of Indigenous struggles for self-government and territorial control, we were both excited when the Bolivian government established a new legal framework for Indigenous autonomy in 2009. Initially, we focused our attention on the Indigenous communities where struggles for autonomy appeared to be most advanced, in particular in six of the eleven predominantly Indigenous municipalities that voted to convert their systems of local government to Indigenous autonomies in State-organized referenda in 2009: Jesús de Machaca and Charazani (La Paz Department), San Pedro de Totora (Oruro Department), Tarabuco and Mojocoya (Chuquisaca Department) and Charagua (Santa Cruz Department) (see Table 4.1). Our research methods involved a combination of participant observation, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with Indigenous leaders. Most importantly, we observed hundreds of hours of community meetings in the six municipalities where community delegates debated the institutional design of their future autonomous local governments, which also created many opportunities for informal conversations with local

Indigenous leaders as well as State officials and NGO personnel. Wilfredo Plata also participated in many dozens of meetings with officials from the Ministry of Autonomy and NGOs in the ‘Inter-Institutional Platform of Support for Indigenous Autonomy’ – a loosely structured group of NGOs and the Indigenous Autonomy Unit within the government’s Ministry of Autonomies (restructured as a vice-ministry in 2017).

It gradually became clear to us that the six municipalities where we had focused our attention did not represent the diversity of Indigenous perspectives on Indigenous autonomy in Bolivia. Indeed, numerous Indigenous leaders explicitly rejected the idea of converting their municipal governments into Indigenous autonomies. We encountered various reasons for this apparent disinterest, including political manipulation by MAS party activists, a lack of information about Indigenous autonomy in rural communities, and political pragmatism on the part of Indigenous leaders who wanted to avoid expensive, complicated and conflictual changes to their systems of governance. Other Indigenous leaders were clearly committed to the so-called “process of change” led by the MAS government to strengthen the rights and well-being of Indigenous peoples (and all Bolivians) through control of the central state rather than by strengthening Indigenous autonomy. Moreover, we also encountered perspectives that reflected an internalization of racist ideologies that rejected Indigenous norms, culture and modes of governance as backward steps away from development and modernization (see Plata & Cameron, 2017).

Recognizing the diversity of Indigenous perspectives, we expanded the scope of our research to also include ten municipalities with predominantly Indigenous populations whose leaders had taken decisions not to exercise their rights to Indigenous autonomy. A first group of six municipalities is located in the Province of Ingavi in the Department of La Paz: Desaguadero, Guaqui, San Andrés de Machaca, Taraco, Tiwanaku and Viacha. A second group of four municipalities is located in the Department of Chuquisaca: Tarvita, Tomina, Yamparavez and Zudáñez. We chose these ten municipalities because Indigenous leaders in them actively debated Indigenous autonomy and also because one or more neighbouring municipalities were directly engaged in the process to convert to an Indigenous autonomy. In sum, the decisions to not convert to Indigenous autonomies in these ten municipalities represented conscious decisions, not a lack of information or debate.

Table 4.1. Indigenous Autonomy processes in Bolivia

Municipality and Department	Route to Indigenous Autonomy (Municipal/ Indigenous Territory)	Population	Indigenous Population	Results of the 1st Referendum on conversion to Indigenous Autonomy		Results of the final Referendum on the Indigenous Autonomy Statute		Current Status of Indigenous Autonomy Process
				Yes	No	Yes	No	
Fully established Governments of Indigenous Autonomy (4)								
Charagua (Santa Cruz)	Municipal	24,427	67.02%	55.66% (2009)	44.34%	53.25% (2015)	46.75%	Government of Indigenous Autonomy established in 2017.
Chipaya (Oruro)	Municipal	1,814	97.08%	91.69% (2009)	8.31%	77.39% (2016)	22.61%	Government of Indigenous Autonomy established in 2018.
Raqaypampa (Mizque - Cochabamba)	Indigenous Territory	7344	--			91.78% (2016)	8.22%	Government of Indigenous Autonomy established in 2017.
Salinas de Garci Mendoza (Oruro)	Municipal	8,723	95.59%	75.09% (2009)	24.91%	51.80% (2019)	48.20%	Government of Indigenous Autonomy established in 2020
Municipalities and Indigenous Territories with Autonomy Statutes approved by the Plurinational Constitutional Tribunal (6)								
Pampa Aullagas (Oruro)	Municipal	2,975	98.39%	83.67% (2009)	16.33%			Autonomy Statute approved in 2016. Waiting for local approval.
Lomerio (Santa Cruz)	Indigenous Territory	6,481	89%					Autonomy Statute approved in 2018. Waiting for national law to approve the government of Indigenous Autonomy.
Corque Marka (Oruro)	Indigenous Territory	8,412	--					Autonomy Statute approved in 2018. Waiting for national law to approve the government of Indigenous Autonomy.

Territorio Indígena Multiétnico - TIM I (San Ignacio de Moxos, San Borja y Santa Ana - Beni)	Indigenous Territory	3,265	--						Autonomy Statute approved in 2017. Waiting for national law to approve the government of Indigenous Autonomy.
Kereimba Iyaambaé (Gutiérrez - Santa Cruz)	Municipal	11,393	--	63.11% (2016)	36.89%				Autonomy Statute approved in 2019. Waiting for national law to approve the government of Indigenous Autonomy.
Jatun Ayllu Yura (Tomave - Potosí)	Indigenous Territory	6,451	--						Autonomy Statute approved in 2019. Waiting for national law to approve the government of Indigenous Autonomy.
Municipalities and Indigenous Territories with completed Autonomy Statutes that have not yet been approved by the Plurinational Constitutional Tribunal (1)									
Cavineño (Kiberalta y Reyes - Beni)	Indigenous Territory	2,954	--						Preparing to present Autonomy Statute for constitutional review.
Municipalities and Indigenous Territories in the process of drafting Autonomy Statutes (2)									
Consejo Indígena Yuracaré (Villa Tunari - Cochabamba y Chimoré - Beni)	Indigenous Territory	2,358	--						In process of drafting Autonomy Statute.
Maracheti (Chuquisaca)	Municipal	7,418	--	51.25% (2017)	48.75%				In process of drafting Autonomy Statute.
Municipalities and Indigenous Territories that have fulfilled the requirements to convoke a referendum on conversion to Indigenous Autonomy (2)									
Lagunillas (Santa Cruz)	Municipal	5,283	--						Documentation under government review.
Uribicha (Santa Cruz)	Municipal	7,026	--						Documentation under government review.

