

CHAPTER IX

CRISIS OF REPRESENTATION?

The Bolivian crisis has not occurred in isolation. In the last several years, the various Andean republics have experienced a series of democratic setbacks. In a recent analysis of the Andean case, Scott Mainwaring (2006) comes to the conclusion that “state deficiencies” are primarily to blame for the series of political crises in the Andes. In contrast to the common perception that these crises were a product of a “crisis of representation,” Mainwaring instead suggests that political representation has improved across the Andes and that political elites were particularly attuned to problems of under-representation since the 1980s. Although he focuses on state weakness as the primary factor in the Andean political crises, Mainwaring proposes a “paradox of representation”—that political elites may unintentionally contribute to political crises in efforts to improve political representation. It is this latter proposition that drives this study of Bolivia’s recent transition from political stability to crisis.

In the early 1990s, Bolivian political elites were not deaf to popular demands for greater political representation. If anything, Bolivia epitomized regional efforts to increase popular representation and political participation through various institutional reforms. The 1994 Popular Participation Law—which divided the country in more than 300 municipal units and set aside twenty percent of the national budget for these on a per capita basis—was an international success story. The sweeping reforms made during the first Sánchez de Lozada administration suggest considerable preoccupation by political elites over the issue of representation and participation. One of the first Latin American states to engage in

significant state devolution reforms, Bolivia became a model for other regional reformers.¹ Subsequent years saw continued efforts devoted to the critical evaluation of the successes (and failures) of the municipalization reforms. Even in the midst of the 2003 crisis, political elites, social scientists, international and local non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives, and leaders of social movements routinely met at conferences hosted by the various Bolivian think tanks to discuss issues of participation, representation, and political decentralization.

One of the most active of the Bolivian think tanks has been the Instituto Latinoamericano de Investigaciones Social (ILDIS). Sponsored by the German Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), ILDIS investigators and other social scientists have actively published conference proceedings and short analytical monographs for the past two decades. Monograph topics have included evaluations of the performance of uninominal deputies (Ardaya Salinas 2003), citizens' access to political information (Soruco and Eyzaguirre 1999), an evaluation of levels of citizen participation (Vacaflor, *et al* 1999), studies of territorial political representation (Zegada 1998), issues of governability (Oporto Castro 1998), and problems of representation (Verdesoto and Ardaya 1997; Rojas Ortuste and Zuazo 1996; Lazarte 1993). More recently, ILDIS has published two large volumes on the possibility—and challenges to—regional decentralization. The first is a collection of essays by members of the first conference on regional decentralization (Quiroga and Requena 2003); second is a series of in-depth interviews of Bolivian political and intellectual elites (Ayo 2004). A third volume (based on the second regional conference, which I attended) is set to follow.

¹ The Venezuelan publisher, Nueva Sociedad (one of the most significant regional publishers of political commentary and analysis), published a series of critical essays and analysis of Bolivia's municipalization reforms edited by members of Bolivia's Ministry of Human Development and its subordinate National Secretariat of Popular Participation in 1997. For a sense of comparison: Nueva Sociedad, which is also the name of a regional journal, occupies the same position among regional democratization scholars as the *Journal of Democracy* and Johns Hopkins University Press does in the United States.

Alongside ILDIS, other Bolivian think tanks—most notably the Fundación Milenio and CEBEM (through its publisher, Plural)—have also actively participated in academic study, analysis, and publication concerning the quality of Bolivian political participation and representation. There is a small, but flourishing number of Bolivian scholars who regularly publish work on the nature of Bolivian democracy, its social and political institutions, and potential reforms that can improve the quality of democracy.² There is little evidence of an inattentive political and intellectual elite.

Similarly, the reforms of the first Sánchez de Lozada regime were accompanied (and in many ways propelled) by interest in improving the quality of democracy. The 1993-1997 MNR post-electoral alliance with the MBL should not be overlooked. Though a minor party, the MBL was an active critic of elite-dominated neoliberal politics, championed anti-corruption measures, and sought to transform the Bolivian state into a more participatory and representative democracy. Like the MNR-MRTKL alliance—which shaped the multiculturalist policies of the Sánchez de Lozada presidency—the MNR-MBL alliance gave the small social democratic party incredible access to social policy decisions. With a leadership dominated by public intellectuals (many of them tied to various political think tanks), *emebelistas* influenced political decisions disproportionately to their numbers.

