

*PARTY POLITICS AND THE BOLIVIAN CONSTITUENT
ASSEMBLY: MAS' CONSTRAINTS TO BECOME A DOMINANT
PARTY*

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1. INTRODUCTION

As neoliberalism has followed its course in Bolivia, emerging forms of opposition to that project have recently become more salient. Most notably, indigenous movements have emerged and they have rejected neoliberalism on the basis that its distributional consequences are alien to and have affected their cultures; conversely they have promoted an alternative project, albeit with an often-contradictory programmatic platform. The access to the presidency of MAS, under the leadership of Evo Morales Ayma, and his call for a socio-cultural revolution occurred in a moment of unprecedented party system decomposition, which created a favorable political context for the emergence of an enduring party. In addition, this situation would open up spaces for innovation in defense of an alternative development project. However, MAS' most ambitious project in this direction—the reform of the National Constitution of the State—seems to face fierce opposition and dramatic challenges both from the political right and from the indigenous, nationalist, and leftist wings within the movement. These dual challenges constitute the greatest obstacles that MAS faces in carrying out its programmatic platform and its goal of becoming an hegemonic (dominant) force in Bolivian politics.

Parties and party politics have historically played a crucial role in the Bolivian policy-making process, in general, and in the constitutional reform process in particular. According to Gamarra and Malloy, “parties have always been in effect the main source of the problem of governance in Bolivia, and at the same time the only real source of any potential solution.”¹ Given the importance of parties in the current process of change, and considering that unions, indigenous groups, and other social movements have been

¹ E. Gamarra and J. Malloy. “The patrimonial dynamics of party politics in Bolivia.” In: S. Mainwaring and T. Scully (Eds.) *Building democratic institutions: party systems in Latin America*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 399-433.

excluded from the formal constitutional process, this paper seeks to answer the following questions: How could the outcomes of the CA potentially affect party politics in Bolivia, particularly MAS' desire to become a dominant party? And conversely, what are the prospects for an emerging opposition? To answer these questions I will first look at the historical difficulties for building party structures in Bolivia, and then I will frame those difficulties using the CA as a critical juncture. I will examine the technical and political problems that arose in the CA when delegates dealt with key issues of natural resources and regional autonomies, and will look at the potential effects that those changes might have on the major political parties involved in the constitutional re-writing. I argue that MAS has failed to emerge as a dominant political party because, to a great extent, it has failed to successfully address the political and economic demands of its constituency in the framework of the CA. As a consequence, MAS' negotiations with the opposition contributed to the weakening of its social base and, simultaneously, to the strengthening of the political right.

The importance of the CA lies in the fact that the political dynamics within provided a unique opportunity for political parties, from both the left and the right, to strengthen themselves and (re) build their party structures. Since 2002, political structures have been either seemingly decomposing (the parties on the right) or consolidating into political parties (particularly MAS). The CA thus offered a political opportunity context for the forces in both sides of the ideological spectrum. Whereas MAS failed to capitalize gains in this process, the forces on the right seemed to have managed to (re) emerge and regroup.

2. THE EMERGENCE OF NEW PARTIES AND THE COLLAPSE OF THE “TRADITIONAL” BOLIVIAN PARTY SYSTEM

A significant characteristic of Bolivian politics and its party system became evident after 1985, when “The turn to neoliberalism was sustained by what has become known as ‘pacted democracy’. From 1985 onwards a series of gentlemen’s agreements were concluded among the main party leaders.”² This moderate system was a direct consequence of the existence of a severe representation deficit and it forged coalitions dominated by the established political parties (MNR, CONDEPA, AND, and MIR). However, this system is currently in tatters.

Political parties are fundamental for the functioning of today’s Latin American democracies and Bolivia is not an exception to.³ Political parties are central features of Bolivia’s policy-making process and its political life, although recently this country has experienced a series of governments that were not backed up by political parties. Despite their centrality for representative democracy, parties and party systems in Bolivia have been studied by a relatively limited group of scholars. This section overviews the decentralization process in the 1990s and the 2002 general elections in an attempt to gain an understanding of the current atomization of the party system. Both these processes are historically contingent reasons that explain some of the current features of the Bolivian party system.