Table 4.1. (continued)

Municipality and Department	Route to Indigenous Autonomy (Municipal/ Indigenous Territory)	Population	Indigenous Population	Results of the 1st Referendum on conversion to Indigenous Autonomy	Results of the final Referendum on the Indigenous Autonomy Statute	Current Status of Indigenous Autonomy Process
Municipalities and Indigenous Territories that are preparing the documents required to formally request a referendum on Indigenous Autonomy (6)						
Jatun Ayllu Toropalca (Potosí)	Indigenous Territory	5,031	--			Certificate of Ancestral Territory received. Waiting for Certificate of Governmental Viability and Population Base.
Challa (Cochabamba)	Indigenous Territory	--	--			Certificate of Ancestral Territory received. Waiting for Certificate of Governmental Viability and Population Base.
Monte Verde (Santa Cruz)	Indigenous Territory	13,679	--			Certificate of Ancestral Territory received. Waiting for Certificate of Governmental Viability and Population Base.
Pitool Lecos (La Paz)	Indigenous Territory	3,159	--			Submitted application for Certificate of Ancestral Territory.
Nueva Llaguna (Oruro)	Indigenous Territory	--	--			Submitted application for Certificate of Ancestral Territory.
Territorio Indígena Multirétnico II (Pando)	Indigenous Territory	3,594	--			Preparing documents required to apply for Certificate of Ancestral Territory.

Indigenous Territories that requested conversion to Indigenous Autonomy but do not meet the minimum population requirement (3)									
Puesto Araona (La Paz)	Indigenous Territory	116	--						Certificate of Ancestral Territory received. Does not meet population requirement.
Marka Camata (La Paz)	Indigenous Territory	1,195	--						Certificate of Ancestral Territory received. Does not meet population requirement.
Copacabana Antaquilla (La Paz)	Indigenous Territory	1,111	--						Certificate of Ancestral Territory received. Does not meet population requirement.
Indigenous Autonomy processes paralyzed by internal conflicts (11)									
Tarabuco (Chuquisaca)	Municipal	19,554	93.40%	90.80% (2009)	9.20%				Internal conflicts: Indigenous autonomy process unofficially ended.
Charazani (La Paz)	Municipal	9,161	96.62%	86.62% (2009)	13.38%				Internal conflicts: No progress since 2015
Chayanta (Potosí)	Municipal	14,165	97.85%	59.60% (2009)	40.10%				Internal conflicts: No progress since 2012.
Curva (La Paz)	Municipal	2,213	98.5%						Internal conflicts: No progress since 2014.
Turco (Oruro)	Municipal	4,160	97.4%						Internal conflicts: No progress since 2009.
Huari (Oruro)	Municipal	10,221	91.1%						Internal conflicts: No progress since 2009.
Santiago de Andamarca (Oruro)	Municipal	4,588	96.2%						Internal conflicts: No progress since 2009.
Inquisivi (La Paz)	Municipal	16,143	96.4%						Internal conflicts: No progress since 2009.
San Miguel de Velasco (Santa Cruz)	Municipal	10,273	--						Internal conflicts: No progress since 2016.

Table 4.1. (continued)

Municipality and Department	Route to Indigenous Autonomy (Municipal/ Indigenous Territory)	Population	Indigenous Population	Results of the 1st Referendum on conversion to Indigenous Autonomy	Results of the final Referendum on the Indigenous Autonomy Statute	Current Status of Indigenous Autonomy Process
Jesús de Machaca (La Paz)	Municipal	13,247	95.73%	56.09% (2009)	43.91%	Internal conflicts: No progress since 2013.
Jatun Ayllu Kirkiawi (Bolívar -Cochabamba)	Indigenous Territory	8,635	--			No progress due to internal conflicts.
Indigenous Autonomy rejected through formal referenda (4)						
Mojocoya (Chuquisaca)	Municipal	7,962	94.58%	88.31% (2009)	11.69%	Indigenous autonomy rejected in referendum in 2016.
San Pedro de Totora (Oruro)	Municipal	4,941	97.15%	74.50% (2009)	25.5%	Indigenous autonomy rejected in referendum in 2015.
Huacaya (Chuquisaca)	Municipal	2,345	63.77%	53.66% (2009)	46.34%	Indigenous autonomy rejected in referendum in 2017.
Curuhua de Carangas (Oruro)	Municipal	5,278	92.73%	45.08% (2009)	54.92%	Indigenous autonomy rejected in referendum in 2009.

Source: Elaborated by the authors with data from the Vice-Ministry of Autonomies (2019).

We are very aware that as outsiders in the communities where we conducted research, we did not hear and do not understand all the perspectives on Indigenous autonomy. Most of our research engaged with community leaders and we had few serious conversations with members of the communities who were not in positions of leadership. We also grappled seriously with ethical questions about our research and particularly the question of who should tell the stories about internal debates within Indigenous communities: outside researchers or members of Indigenous communities themselves. After many discussions, we decided that it was important for us to write about the internal divisions and debates about Indigenous autonomy to help other outside actors understand them and to respond more appropriately. There is still a tendency among some researchers to romanticize Indigenous autonomies and to assume that all Indigenous peoples support it. We decided that it is important to highlight the many different perspectives on Indigenous autonomy and to try to understand and explain those different perspectives.

The historical context for Indigenous Autonomy in Bolivia

Indigenous peoples in what is now Bolivia have struggled for a combination of autonomy from the colonial-republican State and inclusion in the state from the beginning of the colonial era (Choque Canqui et al., 1992; Irurozqui, 2000; Larson, 1998; Platt, 1987; Rivera Cusicanqui, 1984). That history is far too complex to recount in one chapter, so here we highlight two elements of the recent history of Indigenous political struggles that have had particularly important consequences for contemporary efforts to implement the right to Indigenous autonomy.

First, in 1994 the Bolivian state implemented the Law of Popular Participation (*Ley de Participación Popular* — LPP), which created more than three hundred municipal governments throughout the country, decentralized state resources to municipalities and introduced a new legal framework for municipal governments with stronger mechanisms for accountability to community members (Molina-Saucedo, 1996). The LPP was initially conceived as part of the second-wave of neoliberal governance reforms in Bolivia. However, Indigenous and peasant organizations quickly embraced the new political opportunities and gained control of hundreds of rural municipal governments throughout the country (Cameron, 2009; Postero, 2007). As a

result of the LPP, large numbers of Indigenous leaders gained important administrative and political experience in managing municipal governments and in many rural municipalities Indigenous organizations were able to wrest local political power away from local white-*mestizo* elites (see Cameron, 2009). In some municipalities, such as Jesus de Machaca in the Department of La Paz, Indigenous organizations also launched projects to create 'Indigenous municipalities' with the goal of merging Indigenous forms of governance with municipal administration (Colque & Cameron, 2009; Galindo Soza, 2009; Thede, 2011). As we explain in more detail in Section IV, in some municipalities, these experiences of hybrid governance became the foundation for subsequent struggles for Indigenous autonomy. However, in other municipalities the experience of successfully managing municipal administrations led Indigenous leaders to conclude that Indigenous autonomy was not necessary; they were able to control local power through already-existing municipal institutions with none of the risks, uncertainty or internal conflict involved in creating new systems of governance.

