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Author(s): Cletus Gregor Barié and Moira Zuazo

Source: *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies / Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, July–December 2022, No. 114 (July–December 2022), pp. 89–114

Published by: Centrum voor Studie en Documentatie van Latijns Amerika (CEDLA)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48712110>

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Plurinational state and ecological conscience in Bolivia: The case of the 2019 forest fires

Cletus Gregor Barié
Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam

Moira Zuazo
Freie Universität, Berlin

Abstract

In 2019, Bolivia suffered one of the worst forest fires in its history. The rapid advance of the flames provoked reactions in defence of the environment hitherto unknown in Bolivian society. Encouraged by a peaceful march of lowland indigenous communities, a broad spectrum of social actors expressed their indignation at the destruction of the forests and demanded more governmental action. The spontaneous emergence of ecological awareness during the fire crisis allows reflection on the progress in constructing the symbolic state, a state in the “heads” and imaginaries of citizens (Bourdieu, 2014). Social demands during the crisis reflect new expectations placed on a plurinational state respectful of the rights of nature. By ignoring the ongoing ecological catastrophe, the government placed itself at the margin of an emerging symbolic order to which it had previously contributed and of which it is a product. *Keywords:* Wildfires, plurinational state, ecology, rights, mother earth, Bolivia.

Resumen: Estado plurinacional y conciencia ecológica en Bolivia: El caso de los incendios forestales de 2019

En 2019, Bolivia sufrió uno de los peores incendios forestales de su historia. El rápido avance de las llamas provocó reacciones en defensa del medio ambiente hasta ahora desconocidas en la sociedad boliviana. Alentados por una marcha pacífica de las comunidades indígenas de las tierras bajas, un amplio espectro de actores sociales expresó su indignación por la destrucción de los bosques y exigió una mayor acción gubernamental. La emergencia espontánea de la conciencia ecológica durante la crisis de los incendios permite reflexionar sobre el avance en la construcción del estado simbólico, un estado en las “cabezas” e imaginarios de los ciudadanos (Bourdieu, 2014). Las demandas sociales durante la crisis reflejan las nuevas expectativas puestas en un estado plurinacional respetuoso con los derechos de la naturaleza. Al ignorar la catástrofe ecológica en curso, el gobierno se situó al margen de un orden simbólico emergente al que había contribuido previamente y del que es un producto. *Palabras clave:* Incendios forestales, estado plurinacional, ecología, derechos, madre tierra, Bolivia.

Introduction

In Bolivia, historically, environmental issues have been of limited relevance in development debates. For many decades, political elites, mostly identified with modernization theories, exhibited “a marked disregard” (Mansilla, 2001, p. 38)¹ for environmental issues. In fact, there is still no strong environmental party and the demands put forward by global environmental movements, such as Fridays for Future, have found little echo among the population. Moreover, research related to the subject, for example on institutional policies or on civil society actions, is limited (Castro et al., 2014; Ciudadanía, 2018). This gap in analysis and debates contrasts with the urgency of the challenges: Bolivia is a country with high vulnerability to climate change (Carmen & François, 2013, p. 38). Among the structural environmental issues that need to be addressed are water scarcity, flooding, river and soil contamination by extractive projects, deforestation and soil degradation (Liga de Defensa del Medio Ambiente [LIDEMA], 2020). Along with these phenomena, and sometimes almost in parallel, there is an increase in socio-environmental conflicts (De La Fuente, 2017).

In this panorama of little presence of ecological issues on the public agenda, the case of the forest fires from July to September 2019 in the Chiquitanía, an extensive plain located between the Gran Chaco and the Amazon, is striking. With a burned area of approximately 50,000 km², which corresponds to the size of Costa Rica, these fires were the most severe since monitoring began in 2001 (Colque, 2019, pp. 22; 74). In fact, the uncontrollable advance of the flames provoked massive reactions in defence of the environment, hitherto unknown in Bolivian society. A diversity of actors, through protests, demonstrations, volunteer actions and debates, expressed their indignation at the ferocious destruction of the forests and the government’s slowness to recognize and confront the disaster.

For several months the fires occupied the top of the media agenda, to the point of overshadowing the political campaigns for the October 20, 2019 presidential elections underway. One of the novel aspects of the protest was the incorporation of new concepts of the defence of Mother Earth, embodied in the constitution and in secondary state legislation. While the massive ecological impacts of the burns have been the subject of some specialized research (Anívarro et al., 2019; Joint Research Centre, 2020), the social and political implications have so far not been sufficiently analysed and the few existing studies are limited to short-term analysis (CEJIS, 2019; Colque, 2019). The case certainly raises a number of fundamental questions, beyond the episodic: How to explain the phenomenon of mass mobilization and protest around an issue that until then had been virtually absent from political debates in Bolivia? What expectations about the role and performance of a plurinational state could underlie these demonstrations? And finally, how to account for the contrast be-

tween a government that was part of the process of developing new ecological approaches and its apathy to react accordingly?