Decentralization and the Emergence of New Political Parties

The decentralization process initiated in the 1990s opened up political spaces and created new channels for traditionally excluded groups to participate in politics. Despite

² Willem Assies, ‘Neoliberalism and the Re-emergence of Ethnopolitics in Bolivia’ in Banting, Keith G. and Will Kymlicka. *Multiculturalism and the Welfare State: Recognition and Redistribution in Contemporary Democracies*, 307 (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³ Mainwaring and Scully 1995, Mainwaring 1999, Levitsky and Cameron 2003.

having increased the chances for ethnic groups—most notably indigenous movements—to enhance their ability to attract and mobilize a vast body of voters, the decentralization process did not involve a redistribution of resources in favor of indigenous peoples. Instead of bringing about a change in economic policies, decentralization reinforced and was an integral component of neoliberalism. That economic model would eventually lead to increasing popular protests, culminating in the October 2003 “Gas War;” the resignation of Sanchez de Lozada, the subsequent election of Evo Morales to the presidency of Bolivia, and the surge of MAS as a strong political force. Now, almost two years since Morales took power, he and his party are facing very difficult challenges around their most ambitious political project: the reform of the National Constitution of the State. Those challenges come predominantly from land and business elites in the eastern lowlands and a resurgent political right, which is currently promoting a vision of regional (departmental) autonomy and rebuilding a fragmented party structure. A study of how party politics have shaped the CA and how, conversely, the latter has reconfigured party politics is critical to gain a thorough understanding of the challenges faced by MAS and, most importantly, by the Bolivian democracy. But before doing that, it is useful to understand how the Bolivian party system has been shaped by the 2002 general elections.

2002 Elections: Consequences and Implications for the Party System

The moderate multiparty system was in place until the 2002 general elections, in which the party system began to show symptoms of decomposition or atomization. In Mayorga’s words, these elections “triggered the most far-reaching political consequences since the emergence of a moderate multiparty system and the collapse of the worker’s

movement.”⁴ In fact, the elections saw a dramatic decline of CONDEPA, MNR, MIR, and other established parties. On the other hand, these elections saw an impressive electoral performance of emerging indigenous parties; most notably, MAS that obtained 20.94% of the votes and, less significantly, MIP that obtained 6.09 % of the total vote.

Directed by Evo Morales, the MAS had entered into the political scene in 2002 when it finished second in both the presidential and legislative elections, less than two points behind the winner. Thereafter, the support for Morales gradually increased over successive electoral campaigns. On December 18, 2005, Evo Morales was elected the President of Bolivia in an unprecedented landslide victory (53% of the vote). In his meteoric political career, Morales had mobilized a wide array of constituencies until he appropriated the nearly defunct MAS and decided to participate in electoral politics (See Table 1 in the Appendix, for electoral results in the past 10 years).

Table 1 shows the decomposition of Bolivia’s party system and, since 2002, the emergence of MAS as a national force. These results are also representative of the legislative elections.

This landmark has represented a historical opportunity for deepening Bolivia’s democracy as well as a set of challenges. For Bolivia’s democracy, the MAS’ electoral success has signified the opportunity to make politics more diverse and to innovate in matters of political representation. It has also represented the challenge of overcoming growing polarization and achieving full inclusion of traditionally marginalized groups (especially indigenous peoples).

⁴ Rene A. Mayorga. “Outsiders and Neopopulism: The Road to Plebiscitary Democracy,” in Mainwaring, Scott, Ana María Bejarano, and Eduardo Pizarro Leongómez. *The Crisis of Democratic Representation in the Andes*. 169 (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006).

As already noted, in contemporary Bolivia the party system is in complete disarray. The MAS (entrenched primarily in the West) seeks to project itself as a democratic left-leaning alternative to the traditionally dominant parties but has not yet consolidated as a political party with a coherent programmatic and ideological agenda. The fragmented right (entrenched in major urban centers in the eastern lowlands) seeks to build a national party structure while promoting a regionalist vision of departmental “autonomy.” What is somewhat certain at this point is that the rise of MAS and the simultaneous decline of the traditional parties have increased the levels of polarization.