Second, over the course of 1995 to 2005 the Indigenous movement in Bolivia became increasingly powerful at both the local and national level, challenging the neoliberal economic policies of the elite-controlled State and electing increasing numbers of leaders to all levels of government. When the national government resorted to violence to repress opponents to the proposed privatization of water in the so-called Water War (*Guerra del Agua*) in the city of Cochabamba in 2000 and the nationwide 'Gas War' (*Guerra del Gas*) over the cheap export of Bolivian petroleum through Chilean ports in 2003, the legitimacy of the elite-dominated State finally crumbled. In 2005, with the support of Indigenous movements, Evo Morales was elected as Bolivia's first Indigenous president and the MAS political party gained control of the national congress.¹

The contradictory legal framework for Indigenous Autonomy in Bolivia

The election of Morales and the MAS generated high expectations for the recognition of Indigenous rights and the economic, political and social inclusion of millions of Bolivians who had been historically excluded from the country's development. However, the Indigenous and popular movements that brought Morales and the MAS to power represented two contradictory

political projects, resulting in serious restrictions on Indigenous autonomy. The first project was the construction of a plurinational and decolonized state through Indigenous autonomy. As anthropologist Andrew Canessa (2012) highlighted, this project represented the struggle of Indigenous peoples to protect themselves from the State. The second project was the so-called “process of change” of the MAS party to gain control of State power in order to best respond to the needs of the majority of Bolivians who had been historically excluded from the country’s development. Over the course of Morales’ three terms in government, the contradictions between these two political projects became much clearer and the possibilities for exercising Indigenous autonomy were increasingly constrained.

Indigenous Autonomy in the first MAS government (2006-2009)

In response to the demands of Indigenous and popular organizations, the newly elected Morales government convoked a constituent assembly, which met between 2006 and 2007, to draft a new plurinational constitution with a strong emphasis on Indigenous rights. To negotiate with greater power, the major Indigenous and peasant organizations established a ‘Unity Pact’ which presented a collective proposal for the new constitution and initially supported the government’s positions (Garcés, 2010). Key elements within the Unity Pact’s proposal included the recognition of Indigenous rights to autonomy based on the reconstruction of pre-colonial territories and governed by the norms of each Indigenous nation or people, including the power to administer systems of justice and the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent in relation to the extraction of non-renewable natural resources (Garcés, 2010, p. 80).

However, as a result of the negotiation process and the power of the MAS government, the final text of the 2009 Constitution recognized only a highly restricted version of the right to Indigenous autonomy (Garcés, 2010). Article 2 of Bolivia’s 2009 Constitution recognizes the right of Indigenous peoples to autonomy:

Given the pre-colonial existence of nations and rural Indigenous peoples and their ancestral control of their territories, their free determination, consisting of the right to autonomy, self-government, their culture, recognition of their institutions, and the

consolidation of their territorial entities, is guaranteed within the framework of the unity of the State, in accordance with this Constitution and the law.

To implement the right to Indigenous autonomy, the Constitution created the legal category of Indigenous First Peoples Peasant Autonomy (*Autonomía indígena originaria campesina* — AIOC).² Chapter Seven of the Constitution (Articles 290 – 296) briefly outlined the basic process for Indigenous municipalities and territories to convert to Indigenous autonomies and to create autonomous regions, which were to be detailed in a subsequent secondary law. However, the Constitution also imposed important restrictions on the right to Indigenous autonomy, which became even more pronounced when the government introduced the secondary laws to implement the rights outlined in the Constitution. First, the Constitution establishes an administrative-legal hierarchy in which Indigenous autonomy is subordinate to the central state (Tapia 2011). Second, although the constitution recognizes the right to autonomy based in “ancestral territories” (Art. 290), the mechanisms to create Indigenous autonomies were limited to the conversion of municipal governments and legally recognized Communal Lands (*Tierras Comunitarias de Origen* — TCOs), renamed as Indigenous First Peoples Territories (*Territorios Indígena Originaria Campesinas* — TIOCs). The constitutional recognition of only these two pathways to Indigenous autonomy undermined the hopes of many Indigenous organizations to reconstruct systems of governance based on pre-colonial territories, which were generally much bigger than municipalities and TIOCs.

Bolivia’s 2009 Constitution also limits the power of Indigenous peoples in decisions about the extraction of natural resources from their territories. Article 349 reserves for the central state control of all non-renewable natural resources, including those within legally recognized Indigenous territories. Article 359 further specifies central State control over hydrocarbons, including within Indigenous territories. Although Bolivia was the first country in the world to implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples into a national law in 2007, the 2009 Constitution ignores the rights to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) recognized in the Declaration. The Constitution recognizes only the right of Indigenous peoples to prior “consultation by the State with respect to the exploitation of non-renewable natural resources in the territory they inhabit...” (Art. 30, Para. II, No. 15).

However, noticeably absent from the recognition of this right is the condition that the results of consultations are binding on the State (Garcés 2010: 80). The affirmation of State control over natural resources and the limitation of the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent poses a serious challenge to Indigenous understandings of “territory,” which generally involve not just land but also subsurface resources, as well as the water, air and spiritual connections to ancestors and non-human life within the territory (de la Cadena, 2015; Salgado, 2011). The first version of the Constitutional proposal from the Unity Pact emphasized that “our right to the land and natural resources is of special importance” (Garcés, 2010, p. 146). However, as Garcés (2011) and Tapia (2011) explain in detail, these crucial elements of the Unity Pact’s proposal for self-governance were excluded by the MAS and other political parties that negotiated the final text of the Constitution in 2008. As a result, the concept of plurinationalism articulated in the Constitution was “tamed and controlled” (Garcés, 2010, p. 30).

Indigenous Autonomy in the Second Term of Evo Morales and the MAS (2009-2014)

The contradictions between the concept of plurinationalism and MAS government policies became even more clear during Morales’ second term as president, when the MAS government promulgated a series of secondary laws and public policies to implement the rights to Indigenous autonomy recognized in the constitution. Moreover, the relations between the government and the main Indigenous organizations in Bolivia seriously deteriorated when the government revealed its determination to pursue a neo-extractivist agenda during the conflict over the construction of a highway through the Isiboro Sécore Indigenous Territory and National Park (*Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Sécore* — TIPNIS) in 2011 and 2012. At the same time, the launch of the new legal framework for Indigenous autonomy opened the doors for a series of important experiments – albeit complicated and contradictory – in the construction of new systems of Indigenous self-governance.

A few months after the promulgation of the 2009 Constitution, the MAS government introduced the secondary laws and supreme decrees to put in place the new legal framework for plurinationalism, including several laws directly related to Indigenous autonomy. In August 2009, President Morales promulgated Supreme Decree 231, which established the bureaucratic steps

for municipalities to convert systems of local governance to Indigenous autonomy (Plata, 2010; Federación de Asociaciones Municipales de Bolivia 2010). It is important to highlight that in August 2009, the legal framework for Indigenous autonomy did not yet exist. As a result, Indigenous organizations and municipal governments had to decide whether or not to initiate a process to convert to an Indigenous autonomy without knowing the legal framework that would shape their future institutional operation. Supreme Decree 231 opened a very narrow window of opportunity to comply with the bureaucratic requirements to convoke a referendum on the conversion to Indigenous autonomy in December 2009. Of the 19 municipalities that began the process, only 12 were able to comply with all the requirements (Plata, 2010, pp. 251-254; Federación de Asociaciones Municipales de Bolivia, 2010, pp. 2013-2014). In 11 of those 12 municipalities, a majority of the local population voted in favor of conversion to Indigenous autonomy. In the following years, Indigenous leaders in these eleven municipalities discovered that the path towards Indigenous autonomy was much more complex and restricted than they had imagined when they launched the conversion process.