We propose to place the protests around the fires in a longer process of state building: The plurinational state, which emerged as a demand of many indigenous organizations at the end of the last century, constitutionalized in 2009 after a long struggle and then transformed into official discourse. In particular, we wonder to what extent expectations about a new role and function that the state should play in protecting the environment resonate in the discussions about how to deal with these fires. In this context we understand the events of September and October 2019 as a “national crisis”, a concept introduced by René Zavaleta (2009). For the Bolivian political thinker the crisis functions for a variegated society (*sociedad abigarrada*) as Bolivia as a method, albeit pathetic, of knowing itself in its complexity: “The crisis is therefore postulated as the phenomenon or the exteriority of a society that does not have the possibility of an empirical-collectable cognitive revelation” (Zavaleta, 2009, p. 214; Antezana J., 2009). The wildfires would therefore be a temporary social episode, but with exceptional characteristics, which reveals aspects so far little explicit and visible about the symbolic construction of a new plurinational state.

The challenge is thus to look at the events of 2019 from a lens of the emergence of a new statehood. To address this, we begin with a brief historical-conceptual review: We will examine how the idea of the rights of Mother Earth emerged as a central part of the plurinational agenda and how it was transformed into a state discourse. In a second part we rescue some analytical tools of Bourdieu (2014) on the state, especially the idea of the construction of the state through symbolic dispossession and the notion of the “state in the heads”, as a metaphor for the effects of the symbolic irradiation of the state. In the third part we present the ecological and social crisis provoked by the forest fires, the constellation of actors and the interconnectedness of their approaches. In the last section we will try to relate the awakening of an environmental awareness with the expectations and imaginaries generated around the protection of Mother Earth. We conclude with some reflections on the dynamics generated by state-induced ideas related to plurinationality and *Pachamama*.

Mother Earth as part of a new state narrative

Plurinationality, in the Andean context, can be understood as a “meta-concept”, since it refers to several other concepts and categories and relates them in a framework of meanings. In its basic sense, it means the recognition of different groups and collectivities within a society and the guarantee of the effective exercise of their political rights. However, in a process of historical accumulation, Andean indigenous organizations have enriched and transformed the concept, giving it a broader meaning. These more ambitious interpretations range from elements of direct political representation of indigenous peoples, the de-colonization of society, the establishment of territorial autonomies and the

search for good living in harmony with nature, instead of a profit-oriented economy (Resina de la Fuente, 2012, pp. 139–147; Schavelzon, 2015). It is therefore a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between state, society and nature that, in some way, implies transcending a conventional liberal model of the state (Wolff, 2012).

The formation and consolidation of the idea of the rights of nature within the conceptualization of the plurinational state, roughly speaking, went through three stages: In a first phase before and during the Constituent Assembly an alliance of highland and lowland indigenous organizations, articulated since 2004 in a Unity Pact (Garcés, 2010) rescued a series of ideas related to indigenous cosmology, such as good living and respect for *Pachamama* (a goddess of life worshipped by Quechua and Aymara communities), and translated them into legal juridical language. The issue, in fact, was raised in the respective Commission of Renewable Natural Resources, Land, Territory and Environment (Pinto Quintanilla, 2009, pp. 1865–2022), but finally discarded for its insufficient conceptual clarity: “Many members of the commission still did not understand who could exercise these new rights,” recalls Wilson Rocha, then legal advisor to the Commission (interview, 2021). In the finally approved Constitution (Congreso Nacional, 2009) *Pachamama* only appears in the preamble as a source of inspiration. Additionally, and in a novel but still vague formula, the “right to a healthy, protected and balanced environment” is established and extended to “other living beings”, with the aim of “developing in a normal and permanent way” (art. 33). Otherwise, the text maintains the conventional language of environmental protection (arts. 34, 342).

In a second moment, approximately from the approval of the Constitution by referendum in 2009 to the end of 2010, the multiple indigenous organizations that were part of the Unity Pact were able to reach a consensus on a more elaborate proposal on the issue. An important moment in this context was the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Tiquipaya (Cochabamba) in April 2010, convened by the Bolivian government, in which there was a rich exchange on the constitutionalization of the rights of nature in Ecuador and a debate with leading intellectuals on the subject (Santos Villarreal, 2010). The expulsion from the conference of an alternative round table that denounced the persistence of extractivism and the government’s double discourse was one of the first signs of the ruptures in the alliance of social sectors with the government (Bjork-James, 2019).

In the proposal for the Draft Bill of Mother Earth finally agreed upon in negotiations with the legislators, the notion of “natural resources” is discarded as an expression of “the relationship of dispossession of nature by the capitalist world-system”. Instead, they are considered “beings, substances, elements, components, goodness of Mother Earth” (Pacto de Unidad, 2011, p. 7). Mother Earth is defined as “a dynamic living system formed by the indivisible community of all living beings” (art. 4) and for the purposes of its protection is considered a collective subject of public interest (art. 5). It has the right to life,

to diversity, to the functionality of water cycles, to clean air, to balance and restoration (art. 7). An Ombudsman's Office oversees the enforcement, promotion, dissemination, and fulfilment of these rights (art. 37). Free, prior, and informed consultation is guaranteed in the case of extractive projects and legislative measures that affect indigenous peoples (art. 42). The draft also seeks to mainstream rights, as it aims to become “the basis at all levels and sectors of the Plurinational State for the participatory formulation and implementation of policies for the use and exploitation of the components of Mother Earth” (art. 2.2). Despite its high degree of conceptual elaboration, which identifies a transition from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric vision of the relationship with nature,² this proposal was only partially taken up in subsequent legislative development. In fact, since 2010 the impetus of the organizations part of the Unity Pact to build a plurinational state from the indigenous cosmovision and spirituality, increasingly stumbled against the growing willingness of the government and the ruling party to direct and centralize the construction of a new state (Chávez et al., 2013).