The 1994 Popular Participation Law was political project designed and implemented by public intellectuals, many with ties to the MBL. Rather than a product of legislative committee, the Popular Participation Law was (in large measure) the product of conferences and meetings by public intellectuals in efforts to insulate the process from “political”

² Some of this academic activity and literature stretches back to the 1980s. The issue of representation was the focus of the fifth *foro político* sponsored by ILDIS and coordinate by Carlos Mesa (see Mesa 1989); proposals to reform the electoral system were the subject of the second *foro político* (see Mesa 1988).

considerations.³ The law was explicitly designed to increase grass-roots political participation at the local level, while avoiding the potential problems that decentralization at the departmental level might produce. The project was also accompanied by an extensive social survey (Rojas Ortuste and Verdesoto 1997) of Bolivian political attitudes—particularly the question of whether there was evidence of a “democratic” political culture. Other studies of Bolivian political culture include works by Jorge Lazarte (2000) and Fernando Mayorga and Ricardo Paz (1999). Carlos Böhrh Irahola (2004) published a book about “constitutional engineering” in Bolivia. Even established political figures, such as the MNR’s Guillermo Bedregal (1996; 2000) were engaged in the public academic debate on governability and civil society. At nearly every level, political and intellectual elites were clearly responding to popular demands for greater participation, representation, and government efficacy.

Like Mainwaring (2006), we see little evidence in the Bolivian case of an elite that was disinterested or unconcerned with popular demands for an improved quality of democracy. Instead, we see a series of reforms enacted by a wide variety of members of Bolivia’s political and intellectual elite in efforts to make formal political institutions more responsive to citizen demands. And though Mainwaring too quickly shifts focus away from the question of how these reforms may themselves have partly contributed to the Andean crises, and towards the question of state deficiencies, this study instead focuses on the reforms themselves—in particular the change from a list proportional (list-PR) to a mixed-member proportional (MMP) electoral system—as a major contributor to political instability in the Bolivian case.

Like the Popular Participation Law, the changes to the electoral system were specifically designed to improve the representative function of Bolivian political parties. Yet,

³ The history of the Popular Participation Law is recounted in MDH-SNPP 1996 and MDH-SNPP 1997; for a review, see Centellas 2000.

as the evidence presented in the preceding chapters demonstrates, these reforms had the unintended consequence of polarizing the Bolivian electorate—especially along regional cleavages that were already salient. Over time, the new “local” dimension of politics exerted what Giovanni Sartori (1976) would describe as a “centrifugal” force on the political party system. Whereas the previous list-PR encouraged moderated bargaining, the new MMP electoral system provided substantial incentives for local, regionalistic, and anti-systemic parties.

But what of state deficiencies? Of course, there is considerable truth to Mainwaring’s claim that weak, ineffective, and unconsolidated states contributed to the Andean crises. But such a proposition cannot explain the timing of the Bolivian political crisis. The political crises of Ecuador and Peru were visible since the early 1990s. Why was there no similar crisis in Bolivia—which faced similar (if not worse) socioeconomic pressures as Ecuador and Peru—during that decade? Further, there is evidence that the Bolivian state was slowly becoming more (and not less) efficient during the 1990s. There was no major corruption scandal of the type that plagued the 1989-1993 Paz Zamora presidency in the subsequent period. If anything, reforms like the Popular Participation Law and the Administrative Decentralization Law increased transparency from pre-1990s levels. Similarly, the introduction of a modified jury trial system, bilingual education, the recognition of indigenous communities, and the increased resources provided to local communities by municipal decentralization improved the state’s reach across various levels of civil society.

Evidence from the Bolivian case suggests that the “state deficiencies” thesis cannot adequately explain the Bolivian crisis. Instead, the unintended consequences of institutional reforms played an important role in destabilizing the Bolivian political system. These reforms created new political elites and strengthened civil society at the local level. But they

also encouraged local, regionalistic, and anti-systemic politics at the expense of a broader “national consensus” politics. Rather than a cooperative, coalition-building game, politics was slowly transformed into “politics as war” zero-sum games. As politics became more open to increased participation, citizens’ expectations also increased as they began to make greater demands on the state and the broader political system. Meanwhile, the new electoral incentive structure encouraged new political actors to play the “blame game” against incumbents, which eroded confidence in the state and the political system. Similarly, politicians began to seek short-term political strategies in order to secure their local political base (whether at the municipal or single-seat district level).

The 1990s were a period of incredible optimism and hope for students of Bolivia’s democratization process. Unlike its other Andean neighbors, Bolivia’s state and its political elites were actively engaged in innovative reforms meant to improve the quality of democracy and increase political participation and representation. Within only a few years, the country shifted from political stability to political crisis in a dramatic fashion. Since October 2003, the country has been exceptionally polarized and on the precipice. Perhaps the most important lesson from the Bolivian case is that political reforms and “institutional engineering”—currently en vogue among social scientists—can have negative unintended consequences. Ironically, Bolivian elites are currently engaged in a profound process of “national engineering” as the country seeks to establish a new constitution (a new social, institutional contract). Hopefully, Bolivians can resolve the current crisis and develop new institutional norms and procedures—hopefully ones that will have positive long-term consequences.