In July 2010, the government promulgated the Framework Law on Autonomy and Decentralization (*Ley Marco de Autonomías y Descentralización* — known in Bolivia by its Spanish acronym — LMAD). The process to create the LMAD was highly contentious. High level Indigenous confederations such as CONAMAQ (*Consejo Nacional de Ayllus y Markas de Qullasuyu* — National Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyu) and CIDOB (*Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas del Oriente Boliviano* — Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Eastern Bolivia) pressured the government to eliminate a series of complex requirements to access Indigenous autonomy and produced various proposals for alternative versions of the law (CIDOB, 2010; Enlared, 2010; IWGIA, 2011, pp. 174-176). However, the government ignored those demands. In response, in June 2010, CIDOB initiated a massive cross-country protest march, named ‘The Great Indigenous March for Territory, Autonomy and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’ from the city of Trinidad, in the lowland Department of Beni, to the capital in La Paz (Wasylyk-Fedyszak, 2010). Government representatives met with CIDOB to negotiate, but the final text of the law did not respond to any of CIDOB’s objections.

The Framework Law on Autonomy and Decentralization establishes three possible routes to Indigenous autonomy: 1) the conversion of already-existing

municipalities; 2) the conversion of collectively titled Indigenous territories (*Territorios Indígena Originaria Campesinas* — Indigenous First Peoples Peasant Territories — TIOC); and 3) the creation of autonomous regions composed of two or more legally-established Indigenous autonomies. The municipal route to Indigenous autonomy is most relevant in Bolivia's highland region, where Indigenous peoples represent the majority of the population in most municipalities. By contrast, the TIOC route to autonomy is most relevant in Bolivia's eastern lowland region, where Indigenous peoples are generally minorities within municipalities – making the TIOC route the only viable legal option for enhanced self-governance in most of the lowland region (Salgado, 2011). The main innovations of the LMAD and the differences between the legal structure for Indigenous autonomies and municipal governments are that Indigenous autonomies have jurisdiction over Indigenous justice (albeit with significant restrictions) and can determine the design of institutions of self-governance according to the norms and culture of each Indigenous nation or people, again with multiple restrictions.

Despite these opportunities, the Framework Law did not respond to the principal demands of Bolivia's Indigenous confederations. The first problem was that the law restricted the administrative jurisdiction of Indigenous autonomy to the level of municipal government and in practice simply reproduced much of the system for municipal governance established in the 1994 Law of Popular Participation (López-Flores, 2017, p. 56). The 'municipalization' of Indigenous autonomy radically undermined the dreams of many Indigenous organizations to recuperate control over their pre-colonial territories, which were much larger than the geographic boundaries of contemporary municipalities. As Bolivian researcher Giorgina Jiménez observed, "although the Constitution recognized the existence of ancestral territories, Indigenous peoples can only exercise autonomy by first subjecting themselves to municipal government" (cited in Rousseau & Manrique, 2019, p. 9). Reacting to the constraints on Indigenous autonomy, various Bolivian Indigenous leaders mockingly referred to it as a "municipality with a poncho" (*municipio con poncho*), highlighting that the legal framework represented little more than a municipal government with Indigenous decorations.

The second problem with the Framework Law from the perspective of Indigenous organizations is the long list of bureaucratic requirements to access Indigenous autonomy, which does not respect their norms and culture – as called for by Article 290 of the constitution. For example, to convoke

the referendum to begin the process to convert to Indigenous autonomy, municipal governments must submit a formal application for a Certificate of Ancestral Territory, with evidence that the Indigenous group occupied the territory before Bolivia was colonized and with the signatures of thirty percent of the adults living in the municipality (Ministerio de la Presidencia, nd/a). Moreover, Indigenous Territories (TIOCs) must also formally apply for a Certificate of Governmental Viability and Population Base (Certificado de Viabilidad Gubernativa y Base Poblacional) to demonstrate their management capacity – according to criteria established by the State – and to show that they have a population of at least one thousand people (Ministerio de la Presidencia, nd/b). After satisfying the requirements for the referendum and winning more than 50% of the votes, municipalities and Indigenous Territories must then establish a deliberative assembly to draft an ‘autonomy statute’ that establishes the institutional design for Indigenous self-governance. The next requirement is the review and approval of the autonomy statute by the Plurinational Constitutional Tribunal (similar to a supreme court), a slow process that in practice resulted in requirements to make significant changes to the text of the autonomy statutes (see Tockman, Cameron and Plata 2015). Until 2019, the final step was a second referendum to approve the text of the autonomy statute, supervised by the central State (Ley Marco de Autonomías y Descentralización, Art. 52). However, this regulation was eliminated in 2019 in response to pressure from Indigenous organizations and replaced with a requirement to approve the autonomy statute through local norms (Ley de Modificación a la Ley Marco de Autonomías y Descentralización 2019, Art. 2).

For Indigenous peoples in the eastern lowland region, the legal requirements to create Indigenous autonomies were especially onerous. First, the municipal route to Indigenous autonomy is generally not an option because most Indigenous peoples in the lowlands are minorities within their municipalities (Salgado 2011). To access Indigenous autonomy through the Indigenous Territory route, Indigenous peoples must satisfy four legal requirements, which exclude most of them. The first condition is a population of at least one thousand people (Ley Marco de Autonomías y Descentralización, Art. 58). The second condition is the approval by the State of Indigenous governance capacity and the granting of a ‘Certificate of Governmental Viability (Ley Marco de Autonomías y Descentralización, Art. 58). The third condition is that the Indigenous territory cannot exceed the geographical boundaries of Bolivia’s

departmental governments; the only option that the law offers for Indigenous peoples whose territories extend across departmental boundaries is to divide themselves into separate Indigenous autonomies (each in a separate department) and then create a federated structure (Ley Marco de Autonomías y Descentralización, Art. 29, III). The fourth condition is that the territories governed by Indigenous autonomies must be geographically continuous (Ley de Unidades Territoriales – Law of Territorial Units, Art. 6), which excludes more than half of the legally recognized Indigenous Territories in Bolivia’s lowland region – which are not geographically continuous. Considering these four requirements, researcher Jorge Salgado conducted a rigorous analysis of the sixty legally-recognized Indigenous Territories in the lowland region and concluded that only fifteen could possibly meet the minimum requirements to exercise Indigenous autonomy (Salgado. 2011: 223).