In this context it is necessary to consider the particularities of Movement for Socialism (MAS, *Movimiento al Socialismo*) and its transformation from an “anti-systemic” party (Mayorga, 2005), seeking radical changes, to a hegemonic party, which subsequently acquired even the characteristics of a state party. Since its foundation in 1995 in Santa Cruz, MAS defined itself as a “political instrument” of different social organizations, and not as a conventional party, which is also reflected in the second part of its acronym, IPSP: Political Instrument for Peoples’ Sovereignty (*Instrumento Político por la Soberanía de los Pueblos*, Zuazo Oblitas, 2009). The common bond among its members, initially, was to fight against the growing marginalization and discrimination resulting from a closed political system and a long series of neoliberal economic measures. Although the composition of their members has always been a mix of various subaltern groups, especially rural ones (Zuazo Oblitas, 2009), including coca leave growers and *colonizadores*,³ indigenous and peasant organizations and urban intellectuals, the coca farmers have always been the most influential stakeholders. Being the organizational level of indigenous peoples in Bolivia relatively high, the government’s relationship with the different indigenous organizations has been multifaceted and complex with a marked tendency to co-opt and subordinate them (Springerová & Vališková, 2021; Zegada et al., 2011). Reflecting its ideological diversity, MAS discourses revolve around the defence of sovereignty and natural resources, such as the coca leaf and hydrocarbons, in the face of external intervention. These nationalist and anti-imperialist components are complemented by the demand for recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples and a socialist rhetoric (Barrientos Garrido, 2010).

In a third moment beginning in 2010, the government of Evo Morales began to claim for itself a monopoly on the interpretation of the meaning and scope of these new rights. In October 2010, faced with the need for president

Evo Morales to present concrete actions at the Cancun World Summit against Climate Change, the Plurinational Assembly, in which MAS was represented with 64 percent of the seats, approved with an “urgent vote” a short version of the Law on the Rights of Mother Earth No. 71 (Ley de Derechos de la Madre Tierra, 2010). Although this norm included several sections of the aforementioned Draft, the leaders of the Unity Pact were disappointed, since it was made “in haste, without taking into account our proposals” (Sancionan Ley de la Madre Tierra; Evo la presentará en Cancún, 2010). A Framework Law No. 300 (Ley Marco de la Madre Tierra y Desarrollo Integral para Vivir Bien, 2012), enacted in 2012, reconfigured the concept of the rights of Mother Earth, limiting them to the conventional framework of a development paradigm with a focus on the issue of climate change (Clavero, 2012; Gudynas, 2018; Prada, 2012).

Parallel to an incipient legislative development, the government increasingly referred to the issue in official statements and public acts. The discourse in defence of the Pachamama was also directed to international public opinion to position itself in a broad group of countries that question the rules of the game of the global economy. Bolivian diplomacy in this context achieved a long series of international milestones, among them the declaration of April 22 as International Mother Earth Day (2009), the naming of Evo Morales as “World Hero for the Defence of Mother Earth” (2009) and the incorporation of the issue in a whole series of international declarations and resolutions, most recently that of Glasgow (Berros, 2021; The Glasgow Climate Pact, Annotated, 11.13.2021). Mother Earth gradually became thus a substantial ingredient of a state symbolism, whether for domestic or international use.

Symbolic dispossession and the concept of the “state in the heads”

We draw on a set of Bourdieu’s (2014) conceptual tools on the state to analyse the process of incorporating the idea of Mother Earth into the state narrative and the dynamics it activates. Specifically, we are interested in recovering the idea of symbolic dispossession and the notion of the “state in the heads.” In exploring the emergence of the modern state in Europe, Bourdieu identifies a tendency towards the concentration and universalization of symbolic resources by the state. Taking as examples the cases of the unification of local units of measurement, the aggregation of statistical data at the national level and the officialization of languages Bourdieu observes a process of accumulation of a new cultural capital through symbolic expropriation: “Where there was diversity, dispersion, localism, there is now uniformity...This process of concentration, unification and integration is accompanied by a process of dispossession, since all the skills and knowledge that were associated with these local measures are disqualified” (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 99). We are therefore witnessing a process of statization and universalization, in which a certain group of people – which Bourdieu calls “state nobility” – begins to have privileged ac-

cess to symbolic capital (Loyal, 2017, pp. 100-101). One of the paradoxes of the process of symbolic dispossession is that, on the one hand, it makes social integration possible by creating a unified framework in which social knowledge can be inserted. On the other hand, it creates social exclusion because it minimizes and discards particularities: “The first face [of the state], therefore, is that of universalizing integration; the second face is that of alienating integration as a condition of domination, subjugation, dispossession. And the two faces are inseparable” (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 227).