In this context, as Bolivia enters 2008, the CA has had the fundamental role of re-founding the country. The working of the assembly was, however, a battleground for the agendas of the left and the right under zero-sum logic.

3. MAS’ FAILURE TO EMERGE AS A DOMINANT PARTY

The question as to whether MAS can become a party with a stable national constituency seems to be problematic; further, its desire to become a dominant party is even more complicated. This section presents a framework for understanding party politics and party-building strategies in the Bolivian context and is broadly divided into two parts. First, an examination of the problems for building party structures is presented and will shed light on the challenges that MAS might face to become a political (and dominant) party. Second, an evaluation of the working of the CA as a case study will provide some insights into how this legal process, which was proposed by MAS and backed by an array of social movements, backfired against the movement and eroded its possibilities for becoming a dominant party.

Historical-structural difficulties for building national party structures

Collier and Collier's (1991) study on labor-party relations provides an example of how structural changes provide incentives for the creation of stable political parties. These authors look at the different policies adopted by a group of Latin American countries as a response to their emerging labor movements and the emergence of labor-based parties. They claim that the way in which Latin American politicians implemented labor policies led to the emergence of political institutions that shaped the character of labor-state relations for years to come.

The analysis of Collier and Collier offers an explanation on the emergence of Latin American parties and party systems in what can be called a "critical juncture" framework. Although the framework they provide does not transfer to the Bolivian contemporary period, other authors followed their approach and tested it in the contemporary Andean context.

Within the framework of Collier and Collier, Cameron and Levitsky offer a historical-structural framework to locate the root of the problem for building party structures in the Andes. A historical-structural approach for explaining party-building efforts suggests structural changes impose a set of incentives and constraints for politicians to build parties. In this view, "strong parties are products not of electoral engineering but of particular historical, sociological, and technological conditions, many of which are only weakly present in the contemporary period."⁵ According to this approach, the prospects for (re) building party structures in Bolivia are somewhat optimistic, although they entail a set of rather pessimistic challenges and constraints. On the optimistic side, the rise of MAS may constitute a critical juncture for the Bolivian party system; an opportunity for MAS to

become a party like MNR did in the 1950s while claiming a social revolution. On the other hand, the challenges that politicians have to face in order to build new party organizations are due to technological changes in a regional context “where exclusion from citizenship rights is an enduring legacy of colonialism and where local, indigenous cultures coexist uneasily with the individualistic notions of citizenship that underpin representative democratic institutions.”⁶ In this view, the latter constraints may inhibit the reconstruction of party structures and this situation, in turn, may reproduce patterns of path-dependency (Collier and Collier 1991). Nonetheless, this does not suggest that ambitious politicians should not carry out efforts at party rebuilding.

Another key body of work speaks directly to the difficulties of building party structures while dealing with issues of regionalism and ethnicity. With regard to Bolivia, for instance, this body of literature would ask the following question: Can the social movements and other social organizations that comprise MAS build a political structure in order to extend their social and political base nationwide if they remain identity-based? According to Mayorga, the key question is “whether these movements will be able to consolidate themselves as strictly ethnic-based parties or whether they will manage to develop as parties with a broad national constituency and political program.”⁷ This framework suggests that in a very dynamic context of economic, social, and political change it may be plausible that indigenous movements will not become political parties if they remain identity-based and do not try to appeal to a broader constituency.

⁵ Cameron and Levitsky, *Op. Cit.*, 25.

⁶ Cameron and Levitsky, *Op. Cit.*, 25.

⁷ Mayorga, *Op. Cit.*, 160.

The MAS has aimed at overcoming its origins as a network of peasant unions and indigenous movements by developing a national party structure. Its strategy to achieve this goal has two essential components, but the results are hitherto questionable. First, the MAS championed—at least rhetorically—the nationalization of natural resources (oil and natural gas) and, second, it called for the CA to radically restructure the state. The strategy, which was in tune with the guidelines of the “October Agenda” did indeed strengthen the electoral force of MAS especially in the departments of the West; however, it did not broaden the party’s constituency to the eastern departments, particularly amongst middle-class non-indigenous sectors. Moreover, the latter groups have hitherto been claiming regional autonomy with an aggressive anti-indigenous platform.