For the municipalities and Indigenous Territories that want to convert to Indigenous autonomy, the bureaucratic requirements appeared to be intentional obstacles to block their way. Leaders of CONAMAQ and CIDOB explained in 2011 that they felt betrayed by the government for the imposition of “so many obstacles ... so many requirements” to access Indigenous autonomy (ERBOL 2011). Reflecting on the Framework Law, José Isategua, a CIDOB leader explained:

We believe that we have been betrayed, and they [the government] always tries to make us seasick and confused with regulations. We are very upset, it is time that each Indigenous people has the right to decide its own destiny... [However] within the government of Evo Morales there is a group that does not want Indigenous autonomy. (cited in ERBOL, 2011)

Other analysts referred to the bureaucratic requirements as “a labyrinth” (Tomaseli, 2015, p. 79), “a bureaucratic odyssey” (Morell i Torra, 2015, p. 127) and “a long march” (Exeni, 2015).

The Law of Jurisdictional Demarcation, also promulgated in 2010, created further restrictions on the rights of Indigenous peoples to administer their own systems of justice (IWGIA 2011). The Law established the jurisdictional limits for ‘ordinary’ and ‘Indigenous’ systems of justice in Bolivia, leaving the latter only authority over minor legal violations within Indigenous communities, such as the theft of chickens or livestock. Gualberto Cusi, one of the

first Indigenous judges elected to the Plurinational Constitutional Tribunal, argued that the Law was “a step backwards from decolonization” (La Razón. 2012a), while Leonardo Tamburini (2012), the former director of an NGO focused on Indigenous rights, described the law as “unconstitutional.”

The rights of Indigenous peoples to be consulted prior to the natural resource exploration and extraction in their territories were also constrained by the 2010 Law of Electoral Regimes (*Ley de Régimen Electoral*), the 2014 Law of Mining and Metallurgy (*Ley de Minería y Metalúrgica*), and a series of supreme decrees. The Law of Electoral Regimes specified that the results of consultations with Indigenous communities are not binding on the government and that they must only “be considered” in the State’s decisions (Art. 39) – a serious weakening of the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent recognized in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). The Law of Mining and Metallurgy eliminates the right to consultation from the prospecting and exploration stages of natural resource extraction (Art. 207, Para II), facilitates State expropriation of water resources (Art. 111-112) and effectively criminalizes opposition to natural resource extraction (Art. 99-101) (Schilling-Vacaflor, 2017). Deeply concerned about these restrictions on their rights, the Indigenous organizations CIDOB and CONAMAQ organized protests calling on the government to rescind the laws while Raul Prada, a Bolivian intellectual and former advisor to the MAS government, labelled the legal framework for prior consultation as a tool of “ethnocide” (Prada, 2013).

Beyond the formal legal framework, the implementation of public policies and the functioning of the machinery of the state operated in ways that simultaneously supported and constrained the right to Indigenous autonomy. In 2009, the government created the Vice-Ministry of Indigenous First Peoples Peasant Autonomies and Territorial Organization within the Ministry of Autonomy to support the creation of new Indigenous autonomies. Although the staff within the Vice-Ministry were generally committed to the goals of Indigenous autonomy, they lacked the human and financial resources to respond to requests for technical assistance or even to effectively disseminate information about Indigenous autonomy. As a result, State technical assistance to support the creation of Indigenous autonomies was weak and often totally absent. Various municipal authorities in the Departments of La Paz and Chuquisaca explained to us that the lack of State resources to help pay for the costs of converting to Indigenous autonomy was one of the

main reasons that they decided not to pursue conversion. Moreover, in many municipalities, accurate information on the legal implications of Indigenous autonomy was completely missing, making it impossible for local Indigenous organizations to seriously discuss and debate their options for self-governance. The lack of accurate information also contributed to situations in which opponents of Indigenous autonomy could easily spread and exploit false rumours, which further weakened popular demands for Indigenous autonomy.

During the second MAS government (2009-2014), the relationships with Indigenous federations deteriorated seriously and it became clear that Indigenous autonomy was not a priority for the State. The breaking point was the violent police repression in 2011 of the Indigenous protest march against government plans to build a highway to Brazil through the Isiboro Sécure Indigenous Territory and National Park (Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Sécure – TIPNIS) without respecting the rights of prior consultation and consent (Fundación TIERRA 2012). As a result of the state repression, CIDOB and CONAMAQ withdrew from the Unity Pact that had supported the government since 2005. MAS Activists responded – with police support – by seizing control of CIDOB offices in 2012 and CONAMAQ offices in 2013 and putting MAS supporters into positions of power, thus dividing and seriously weakening both organizations (Achtenberg, 2014). Only with the political crisis and collapse of the MAS government in 2019 were CONAMAQ and CIDOB able to begin to reconstruct (Página Siete, 2019).

At the local level, the opposition of MAS activists to Indigenous autonomy was clear from 2009. In various municipalities, such as Jesús de Machaca, MAS leaders competed in local elections in direct opposition to the Indigenous organizations struggling to convert their municipalities to Indigenous autonomy. In the municipality of Charagua, local MAS leaders opposed the struggle for Indigenous autonomy (Albó, 2012) and only very gradually reached an alliance with the Assembly of the Guaraní People (Asamblea del Pueblo Guaraní - APG) that led the process (Morell i Torra, 2015, 2018; Postero, 2017, pp. 168-171). Although there was no evidence that local MAS opposition to Indigenous autonomy was directed by the central State, it is clear that the senior leaders of the MAS party did little to restrain the local activists. In the sub-national elections of 2010 and 2015, the MAS became the hegemonic party at the municipal level, winning more than 67% of the positions for mayor and more than 50% of the seats for municipal councilors (Órgano Electoral Plurinacional, no date). With the control of

more than 200 municipalities (out of a total of 342 in 2020), the MAS mayors and councillors could suffocate incipient movements for Indigenous autonomy through the control of information. In many cases, MAS mayors and councillors were able to formally reaffirm the municipal mode of governance without any public debate about Indigenous autonomy.

Indigenous Autonomy in the third term of Evo Morales and the MAS (2014-2019)

During its third mandate, the MAS government centralized its power even further,³ resulting in considerable reductions of poverty throughout Bolivia but also a continual weakening of Indigenous rights. However, after trying to win a fourth mandate in the 2019 national elections, the MAS government collapsed in a political crisis when the Organization of American States declared irregularities in the vote counting (Turkowitz, 2020; Molina, 2020). In response to pressure from the police, military and various social groups, President Morales resigned and fled the country, while the ultra-conservative Senator Jeanine Áñez took over the presidency. Although Áñez initially declared that her only role would be to convoke new elections, she used the COVID-19 crisis to extend her mandate to November 2020 and acted quickly to undermine many MAS government policies and to intimidate its leaders.

Prior to the 2019 political crisis, the government decision with the biggest impact on Indigenous autonomy was the reduction of the Ministry of Autonomies into a Vice-Ministry within the Ministry of the Presidency. With this change, the unit responsible for promoting Indigenous autonomy “suffered a drastic reduction of personnel and resources” (Espinoza, 2017), weakening even further its capacity to support the conversion of municipalities and Indigenous territories to Indigenous autonomies (Postero & Tockman, 2020, p. 5). Luz María Calvo, the director of an NGO, commented “in the current unit for Indigenous Autonomy ... the institutional capacity is much weaker, to the point that in Cochabamba [Bolivia’s third largest city] there is no office and no staff” (Opinión, 2017).