Inspired by this perspective we can understand the three moments described above – from the initial approach to the rights of Mother Earth, through the conceptual consolidation to its incorporation into a new state symbology – as a gradual process of dispossession of knowledge and social practices. The government “of the social movements” (as it used to define itself) appropriated the different ideas and proposals of the indigenous organizations and elaborated an official interpretation. Government action was thus contradictory: On the one hand, it placed for the first time the indigenous peoples and peasants and their proposals for good living and protection of Mother Earth at the centre of state discourse. On the other hand, it reduced the social agency (Ortner, 2006) of these actors, conceived as the “capacity of ethnic actors to act on themselves and their environment” (Martínez Neira et al., 2019, p. 3). In fact, a few years after the “plurinational refounding”, Salazar Lohman (2015, p. 302) describes a panorama of subordination and fragmentation of social organizations: “State institutions absorbed much of the community energy, while it began to disarticulate any social movement or organization that could question or put at risk the stability of the state itself.”

The symbolic appropriation of the imaginary of *Pachamama* and its instrumental use certainly also met with resistance: Between 2009 and 2010 a series of “implementation conflicts” of the Constitution (Barié, 2020) took place, in which indigenous organizations debated the legislative development on issues related to the plurinational transformation. As in the case of the aforementioned Draft Bill of the Unity Pact, the different proposals elaborated from the social organizations were on several occasions dismissed by the legislative branch or incorporated in a subordinate manner (Chávez, 2013). The case of the construction of a road through the Isiboro-Sécure Indigenous Territory and National Park (TIPNIS) in 2011 was one of the first moments of open distancing and rupture of several indigenous organizations from the government (Laing, 2015). We thus identify a permanent tension between the impulse of some peasant and indigenous organizations to build the new state based on their social agency and, on the other hand, a governmental protagonism to determine and control the content and scope of this new statehood.

Bourdieu also studies the capacity of the state to radiate the new symbolic capital accumulated and its sedimentation in the imaginaries of citizens. The “state in the heads”, is a metaphor he takes from the Austrian playwright Thomas Bernhard (2008, pp. 35-40) in allusion, precisely, to the omnipresence

of the state in the minds of citizens (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 334). The state manages to impose “consensus on the meaning and value of the world” since it is “the principal producer of instruments of construction of the social reality” (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 375). However, the “state in the head” is not created from one moment to the next, but emerges in a long process, in a “symbolic struggle to construct the legitimate social view of the world and impose this as universal” (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 32).

The metaphor of the “state in the heads” enriches the current debate on the subjective dimensions of statehood in the Andean region. In line with Abrams’ (1988, p. 76) call to stop treating the state as an object that can be apprehended as such, like a human ear or a marriage, Bourdieu compels us to look at the state beyond its institutional manifestations: Constitution, laws, government, bureaucracies and political programs. In this broader socio-ethnological approach, the imaginaries and expectations placed on the state play a fundamental role: “We can never know the state, at least not directly. Because we can and must imagine it, the state is a repository into which we may project our hopes, fears, disappointments, expectations, and so forth” (Krupa & Nugent, 2015, p. 18).

Bourdieu’s all-encompassing characterization of the state, in which it acquires such force that it succeeds in concentrating symbolic capital and implanting it in people’s thinking, does not necessarily have a valuative or normative connotation. He shows his astonishment at this overwhelming but almost invisible phenomenon and analyzes its contradictory effects. In the same way, he draws attention to the difficulties of thinking critically about the state, since there is always the risk of “thinking the state with the thinking of the state” (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 106).

The symbolic dimension of the plurinational state in Bolivia and its impact on citizenship has been little considered by researchers so far (Orduna, 2015; Postero, 2017; Tórrez Rubín de Celis et al., 2014). Our hypothesis is that the diffusion of a state discourse and aesthetics related to Mother Earth and good living began to generate its own dynamics in society. Thus, the state narratives could have been shaping a new idea of the state “in the heads”. Tórrez and Arce (2014, p. 189) seem to have already detected this phenomenon in their exploration of the new state aesthetics: “the symbolic dimension transcends the fact of being one more resource for legitimizing the political order and becomes a way of ‘condensing’ and ‘visualizing’ the complexity of a society with diverse and variegated formations”.

The Bolivian society in the face of the fires

The fire in Chiquitanía was an announced disaster: At the end of July 2019, the Early Warning System for Forest Fires (SATIF), under the Santa Cruz Governor’s Office, issued a warning about an accelerated increase of hot spots in the region: “46 percent of the Department presents extreme risk and 14 percent

very high risk of occurrence of forest fires" (SATIF, 2019, p. 1). Between July and September the outbreaks multiplied to such an extent that they covered a large part of the Chiquitanía rainforest, parts of the Amazon and the western Pantanal. Due to their rapid spread, which reached 4,000 hectares per hour, these fires began to be considered technically "out of control". Specialists call these types of events "mega fires" or "large wildfires" that have "the potential to transform forest landscapes and convert net carbon sinks to net sources, thus further contributing to global climate change" (Devisscher et al., 2019, p. 38).

