

Letter from Tarija: To the Brink and Back Again

By Denise Humphreys Bebbington

In early September the ordinarily quiet provincial city of Tarija exploded into social protest. This was not a complete surprise. For weeks beforehand, regional political elites had whipped Tarijeños into a fury over regional autonomy and the defense of Tarija's financial resources generated by the payment of royalties and taxes linked to hydrocarbons production in the department¹. An indefinite strike was already underway in the Chaco, home to most of Bolivia's hydrocarbons production, with the towns of Yacuiba (Department of Tarija) and Camiri (Department of Santa Cruz) the centers of civic disobedience. Newspapers, the television and internet bloggers were abuzz with speculation about where Bolivia's worsening political crisis might lead.

Arguing that the strike was having little effect –other than increasing suffering and deprivation for local residents - Chaco political leaders sent an angry ultimatum to urbanites in Tarija and Santa Cruz to close their offices and businesses and join the blockades or face a cut-off of natural gas supplies. Members of Tarija's Civic Committee quickly voted to join the strike and called on citizens to adhere to the total, unconditional and indefinite strike. However urban Tarijeños had limited experience in organizing and participating in massive strikes. Even during the social upheaval of Black October (2003) and the *Guerra del Gas* those living in Tarija at the time say they were hardly impacted. This time would be different though, as Tarija became an epicenter of civic rebellion.

In something akin to a carnival atmosphere, members of the Civic Committee and Prefect Mario Cossío implored Tarijeños to demonstrate their regional pride and protect Tarija's revenues from being raided by central government. This struck a sympathetic chord with many Tarijeños, after all commented one observer and supporter of Morales, “the central government has a long history of ignoring the regions.” Borrowing freely from the discourses and repertoires of social movement organizations and leaders allied with the Movement Towards Socialism, MAS, Cossío and the Civic Committee organized a complete shut down of the city. Reynaldo Bayard, President of the Civic Committee, and an outspoken opponent of Morales and MAS, promised stiff resistance to central authority:

“We won't give in. The government must return the IDH to the regions and accept our proposal for autonomy. Nor will we allow the imposition of a racist and communist Constitution.”

In the days immediately prior to urban Tarija joining the strike, Prefect Mario Cossío pledged that all recently graduated high school students would be able to obtain their diplomas from secondary school free of charge², courtesy of the regional government. Not long after, public university students and members of the Tarija Youth Committee (CJT) announced their support for the strike. The Civic Committee now had the warm bodies it needed to expand the strike, allowing it to take public buildings and reinforce blockades of the region's major highways (which up to then had been carried out by regional government employees). Students, members of the CJT, and other recruits comprised the shock forces in the take over of six public buildings which included the national tax office, the customs office, the Land Reform Agency, and the Immigration office among others. University staff and faculty also participated, standing guard

outside the occupied buildings in their words, “to ensure no harm came to the students inside, or to public property.”³ Clashes between strikers and soldiers assigned to guard public buildings were violent but mercifully brief. Easily outnumbered, soldiers offered little resistance and allowed the students to occupy the buildings. Elsewhere, members of the CJT and the Civic Committee threatened businesses that failed to close for the strike.

The protests then took a decidedly more violent turn. After taking control of the customs office, adjacent to the airport, and setting fire to cars and items stored in the building, protestors turned their attention to the city’s main market (the Mercado Campesino) where it was rumoured that groups linked to MAS were organizing a march towards the main plaza. Civic Committee leaders organized a permanent vigil in the main plaza and called upon residents to defend their city. When MAS sympathizers failed to appear, the protestors headed toward the Mercado Campesino for a showdown. A march organized by the Tarija’s Women’s Civic Committee de Tarija (CCFT) under the guise of protecting the regional agricultural and livestock offices (SEDAG), also located in the market, was apparently the spark that set off the violent clashes. More than 80 people were injured -including one young protestor, a construction worker, who lost his hand when he attempted to pick up a stick of dynamite- in a series of clashes that pitted students and CJT members against peasants, market vendors and residents of the area.