Despite the lack of technical assistance from the government, between 2014 and 2019 10 municipalities and 18 Indigenous territories started the process to convert to the legal status of Indigenous autonomy (see Table 1). However, the autonomy processes subsequently collapsed in six of those 10 municipalities as a result of internal conflicts, while in the majority of the

Indigenous territories the conversion processes have been very slow, largely because of the lack of technical assistance to comply with the state's bureaucratic requirements as well as internal conflicts. At the time of writing (in June 2021), only four municipalities and one Indigenous territory had successfully passed through all the steps to establish new governments of Indigenous autonomy.

In the context of the weakening of the right to Indigenous autonomy it is important to recognize the positive changes in the well-being of many thousands of Indigenous Bolivians as a result of the developmentalist and neo-extractivist policies of the MAS government. According to Bolivia's national statistical institute, between 2005 and 2018 extreme poverty declined from 38.2% to 15.2%, while "moderate poverty" declined from 60.6% to 34.6% of the population (INE, 2019). Moreover, through the symbolic recognition of Indigenous cultures by the state, many thousands of Indigenous Bolivians also came to feel included as citizens for the first time in their lives (Postero, 2017). Only by understanding these positive changes brought about through MAS government initiatives is it possible to understand the relative absence of strong criticism of the weakening of State support for Indigenous autonomy. The central problem for Indigenous peoples was that the national development policies on resource extraction responsible for the reduction of poverty also conflicted directly with their rights to self-governance over their territories.

Indigenous Autonomy after the 2019 Political Crisis

The political and social power of the Indigenous organizations that had been the central advocates for Indigenous autonomy was seriously weakened by the aftermath of the 2019 political crisis. The racist attacks of the interim government of Jeanine Áñez (2019-20) forced Indigenous organizations into defensive positions. When the MAS won a fourth term in power in the elections of October 2020, with Luis Arce as President, a new set of actors had captured the locus of popular social and political power, the so-called 'intercultural communities' (*comunidades interculturales*) of the lowland region.

The 'intercultural communities' initially referred to themselves as 'colonizers' (*comunidades colonizadores*). They represented poor, landless and predominantly Indigenous families from the highland region who migrated

to the lowland region in response to offers of land and other resources from the Bolivian State (Escárzaga, 2011). The numbers of migrants increased rapidly following the implementation of a new agrarian law in 2009 (*Ley de Reconducción Comunitaria de la Reforma Agraria* — LRCRA), which empowered the State to provide land grants in the lowland region to migrants from the highlands, along with promises of local infrastructure. In 2009, the national organization representing this constituency of migrants removed the term ‘colonizer’ from its name to become the Sindical Confederation of Intercultural Communities of Bolivia (*Confederación Sindical de Comunidades Interculturales de Bolivia* — CSCIB), with dozens of member organizations representing over a million Bolivians (Escárzaga 2011). Closely aligned with the MAS government, the CSCIB and its member organizations effectively took over the political and social power previously held by Indigenous organizations such as CONAMAQ and CIDOB. As a result, by 2021, Indigenous autonomy was no longer a central topic of political debate in Bolivia and few Indigenous actors were advocating for its revival.

The MAS Government’s Opposition to Indigenous Autonomy

The policies of the MAS government on Indigenous autonomy appear to be deeply contradictory, especially before the political crisis of 2019. On the one hand, representatives of the government repeatedly emphasized that Indigenous autonomy was one of the central pillars of the plurinational state, particularly during the first two terms in office from 2006 to 2015.⁴ On the other hand, the government established a legal framework that restricted the right to Indigenous autonomy and failed to invest any serious resources to promote access to even the limited opportunities to enhance Indigenous self-governance. Two factors explain this contradictory position. The first factor is the MAS government’s neo-extractivist national development strategy, which is based on the social redistribution of rents on mineral and hydrocarbon resources. The second factor is the MAS party’s determination to control and expand its core base of political support in rural municipalities. It is important to highlight that although the MAS government came to oppose Indigenous autonomy in practice, it maintained a discourse on Indigenous rights that did not explicitly oppose the idea of Indigenous autonomy (see Postero, 2017).

Neo-extractivism: Since the beginning of the colonial period, Bolivia's economy and state have depended on non-renewable resource extraction (Dunkerley, 1984; Klein, 1992; Morales, 2010). Since the MAS came to power in 2005, Bolivia's economy has been more dependent on natural resource exports than any other country in Latin America (CEPAL, 2011, pp. 101, 2018: 41). The MAS government's national development strategy has combined increased mineral and hydrocarbon extraction with increased State rents on extractive activities, social redistribution of those rents and a nationalist discourse of resource control - all in the context of a global spike in resource prices (Kohl & Farthing, 2012; López, 2015, 2016). Labelled as 'neo-extractivism' (Acosta, 2011; Gudynas, 2009). This national development strategy resulted in a significant increase in State revenues, increased social investment, significant reductions in material poverty, and significant popular support for the government and its extractive economic model (Canessa, 2012; Kohl & Farthing, 2012). For example, the Bolivian State has made it very clear that social funds, such as the *Bono Juancito Pinto* for schoolchildren, *Bono Juana Azurduy* for mothers with infants, and credit distributed by the Productive Development Bank, as well as State support for municipalities and universities, are tied to rents on resource extraction (Mayorga, 2011, pp. 64–67). The nationalist political discourse and social investment policies of the MAS government generated considerable popular support for the neo-extractive economy from Bolivian citizens, including many who self-identified as Indigenous. However, as various observers have highlighted, this development strategy conflicts directly with the hopes for increased autonomy and territorial control of many Indigenous communities where valuable natural resources are located (Mayorga, 2011, p. 86; López, 2016, 2017).

It is against this political-economic backdrop that the lack of resources and political support for the implementation of the legal framework for Indigenous autonomy must be understood. A serious implementation of the right to Indigenous self-governance in Bolivia could have massive implications for the territorial organization and fiscal capacity of the Bolivian State. According to data analysed by Albó and Romero (2009, p. 22), in the highland region 73 out of 252 municipalities include populations in which over 90 percent self-identify as Indigenous, which in theory could easily convert to Indigenous autonomy. In the lowland region, Indigenous peoples are a minority in most municipalities, but have gained State recognition for 60 Indigenous Territories, many of which have expressed interest in Indigenous

autonomy (Salgado 2010). Countrywide, the 190 Indigenous Territories that had been legally recognized by 2011, represented 19% of Bolivia's national territory. If the long list of Indigenous Territories that have not yet been legally recognized is added, the proportion of national territory under the jurisdiction of Indigenous autonomy would be more than 35 percent (Fundación Tierra, 2011, p. 46). It is precisely in these territories where the most important mineral and hydrocarbon reserves are located (Fundación TIERRA, 2011, pp. 127-137).