Observing the reaction of Bolivian society as a whole, it is possible to distinguish two moments (see Table 1): In a first phase, from July to the end of August 2019, the growing reports about the expansion of the flames combined with government inaction and growing concern at the local level. Local authorities in several localities such as San Javier, San José de Chiquitos and Roboré declared a disaster situation and requested air support, as the site of the flames had become inaccessible by land. Meanwhile, state actions at the national and subnational levels were characterized by a high degree of improvisation, ad hoc interventions at the local level and lack of coordination (CEJIS, 2019; Colque, 2019). Official statements tried to minimize the facts, and limited themselves to pointing out various responsible without providing evidence. Only in early August, when the city of Santa Cruz found itself completely covered with smoke, some media outlets began to talk about the fires.

Table 1: Timeline 2019-2021

2019	July	Monitoring System warns of "extreme risk" of forest fires in Santa Cruz
	August	Alerts from the regions (Roboré and San José de Chiquitos)
		Santa Cruz, by Departmental Decree declares forest fire disaster (August 17)
		A special cabinet is formed (August 17)
September		Colonizers protest against the "ecological pause" (prohibition of sale of lands affected by the fires, September 11)
		Volunteers and firefighters from all over the country are mobilized – 7000 people in total
		Tenth indigenous march for life and in defence of the forest during 30 days (September 16)
		Start of heavy rains (September 24)
2020		International Tribunal of Nature declares the government guilty of "ecocide"
2021		Deputies' initiative against legislation promoting deforestation

Source: own elaboration.

In a second phase, from August to the end of September 2019, the fires converged as a central issue on the public agenda with high-sounding government measures in the media, and a society that, from a diversity of interests, agendas and origins, began to converge in a common look of rage and desperation at the ecological disaster. At the end of August, when the fire had already consumed

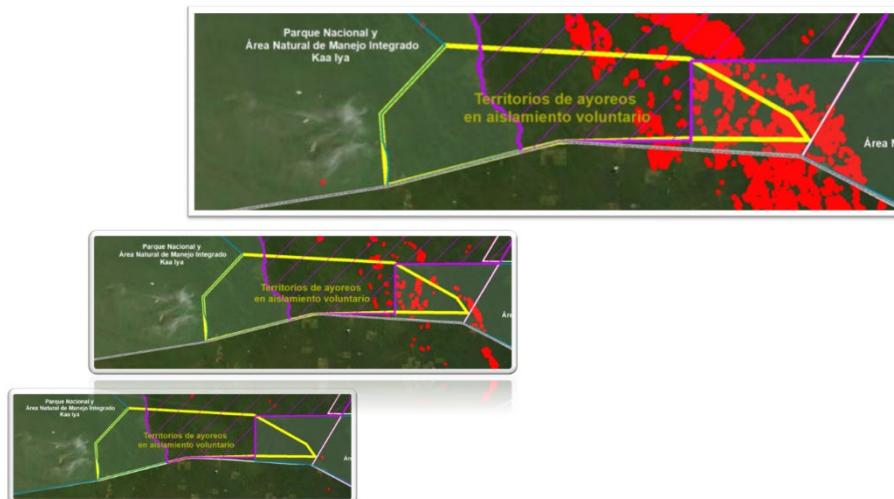
18.000 km², more than a third of what it would destroy by the end of September, in the face of the growing mobilization of the affected communities, the national government formed a special cabinet, coordinated by Javier Zavaleta, Minister of Defence (FAN: 1,8 millones de hectáreas se quemaron en lo que va del año en Bolivia, 2019; Incendio en la Chiquitanía: Morales crea gabinete de emergencia ambiental, 2019). A high-tech strategy was applied (mainly through the hiring of specialized planes and helicopters), accompanied by the deployment of some 7,000 firefighters, soldiers and volunteers and the sending of humanitarian aid (Carrasco, 2019). Almost in parallel, the government suspended its electoral activity.

In early September a group of experts warned that even these kinds of high-tech measures were not going to yield results in the face of the magnitude of the burning: “The only reliable proposal consists of remote fire lines. This requires a lot of machinery on the ground, especially caterpillars” (Enrique Bruno, director of the Emergency Operations Centre, in Roca, 2019). Despite the anomalous nature of the fire, “one of the most complicated phenomena there has been in Latin America”, according to international experts (Chiquitanía: Expertos ven que incendio podría ser de los más complicados en Latinoamérica, 2019), the government continued with an approach centred on aerial intervention, which allowed it to maintain high public visibility with explanatory audio-visual material. On the other hand, the presence of specialized personnel at the site was occasional and with little equipment and machinery. The recommended strategy of opening counter-fire lines was never applied.

Confronted with the growing demand to declare the situation a “national disaster”, which is the way to open the administrative locks for the extraordinary use of public resources and to speed up the arrival of international aid, the government responded with the argument that Bolivia was in economic and technical conditions to face the crisis and that the external contribution would not be significant. In mid-September vice-president Alvaro García argued that “international aid, whether a national catastrophe is declared or not, is always scarce, slow and temporary” (Eid, 2019). In the end, no national disaster was declared. Meanwhile, a growing number of civil society actors expressed their indignation and took actions of solidarity and protest. The first to mobilize were lowland indigenous organizations. The umbrella organization, CIDOB (Confederation of indigenous peoples of Bolivia), in an extraordinary assembly in early September called for the “Tenth Indigenous March for Life and in Defence of the Forest” demanding the fulfilment of the constitutional mandate to preserve the environment. Approximately 200 community members left San Ignacio de Velasco on September 16 and in 30 days marched until they reached the departmental capital of Santa Cruz, where they were received by the governor, Rubén Costas (Cambara Ferrufino, 2019).⁴ The indigenous organizations demanded, among other things, the declaration of a national disaster, the repeal of laws allowing deforestation and the end of new settlements in the region (Escobar, 2019; OICH, 2019).