Given the insufficiencies of the frameworks presented above to address the possibilities and obstacles for the rebuilding of party structures in Bolivia, I suggest that it is also critical to consider the dominant actors in Bolivian politics and their strategic relationships. It might be fruitful to look at the relationships between relevant actors, their positions in a context of institutional reform (critical juncture), and the social forces that they reflect in that process. Understanding the strategic relationships between these actors will help gain a better understanding of the possibilities and challenges for rebuilding the Bolivian party system. In this assessment, the CA will serve both as a critical juncture and as a case study to test the configuration of the party system. Table 2 presents the main actors involved. Thereafter, the following section applies this analytical framework to the CA.

Table 2 – Key Actors and their relationships

Actors	Relationships
Executive power	The president (executive) seeks to pass his agenda through the Congress and other political institutions. The size of the president's contingent depends on the nature of the party system and other institutional rules such as the electoral system.
Political parties	They are key actors in the policy-making process in a representative democracy. They organize the work of deliberations, and articulate and aggregate the demands of citizens and organized groups
Interest groups (unions, social movements)	Influence the policy-making process, depending on the nature of their alliances with political parties and other social actors and their capacity to mobilize groups of the population. Since their behavior is not regulated in the constitution, their role in the political process is somewhat more informal.

Source: Created by the author

Case Study: The Constituent Assembly

The election of delegates to the CA provided a testing ground for MAS to fulfil its promises in matters of political representation. Despite its initial rhetoric in favor of a “representation experimentation,” which would finally subvert patterns of colonization and social exclusion, MAS’ formula for representation in the CA (CA) was far from revolutionary. MAS “rejected any form of collective representation according to ethnic criteria, trade union or neighborhood affiliation, or any of the other sorts of social association by which ordinary people organize their daily lives and express themselves politically.”⁸ In short, the only eligible candidates for the assembly would be those affiliated with a political party or with selected groups formally recognized by the state. It is worth highlighting that after having experienced a period of severe decomposition, parties regained their prominent role in shaping politics. In addition, this proved that for

MAS the CA's goal was not going to be strictly social inclusion but, instead, the configuration of a dominant force structured around MAS.

a. *Actors, Relationships and Sources of Power*

The following table provides an analytical framework for the study of party system transformation in the context of the Bolivian Constituent Assembly. It includes a list of the main actors involved in the constitutional process, their positions on this process and their sources of power. The list is not exhaustive.

Table 3 – Key Actors in the CA, sources of power, and relationships

Actors	Goals, Sources of Power and r/ships
Executive power: President Evo Morales and Vice-president Alvaro Garcia Linera	Re-found the Bolivian state; eliminate traces of neoliberalism and neocolonialism; recuperate the state as an active agent of economic development; and build a dominant political party in Bolivian politics. Sources of power: electoral legitimacy; absolute majority of delegates in the CA. Trough exercising influence, the executive dominated the agenda of the CA, and defined the ideological and political platform of MAS.
Political parties represented in the Constituent Assembly (not exhaustive)	MAS: Seeks to defend a strong developmentalist state and to consolidate a hegemonic project across national territory. It is considered a “non-traditional” party that represents the interests of indigenous peoples, predominantly in the western departments. Sources of power: electoral support; support from social movements, unions, and indigenous groups (particularly in the western departments); carried 137 delegates to the CA. PODEMOS (Social Democratic Political Force): Promotes a vision of departmental autonomy and intensifies the regionalist discourse. It is considered a “traditional” party and represents the interests of regional elites of the eastern departments. Among the right-leaning parties, <i>Podemos</i> has the widest base of support. Sources of power: broad electoral support (predominantly in the eastern departments);

⁸ Forrest Hylton, and Sinclair Thomson. *Revolutionary Horizons: Past and Present in Bolivian Politics*. (London; New York: Verso, 2007), 139.

	carried 60 delegates to the CA.
Unions, indigenous groups, and other social movements that support MAS.	They were excluded from the formal constitutional process. However, they exercised pressure and influence in the form of mobilizations and protests. Sources of power: high levels of mobilization, and capacity (know-how) to apply anti-institutional tools of pressure on political institutions.