And then, just as quickly as the situation turned violent, the confrontations and inflammatory rhetoric subsided. The morning after the clash at the Mercado Campesino, Tarija’s news programs once full of vitriol – with news presenters spicing up a report of events with their personal outrage – called upon residents to remain calm. The dismissive, disrespectful tone towards President Morales and Vice President Garcia Linera of previous days was replaced with grave tones of concern that Tarija, indeed Bolivia, was headed towards civil war. In the Chaco, protestors had attempted to shut off a valve of the GASRYG (Transierra) pipeline causing an explosion and fire which resulted in the interruption of gas supplies to Brazil. Further north, another group of protestors occupied the Vuelta Grande plant effectively paralyzing operations there. The images from Santa Cruz of vandals attacking public buildings and carrying off the spoils and the verbal and physical abuse heaped upon persons of Andean origin in the streets, together with alarming news of the armed confrontation in Pando resulting in the deaths and disappearance of dozens of people deeply traumatized the country. The triumphalist rhetoric that characterized public discourse in Tarija quickly gave way to appeals for peace, dialogue and mutual understanding.

Perhaps the calls for peace and the return to order were hastened by the realization that the protest, outside of the four departments of the Media Luna, had little internal or external support. Morales’ emotional appeal to his rural bases to come out and defend their democracy (resulting in the mobilisation of thousands of marchers who eventually encircled the city of Santa Cruz but not Tarija) alarmed the opposition. The sudden expulsion of U.S. Ambassador Philip Goldberg together with pronouncements of solidarity by the governments of Brazil and Argentina, and later UNASUR’s refusal to allow representatives of the four renegade departments to attend its meeting, made it clear that the opposition’s efforts to create a recognized parallel government would not succeed.

The Morales’ government’s measured – or was it simply caught-off-guard? - response to the protests gave the impression that the government was no longer in control of a significant portion

of the nation's territory. (Even before the strike, the opposition had kept the President's plane from landing at Tarija's airport). There were far too few police and soldiers in place to protect public buildings and ensure public order. And Central government workers and MAS supporters were subjected to harassment and threats. This situation, much criticized by political observers and citizens alike, in the end was likely key to holding the support of those sectors directly affected by the strike along with others who were growing increasingly wary of the Civic Committee's tactics and the potential economic impacts of the strike. Perhaps Morales allowed the protests to go forward confident that the opposition's excesses would be their own undoing, or perhaps his promise to not govern Bolivia by use of force kept him from acting, or perhaps mixed signals from the military made such a move too risky. Whatever the case, the fact of not having "fought back" and repressed this regional "rebeldia" ultimately worked in Morales favour.

At the time of writing, more than two months on, and after countless meetings and weeks of negotiations, the opposition in Tarija is in utter disarray. The enormous autonomy banners that once draped the historic buildings of Tarija's main plaza are gone. Tarija's Civic Committee has ceased to function and its President, Reynaldo Bayard purportedly sent a personal letter of apology to President Morales from his undisclosed hiding place. Meanwhile, the central government, having not reacted with force during the heat of the conflict, is now able to rein in, neutralize or arrest people who played significant parts in the protest. In October, for instance, the government [the intelligence services??] tracked down and detained three individuals in Villa Montes linked to the act of sabotage of the GASRYG pipeline in a commando style operation. More generally, the government insists that those who are responsible must now be brought to justice (even if they have sent letter of apology). Indeed, with the Prefect of Pando in jail, and the remaining three Prefects of the Media Luna effectively silenced, President Morales seems to have won yet another round in the tussle between centre and region, and between MAS and other political currents, over who will govern Bolivia and its natural resource rents. The question is whether this has been a victory won by luck, by judgment or by improvisation.

¹ Tarija receives royalty payments and revenues from the Indirect Hydrocarbons Tax (IDH) estimated at US\$287million for 2008. Ministerio de Hacienda, Departamento de Tarija, Mayo 2008. Powerpoint presentation.

² The diploma, known as a Titulo de Bachiller, is a requirement for entrance to university. The Titulo usually costs Bs500 (approximately GBP50), a prohibitive amount for the average Bolivian family.

³ From author's interviews with protestors conducted outside of the INRA and Immigration offices on September 11th and 13th, 2008