One of the most serious cases illustrating the impact of the fires on indigenous peoples was that of the Ayoreo indigenous people in voluntary isolation on the border with Paraguay and Brazil. Approximately 70 percent of its territories were burned (Monasterio, interview, 2021). This caused their forced displacement with the destruction of their social and cultural reproduction base (Table 2, Fundación Irfa, 2019). In total, 27 indigenous territories of the Chiquitano, Ayoreo, Guarayos, Cayubaba, Baures, Sirionó and Araona peoples were affected by the wildfires, and 20 protected areas (CEJIS, 2019, p. 2).

Table 2. Spread of fire in the territories of the Ayoreo indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation (between August 18-25, 2019). Territories marked in yellow



Source: Monasterio, 2019

The demands of the indigenous organizations quickly produced a domino effect: On the one hand, the Santa Cruz Assembly, a regional body, usually strongly influenced by conservative politicians and agribusiness representatives, after a heated debate, approved support for the Tenth March, calling for the declaration of a national disaster and the repeal of Supreme Decree 3973, which authorises the burning of forests for agricultural and livestock use. One factor that influenced this political shift in the Santa Cruz Assembly was the presence of environmental activists, who pointed to the departmental government as co-responsible for the policy of expanding the agricultural frontier (Asamblea de La Cruceñidad llama a un cabildo y suspende festejos, 2019).

Additionally, a great diversity of social actors, including students, environmentalists, feminists and researchers mobilized, many of them not directly related to each other. The actions undertaken included marches in the main departmental capitals, protests in front of government agencies, as well as non-violent interventions (Carrasco, 2019). Many non-governmental organizations and foundations, among them the most prestigious and long-standing ones,

publicly joined the petitions (Quiroga Antelo, 2020). At the beginning of September the feminist collective Mujeres Creando in Santa Cruz took over the offices of the Authority of Fiscalization and Social Control of Forests and Lands (ABT) in protest of its inoperability and co-responsibility. They achieved the immediate resignation of its director, Cliver Rocha (Gómez, 2019). The protests turned out to be massive due to their national convening capacity and the slogans used such as “environmental crisis”, “SOS Chiquitanía” and “Bolivian Amazon in flames” were widely disseminated on social networks. At the end of September, most of these organizations converged in a National Summit for the Defence of Forests that concluded with the creation of an Intersectoral Platform in Defence of Nature and Peoples (Nació coordinadora en defensa de la naturaleza y naciones, 2019)

Certainly, some actors did not join this alliance of defenders of the Chiquitanía, among them agribusiness interest groups and colonizers, both direct beneficiaries of policies for the expansion of agricultural areas. The Santa Cruz government also kept a low profile and acted only under pressure, e.g. when it decreed an “environmental pause”, prohibiting for a limited period of time new human settlements in the areas affected by the fires. In the end, the flames were not defeated by human intervention. Since 24 September, the inhabitants of the affected areas recorded increasing rainfall, so that by the beginning of October most of the hot spots had been extinguished naturally (Ariñez, 2019). Meanwhile, Evo Morales’s government launched a recovery and restoration plan focusing on housing construction, water supply and massive tree planting. However, several experts warned about the superficial and only “palliative” nature of the post-fire measures (Peredo, 2019) and their insufficient empirical basis (Vides, 2021).

The fire crisis had some immediate political costs and possibly contributed to further “political exhaustion” (*desgaste político*) of the MAS party (Gustafson, 2016), which is why some experts began to speak of the “burnt vote” (Las urnas desahogarán el dolor y la indignación por los incendios, 9.22.2019; Ortiz, 2019). The 2019 elections were surrounded by irregularities, which led to the forced resignation of president Morales. Jeanine Áñez, second vice-president of the Senate, assumed the presidency and governed for a year amidst a debate on the constitutional nature of the presidential succession (Gustafson, 2020; Wolff, 2020). Finally, in Bolivia’s general elections of October 2020, MAS won again with 55.1 percent of the votes with Luis Arce as the new candidate for president and David Choquehuanca for vice-president. Former foreign minister Choquehuanca is considered the visible face of the indigenous wing of the party. Even so, the environmental issue was finally relegated in the public agenda in the face of the permanent political crises and the effects of the pandemic (Schwarz, interview, 2021).