Source: Created by the author

b. Composition of the Constituent Assembly

Elections for the delegates to the CA showed yet again that MAS was a strong political force in Bolivia. MAS managed to place 137 delegates in the CA. However, MAS failed to capture an absolute majority (170 delegates, or 2/3 of the total) thus proving to be incapable of hegemonizing the whole political space (See Table 4 in the Appendix).

The elections highlighted regional differences. Whereas MAS was stronger in the departments of the west, “*Podemos*,” which is theoretically a social democratic force, did particularly well in eastern Bolivia. *Podemos* carried a total of 60 representatives to the CA. This party did well on the eastern departments of Pando (48.4%), Beni (40.6%), Santa Cruz (24.7%), and not so well in Tarija (13.7%). It is worth noting that, unlike what is commonly believed and preached by the media, MAS also has a presence across eastern Bolivia that cannot be overlooked. This became evident in the elections for representatives, wherein MAS achieved 46.2% of the total vote in Tarija, 26.4% in Santa Cruz, 21.3% in Beni, and 37.2% in Pando. The rest of the political parties, most notably the MNR, were severely atomized and altogether managed to place 58 representatives into the CA.

In summary, what is perhaps most important in this electoral process is that the configuration of forces after the elections would, at least in theory, stimulate the dialogue and compromise between the forces involved in order to move forward with a re-writing of

the constitution. However, as the CA began to unfold, the logic of “friend-enemy” would prevail in a sort of zero-sum game and both technical and political problems affected its outcomes.

c. *Technical problems*

As it was expected, MAS and *Podemos* quickly took positions in the CA that aimed to advance their partisan interests, including those of party consolidation. *Podemos* and other forces in the right, backed by powerful landowners and business elites in the eastern departments, forced the MAS to negotiate with them technical and procedural issues that facilitated the (re) emergence of the right as a powerful actor. For example, the right was influential enough to negotiate a voting formula for the approval of each article of the new constitution. In this procedural battle, “the MAS hoped to approve articles by simple majority, while the right wanted to maintain an ambiguously written rule requiring a two-thirds majority.”⁹ Strongly defending this position as a pre-condition to participate in the CA, the right succeeded in achieving the two-thirds. As a result, the voting formula adopted in the CA required 2/3 of the votes for the approval of new articles and MAS did not have delegates in such a proportion as to pass reforms without facing the opposition and its obstacles.

Having achieved a sufficient number of delegates in the CA to block—through abstentions and “lock outs”—significant changes that were in the agenda of Morales and the MAS, the right pushed MAS to a crossroads and weakened its leadership vis-à-vis the social forces that shape the movement.

⁹ Bret Gustafson, “By Means Legal and Otherwise: The Bolivian Right Regroups,” *NACLA Report on the Americas*, January/February 2008, 23.

d. Political Problems

During the working of the CA, both MAS and Podemos launched competing hegemonic projects. Each force had a distinct view with regard to the major political problems dealt with in the CA, which corresponds to their different degrees of support across territories. The key issues discussed in the CA were hydrocarbons, the nationalization of natural resources, land reform, and—perhaps most importantly—the claims for regional autonomy.

Whereas the MAS sought to eliminate traces of neoliberalism and neocolonialism and recuperate the state as an active agent of economic development, as well as to build a dominant political party in Bolivian politics, the right (entrenched in the eastern departments) sought to intensify the regional autonomy. Bolivian gas and rich agricultural lands, which are predominantly located in the lowlands of the eastern departments, were at the center of all these issues and disputed by the left and the right. Surprisingly, however, the issues dealing with resources and regionalism were less contested than those noted on the technical problems—they were indeed the least contested throughout the process. In the case of nationalization, for example, although the new constitution reinvigorates the state property over natural resources, it does not forbid the activities of foreign companies in their extraction and processing. This reflects the level of compromise that MAS was forced to accept by the right, and suggests that this retreat of MAS will weaken its support by the social and political coalitions that support the movement. Conversely, by showing to the popular sectors that Morales and Linera's initial economic and political platforms and their "socio-political revolution" are not being carried out and that, instead, they are negotiating to the advantage of the right, this situation reinvigorates further the relative power of the latter forces and its capacity to (re) build party organizations.