State control of non-renewable natural resources does not undermine the aspirations for autonomy of all Indigenous groups, as many of them occupy territories that are devoid of strategic natural resources. Indeed, many of the municipalities and Indigenous territories engaged in conversion to Indigenous autonomy fall into this category. However, in the context of a single legal framework for the entire country, Indigenous control of Indigenous territory is not compatible with the state's neo-extractive development model. As Bolivian scholar and public intellectual Raúl Prada argued,

The government's project ... is to preserve, continue, extend and deepen the colonial extractivist model of dependent capitalism, in addition to restoring and consolidating the nation-state, nullifying the possibilities of building the plurinational community and autonomous state. From this extractivist perspective, dependent and subordinate to international capital, as well as to the world imperial order, in the condition of a nation-state, the government cannot accept consultation with free, prior and informed consent, nor can it guarantee the rights of nations and indigenous peoples, or respect their territories, their autonomy, self-government and self-determination, established by the Constitution. (Prada, 2013, pp. 4-5)

The only way to resolve the contradictions between neo-extractivism and Indigenous autonomy is to separate the control of non-renewable natural resources from the jurisdiction of Indigenous self-governance. Some Indigenous peoples in Bolivia have accepted this constraint, such as the Guaraní people of the Chaco region in Eastern Bolivia. As Schilling-Vacaflor explained, the Guaraní seek to exercise their right to autonomy, but they generally do not expect to be able to stop hydrocarbon extraction within their territories; rather,

they aim to minimize the negative impacts of extraction and maximize the benefits.

Rural political control: The reticence of the state toward Indigenous autonomy also needs to be understood in the context of the efforts of the MAS party to win municipal elections as a strategy to build a base of popular support and to control local political power (Cameron, 2009; Harten, 2013; Komadina y Komadina, 2007; Postero, 2007, 2017). By contrast, one of the central goals of Indigenous autonomy movements in many municipalities is to exclude political parties from the systems for choosing local political authorities. All of the autonomy statutes completed to date involve electoral systems that block participation by political parties, which are widely criticized for distorting local political decision-making (see Tockman, Cameron y Plata, 2015; Postero, 2017, p. 168). In this context, any large-scale conversion of municipal governments to Indigenous autonomies would seriously undermine the MAS party's rural political networks and control of political power.

Indigenous responses to the framework for Indigenous Autonomy

The Bolivian government launched the legal framework for Indigenous autonomy in August 2009 with a massive spectacle full of Indigenous symbols and President Morales presiding over the ceremony.⁵ At that time, many Indigenous leaders throughout the country as well as their supporters in NGOs and universities were optimistic that the new Framework Law on Autonomy and Decentralization would open the door for Indigenous peoples to finally exercise their rights to self-government. However, for the Indigenous leaders in the municipalities and Indigenous Territories involved in conversion to Indigenous autonomy, the process has been slow, frustrating and often conflictual. According to data from the Vice-Ministry of Autonomies, of the 22 municipalities that entered the process to convert to an Indigenous autonomy, three successfully completed the process and five were in various stages of progress while four had rejected Indigenous autonomy in local referendums and 10 were embroiled in local conflicts that completely paralyzed the autonomy process. Of the 18 Indigenous Territories engaged in conversion to Indigenous autonomy, just one (Raqaypampa) has completed the process, while five are near completion, one is in the early stages of the process, seven are preparing the documents to request access to the conversion process, one

is paralyzed by internal political conflicts, and three initiated the process but were denied because they lack the minimum population (see Table 1).

It is important to analyse these cases in the context of the full spectrum of municipalities and Indigenous Territories in Bolivia. In 2020 there were 342 municipalities. When the Indigenous autonomy process was launched in 2009, two teams of researchers identified the municipalities that had sufficiently large Indigenous populations to hypothetically convert to Indigenous autonomy. Albó and Romero (2009) identified 215 of 252 municipalities in the highland region where Indigenous peoples represented more than 50% of the population and 73 municipalities where they represented more than 90% of the population. Colque (2009, p. 48) identified 173 municipalities in the highlands where 80% or more of the population self-identified as Indigenous. In sum, of the total number of municipalities that could hypothetically convert to an Indigenous autonomy, very few initiated the process and even fewer have been able to satisfy the bureaucratic requirements to complete the process. In the lowland region of Eastern Bolivia the situation is very different as Indigenous peoples there have expressed much more interest in establishing governments of Indigenous autonomy to govern their territories but the legal requirements prevent most of them from doing so. Beyond the two municipalities in the lowland region that began the conversion process in 2009 (Charagua and Huacaya), researcher Jorge Salgado identified five other municipalities (from a total of more than 100) and fifteen Indigenous Territories (from a total of 60) that could theoretically satisfy the requirements to convert to an Indigenous autonomy (Salgado 2011: 223). Ten years later, five municipalities in the lowland region have initiated the process to convert to an Indigenous autonomy and six Indigenous Territories have done so (see Table 1).

These numbers point towards the diversity of responses from Indigenous peoples to the opportunities to create governments of Indigenous autonomy. Some Indigenous peoples – especially in the lowland region – want to establish Indigenous autonomy but cannot meet the State’s requirements to do so, while other Indigenous peoples – especially in the highland region – could satisfy the legal requirements for conversion, but have chosen not to do so. Beyond the legal and political restrictions put in place by the MAS government, we see four main factors within predominantly Indigenous municipalities and Indigenous Territories that help to explain the apparent disinterest in Indigenous autonomy. We have explored these ideas in detail in other

publications (Plata & Cameron, 2017; Cameron, 2013) so here we just explain them briefly.

The MAS Government's "Process of Change" and Political Hegemony in Rural Municipalities

The first election of the MAS to political power in Bolivia in 2005 opened the doors to two big but contradictory political projects. The first project and central objective of the MAS governments is the "process of change" that aims to improve the wellbeing of historically excluded social groups through control of the central State. The second project is the construction of a plurinational state based on the right to Indigenous autonomy, which represents a strategy of Indigenous peoples to protect themselves from the central State (Canessa, 2012). Faced with these two projects, many Indigenous citizens and organizations in Bolivia chose the first, a choice that has been reflected in the impressive electoral victories of the MAS at all levels of government (see Órgano Electoral Plurinacional, nd). Moreover, MAS activists in rural municipalities have worked actively to undermine Indigenous autonomy projects, with the exception of only a few municipalities like Charagua where they formed alliances with advocates for autonomy. The return of the MAS to national political power following the 2020 elections – with Luis Arce as President – also highlights and reinforces the triumph of the first political project to improve social wellbeing through control of the State. As a result, the second political project to construct a plurinational state based on Indigenous autonomy has been largely sidelined.

Political pragmatism and hybrid governance

The emphasis on the formal legal conversion of municipal governments to Indigenous autonomies in Bolivia has diverted attention from the ways that Indigenous organizations have already appropriated and adapted municipal institutions to incorporate local norms and procedures into hybrid systems of local governance (Cameron, 2013; Postero, 2017; Thede, 2012; Ströbele-Gregor, 1996). Indeed, until the right to Indigenous autonomy was formally recognized in 2009, the creation of "Indigenous municipalities" that informally mixed Indigenous norms with municipal structures was the principal strategy of governance for local Indigenous organizations seeking increased autonomy (see Colque & Cameron, 2009; Cameron, 2015). Following the implementation of the Law of Popular Participation in 1994, which created rural

municipal governments throughout Bolivia, Indigenous leaders gained control of municipal power in large numbers of municipalities, primarily in association with the MAS political party (Albó, 2002; Cameron, 2009). With over two decades of municipal experience behind them, Indigenous and peasant organizations and leaders thoroughly control local political power in many municipalities and have appropriated municipal institutions and combined them with peasant and Indigenous forms of decision-making.