In August 2020, the International Court of the Rights of Nature, in its judgment in the Chiquitanía, Chaco and Amazon case, declared that the fires of 2019 were an “ecocide provoked by state policy and agribusiness”, and de-

manded the repeal of relevant regulations so that these events would not repeat (Chiriboga, 2020). Although the Court's rulings are not binding, its verdicts and legal analyses have a certain impact at the international level. In Bolivia, the ruling was widely commented on in the media, although without major political consequences, recalls Senator Cecilia Requena (interview, 2021). The tribunal was created in 2014, inspired by the International War Crimes Tribunal and the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal that investigate human rights violations. One of the main promoters was Evo Morales's own government, which in 2009 launched an international campaign in favor of the creation of an environmental and climate justice tribunal, an idea that was applauded by several Latin American governments (Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, 2010).

Emergence of an ecological conscience

Societies do not usually interpret an emergency situation such as the one in Chiquitanía in a univocal way. In fact, in the affected communities, especially in the first phase described above, there were different narratives about the increase in hot spots. As Monasterio (interview, 2021) recalls, in some areas of northern Santa Cruz, an explanation based on climate change initially predominated. Accordingly, the traditional custom of burning vegetation (*chaqueo*) became risky and counterproductive in the face of increased dry phases. In other areas further southeast, such as Roboré and Valle de Tucavaca, the colonizers, the so-called intercultural communities, were pointed out as possibly responsible for the fires because of their alleged interest in grabbing forest lands. In fact, volunteer firefighters documented several episodes in which, while they were putting out fires, other people were reigniting them (Colque, 2019). This explanation was also seized upon by some local interest groups to incite regionalist and anti-immigrant sentiment, especially in the face of the imminent presidential elections (Gustafson, 2020). Finally, the thesis that agribusiness interests seek to expand their farmland at the expense of local communities and ecological stability was also discussed.

From the second phase described above, the statements of the indigenous communities began to shape and define the public debate. They contained a series of much more elaborate and articulated arguments. Regarding the description of the ecological crisis, indigenous leaders spread the metaphor of the "big house" (*casa grande*) in flames, referring to the Chiquitanía as a natural habitat in which people, plants and animals coexist (Escobar, 2019). On the other hand, references to an established legal framework were frequent, as reflected exemplarily in a public statement of Beatriz Tapanache, grand cacique of Chiquitania: "We know how to claim our rights and we know that now they are being violated. With a constitution that we have been part of building. That is why I dare to say that they have violated article 2 [self-determination of indigenous peoples], and 30 [rights of indigenous peoples], 34 [environmental rights]..." (Galarza, 2019).

Gradually in the public debate the idea of a double governmental responsibility was positioned, both for its insufficient reaction during the crisis and for the previously established public policies, the so-called “incendiary package” (*paquete incendiario*, Table 3). This term was used to describe the public policies and corresponding legislative measures of the government of Evo Morales, mainly in his second administration (2010-2014), of reversion of public lands and natural areas to convert them into agricultural lands (Colque, 2019). The indigenous leader and spokesperson of the National Coordinating Committee for the Defense of Native Indigenous Peasant Territories and Protected Areas of Bolivia (Contiocap), Alex Villca, went so far as to raise the need for a trial of responsibilities against the government “for crimes against humanity committed against nature and the indigenous peoples that inhabit the Chiquitana region” (Michel, 2019). Thus, a widespread impression prevailed that the government had placed itself at the margin of the legal order it had helped to build and of which it was part (Moyoviri, interview, 2020). In the absence of state institutions that would assume *ex officio* the role that corresponds to them, starting with the Defensoría de la Madre Tierra (which, according to Law 71, should have been created in 2010), civil society tried to fill this void with its own actions.

Table 3: Recent public policy and legislation permitting deforestation (incendiary package)

- Economic and Social Development Plan (PDES) 2016-2020
- Patriotic Agenda (2025) Law No. 337 on Support for Food Production and Forest Restitution and its D.S. 1578 (2013)
- Law No. 502 (2014), Law No. 739 (2015) and Law No. 952 (2017), on extensions of terms and amendments to Law No. 337
- Law No. 741 (2015), on Authorization of Clearing up to 20 hectares for small properties and community or collective properties for agricultural and livestock activities
- Law No. 1171 on the Rational Use and Management of Fire
- Law No. 1098 (2018) and Decree Supreme (D.S.) 3874 on authorization of transgenic soybean events associated with biodiesel production
- Departmental Law 93/2019 (Beni) on the approval of the Beni Land Management Plan.
- Supreme Decree 3973 (2019) authorizing “controlled burns” in the departments of Santa Cruz and Beni to promote agricultural and livestock production
- Supreme Decree 4232 and D.S. 4238 authorizing the National Biosafety Committee to establish abbreviated procedures for the evaluation of genetically modified corn, sugarcane, cotton, wheat and soybeans in their different events, intended to supply domestic consumption and external commercialization
- R.A. 084/2020 SENASAG approving the phytosanitary requirements for the importation of Eucalyptus to be implemented in forest plantations

Source: CEJIS, 2020; Colque, 2019

The reactions of civil society as a whole reveal the incipient formation and emergence of an ecological conscience at national scale as a novel phenome-

non. It is characterized by an emphasis on the affective bond of mutual dependence between human beings and nature and by the quest to recover the ecological balance. These particularities recall the reflections of the ecologist Leopold (2013), who was the first to give the concept of ecological consciousness the connotation of an empathetic and ethical connection between nature and the mind (Swan, 2010, p. 19): “A thing is right only when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the community, and the community includes the soil, waters, fauna, and flora, as well as people” (Leopold, 2013, p. 531). Precisely this integrity of the “community” (understood as the “big house” of the Chiquitanía) was harmed by the fires.