4. FUTURE PROSPECTS: A RECONFIGURATION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM?

In this paper, I have argued that adopting a framework that includes relevant actors, strategic relationships, and sources of power, can help us to better understand the (re) configuration of the Bolivian party system. Working within this framework, my conclusions suggest that MAS faces serious challenges and constraints to becoming an enduring and dominant national political party unless it manages to broaden its constituency to the middle-classes in the eastern departments that are currently claiming for regional autonomy. I have suggested that MAS' failures to fulfil its electoral promises in the critical juncture created by the CA have caused tensions within the movement, demobilization, and—eventually—a weakening of the social bases that shape the MAS. Simultaneously, the political forces of the right have managed to use this critical juncture to aggressively rebuild their party structures. I have explored the plausibility of this hypothesis, and created a framework that expands the current literature of party-building efforts in the Andes.

There are several implications that stem from this analysis. One is that this situation might represent a reconfiguration of the Bolivian party system, characterized by the sudden demise of the left and the reemergence of a right that calls for regional autonomy. Another prediction is that MAS does not accept its own retreat and, in light of a growing opposition, conducts a government in the form of a traditional “delegative democracy.” Given the divisiveness of the regional issues and the ethnic divides in Bolivia, both scenarios are particularly worrisome for the Bolivian democracy.

This study has also suggested that although it is useful to understand party systems, to identify the parties that comprise them, their competitive trends over time, and so forth, there is more to be done. Another key aspect that really matters for the study of

contemporary democracies is the balance of social forces that the political parties reflect and how they relate both to the parties and to the state. Along these lines, an especially interesting area for further research would be to look at party-society linkages in Bolivia to better understand the decline of the traditional party system and its current situation. Such a study will help us further answer the following question: Is it possible to speak of a party realignment, or is this an exaggerated notion? Although this is not clear at the moment and the situation remains fluid, it is possible to say that Bolivia is facing a tumultuous conjuncture.

5. APPENDIX

Table 1 – Electoral Results in Presidential elections, 1985-2005

Partido	1985		1989		1993		1997		2002		2005	
	Resultados	%	Resultados	%	Resultados	%	Resultados	%	Resultados	%	Resultados	%
ADN 1985, 2002	493.735	32,83							94.398	3,4		
ADN-APR-POC 1987							484.705	22,26				
ADN-POC-1989			357.298	25,24								
AP (ADN-MIR) 1993					346.885	21,05						
MVR 1993	456.704	30,36	363.113	25,85	686.837	36,66	396.235	18,2	824.126	22,46	195.859	6,47
MVR-MRTK, 1993					226.816	13,77						
UCS-1989							380.728	16,11	153.210	5,51		
UCS-FDS 1989, 1997, 2002												
CONDOPA			173.459	12,25	235.427	14,29	373.528	17,16	10.398	0,37		
MIR	153.143	10,18	309.033	21,83			365.005	16,77	453.375	16,32		
MBL					88.260	5,36	87.344	3,09				
MFR									581.163	20,91	19.667	0,68
MAS									581.884	20,94	154.4374	53,74
MIP									169.239	6,09	61.848	2,157
UN											224.030	7,8
PODEMOS											82.1745	28,59
Total	1.183.582	73,37	1.202.933	84,97	1.483.205	90,02	2.037.445	93,69	2.667.719	96,0	2.857.683	99,43
Otros	403.474	26,63	212.966	15,04	164.305	9,98	139.779	6,42	111.689	4,0	16.118	0,56

Fuente: Corte Nacional Electoral

Table 4 – Partisan Composition of the Constituent Assembly

Abbreviation	Department	Circumscription	Total
AAI	0	1	1
APB	1	2	3
AS	1	5	6
ASP	1	1	2
AYRA	0	2	2
CN	2	3	5
MAS	18	119	137
MBL	1	7	8
MCSFA	0	1	1
MIR – NM	1	0	1
MNR	3	5	8
MNR-A3	1	1	2
MNR-FRI	1	7	8
MOP	1	2	3
PODEMOS	11	49	60
UN	3	5	8
Total	45	210	255

Source: Corte Nacional Electoral

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