To understand the relative disinterest of local Indigenous organizations in Indigenous autonomy, it is crucial to take seriously these forms of appropriation and hybrid governance. Although hybrid municipalities lack the formal features of Indigenous autonomy, they do possess some significant advantages. Most importantly, local Indigenous authorities already know how to manage municipal governments and they do not have to enter into complex, time-consuming, expensive and conflict-ridden processes to design new institutions of local governance – which they have seen other Indigenous municipalities reject in local referenda after years of work. Indeed, some critics dismissed the legal framework for Indigenous autonomy from the very beginning as nothing more than an opportunity to create “municipalities with ponchos,” that is, local governments that retain the core features of municipalities but with Indigenous name changes and other decorations to give them a superficial Indigenous appearance (see Albó, 2012, p. 297). In this context, given all of the restrictions on formal conversion to Indigenous autonomy and the relative ease of informal hybrid forms of municipal governance, the decision to continue governing through hybrid municipal systems must be understood as an appealing alternative to formal AIOC status and an important factor in understanding why more municipalities have not pursued conversion.

Examples of hybrid forms of municipal governance include the close relationships between communal authorities and municipal governments in many highland municipalities, where candidates for the positions of mayor and municipal councillor are pre-selected in communal assemblies prior to municipal elections and where the lines of accountability from the municipal government to Indigenous communities are generally strong. These informal norms do not block political parties from taking part in local elections and they do not guarantee that the candidates chosen in the assemblies will win local elections or that municipal officials will necessarily follow the directives of the Indigenous assemblies (see Colque & Cameron, 2009). However, they

do help to ensure strong lines of accountability and community control over municipal authorities. Other examples of the hybridization of Indigenous norms with municipal governance include the rotation of leadership positions among communities, the use of Indigenous languages in official deliberations and local public services, and a more general attitude of welcoming Indigenous residents in municipal offices (see Cameron 2015; Thede, 2011, p. 227). These practical forms of institutional hybridity highlight the ways in which Indigenous organizations in many other parts of the highland region have been able to control municipal power and informally incorporate local norms into systems of municipal governance – thus making formal conversion to AIOC status redundant in the minds of many Indigenous leaders.

Internal conflicts over Indigenous Autonomy within Indigenous communities

Another pragmatic consideration for many Indigenous leaders has been the high levels of conflict in many of the municipalities engaged in conversion to Indigenous autonomy. In ten municipalities, internal political conflicts over Indigenous autonomy were so intense that the conversion process completely collapsed, while three municipalities formally rejected Indigenous autonomy following divisive referendums (see Table 4.1). At the heart of those conflicts were local power struggles over both the principles of local governance and Indigenous norms as well as highly practical aspects of local power – such as the physical location of the offices of the future Indigenous autonomies.

Watching these conflicts from the outside, Indigenous leaders in many other municipalities concluded that the process to convert municipal institutions into new and unknown institutions of Indigenous autonomy was not worth the risks of internal conflict or political opposition from the Morales government. For example, Indigenous leaders in the six municipalities surrounding Jesús de Machaca all watched the conflicts over Indigenous autonomy unfold there and made explicit decisions after long debates in communal assemblies not to convert to Indigenous autonomy and to continue to govern themselves through the municipal system of governance (Plata and Cameron 2017).

Internalized racism and the quest for modernity

Beyond political pragmatism, the disinterest in Indigenous autonomy also reflects the internalization of the racist idea that Indigenous forms of

governance are backward and that only western institutions (such as the municipality) can lead rural communities to development and modernity. For example, the Indigenous mayor of Taraco, a predominantly Indigenous municipality in the Department of La Paz, asserted that Indigenous autonomy would be a “regression” because it meant “returning to the past” at a time when Taraco needed “to look to the future and become more modern (Interview with Authors 7/11/2012). We heard many Indigenous leaders compare Indigenous autonomy to giving up cell phones and other modern technology. As one Indigenous leader from Tiwanaku put it: “We don’t want to go backwards. We want to progress. We want to be modern.” The apparent rejection of Indigenous forms of governance can appear contradictory, especially after more than three decades of intense struggles for Indigenous rights. However, as anthropologist Andrew Canessa argues, the devaluation of Indigenous norms and traditions needs to be understood in the context of deeply ingrained racism in Bolivia and the ways in which Indigenous peoples “live with, resist, absorb and even reproduce it” (Canessa, 2012, p. 7). In this context, Canessa suggests that aspirations for progress and hopes for the future point toward what is perceived as urban, modern, Western and white – not “Indian” and “backward.” Amidst such deeply ingrained and internalized racism, Indigenous autonomy is not always perceived as a positive option.

Conclusion: A future for Indigenous Autonomy in Bolivia?

The triumph of the MAS in the general elections of October 2020 and the shift in political protagonism from Indigenous organizations to intercultural communities appears to have consolidated the quiet death of Indigenous autonomy in Bolivia. Recognizing the dangers of predicting the future, we anticipate that the bureaucratic-legal framework for Indigenous autonomy in Bolivia will survive, albeit marginalized from the central policies of the State and with only a small number of legally recognized governments of Indigenous autonomy. However, the political and social pressure to re-establish Bolivia with Indigenous autonomies as the core institutional components of a plurinational State has fizzled into irrelevance. In a different political context, demands for Indigenous autonomy may re-emerge, but for now Indigenous actors have shifted their energies to other political priorities.

NOTES

- 1 The MAS party won the 2005 elections with 53.73% of the popular vote (OEP, no date).
- 2 The term '*indígena originario campesino*' (IOC) was a construction of the 2006-2008 Constituent Assembly, which sought a single term to refer to all of the pre-colonial peoples of Bolivia (see Albó & Romero, 2009: 3-4; Garces, 2011). Although national leaders agreed on the term, it was rejected by many local organizations that identified with one but not all three of the combined terms. For example, in the highland region the preferred form of self-identification is *originario* (Originary or First Peoples), in the Amazon region it is *indígena* (Indigenous), and in the central valley region it is *campesino* (peasant).
- 3 The MAS party won the 2014 elections with 61.01% of the popular vote (OEP, no date).
- 4 For example, in 2011 and 2012, Gregorio Aro, then Vice-Minister of Indigenous First Peoples Peasant Autonomy and Territorial Organization emphasized repeatedly in public speeches that "without Indigenous autonomy, there is no plurinational state" (Author's notes).
- 5 See the coverage of the ceremony in the August 2009 edition of the Ministry of Autonomy's magazine *Bolivia Autónoma* <https://www.bivica.org/files/bolivia-autonomia-indigena.pdf>

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