From a comparative historical perspective, the novelty of this ecological awareness is evident in the events of 2010, when Bolivia experienced fires that, in terms of their size, massive environmental impact and affected population, were comparable to those of the Chiquitanía in 2019. As Gonzalo Colque (2019) points out, the 2010 forest fires “did not receive the same media and public attention”, nor did they lead to protest actions on the part of society. Possibly a new imaginary on the reconfiguration of the relationship between state, society and nature and the corresponding receptivity to react had not yet been established.

The first signs of a national ecological consciousness thus emerged from the lived experience of destruction. Consequently, they also placed a series of expectations on the new plurinational state to intervene in the face of the ecological catastrophe and safeguard the rights of Mother Earth. We consider these expectations part of a new imaginary created around the state, or in Bourdieu's words (2014, pp. 334, 366) a “state in the heads”. In fact, interviews with several peasant and indigenous leaders and representatives of different political affiliations confirm the strong entrenchment of plurinationality as a new state fact, resulting from a kind of first victory: “Before it was a republic. Now we have this great achievement of becoming a plurinational state with the presence of 36 nations”, expressed, for example, Deputy Enrique Cunai (interview, 2020). Likewise, Agustín Augustin Cahuana (interview, 2020), indigenous leader, emphasized: “The republican state came from outside, it is alien to us, as well as the communist or capitalist system. With plurinationality we are exercising our culture of life, in balance with nature.”

However, at the same time there is a conscience that there are many other pending battles, a warrior metaphor, by the way, frequently used in this context: “There are many issues we have to fight to be implemented: the right to self-determination, indigenous justice, respect for Pachamama and our ancestors” (Cahuana, interview, 2020). For others, plurinationality is still “dead letters” (*letras muertas*), nothing more than an unfulfilled aspiration: “We have a new Constitution, two laws of Mother Earth approved. However, many violations of our rights remain unpunished,” claimed indigenous representative Miguel Ángel Uche (interview, 2020). All in all, it seems that this new frame of reference acts as a kind of compass that allows citizens and communities to

differentiate between discourses and practices that are within the legitimate order and others that are outside of it.

The medium and long-term impacts of the changes in the symbolic representation of the state and care for nature described above are uncertain. The current government continues to disseminate a pro-Pachamama discourse and to regularly convene international events related to the issue, especially through vice-president David Choquehuanca (*Re-encuentro con la Pachamama – en vivo*, 2021). In the midst of a pandemic health crisis in 2020 another series of fires affected especially indigenous territories (Sierra Praeli, 2020), without provoking major social reactions. According to observers, institutional capacities have improved slightly in terms of articulation between responsible instances at the national, departmental and municipal levels. The government also places more emphasis on technical fire management capabilities, although without major changes in forestry and land policies. (Requena; Monasterio, interviews, 2021). Several legislative initiatives are currently on hold to repeal the legislative package that promotes the reversion of forest harvesting and to regulate the 2012 Mother Earth Framework Law (Cortés, interview, 2021, CEJIS, 02/27/2020). The limited commitment of Evo Morales's successor governments to adjust public policies on environmental issues seems to reflect a deep-rooted political culture of extractivism and massive exploitation of natural resources, even risking the loss of credibility and political capital.

At the level of civil society, there are signs of a growing awareness of the rights of Mother Earth and a willingness to take action on her behalf. A large number of local environmental initiatives have emerged in recent years, many of them inspired by the protests in 2019 (Schwarz, interview, 2021). The growing identification of citizens with the rights of nature was also noted in one of the first surveys on the topic (focused on the metropolitan area), conducted by the NGO Citizenship (Ciudadanía, 2018, p. 19): "9 out of 10 people believe that plants and animals have as much right to exist as humans". Faced with the division of many traditional peasant and indigenous organizations, new independent organizations have emerged in recent years. A prominent example is the National Coordinating Committee for the Defense of Native Indigenous Peasant Territories and Protected Areas of Bolivia (in Spanish: Coordinadora Nacional de Defensa de los Territorios Indígenas Originarios Campesinos y Áreas Protegidas de Bolivia), which brings together community organizations affected by extractive projects and has become a source of information and early warning about the violation of the Mother Earth Rights. The growing pressure on the use of natural resources has also given rise to a series of socio-environmental conflicts, many of them confined to sub-national contexts. Current examples of these conflicts that have transcended the local level are the protests over oil exploration in the Takovo Mora Guaraní indigenous territory, the debate over the construction of a hydroelectric dam in the Madidi National Park, and the conflict over hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation in the Tariquía National Reserve (Department of Tarija) by the Brazilian company

Petrobras (Chinche Callizaya, 2019). Meanwhile, the exchange between environmental advocates and specialists at the Latin American level is intensifying, especially with Peru, Argentina and Chile. Lui Laura Zapana, an activist lawyer, for example, in 2021 shared lessons learned with members of the Constituent Assembly, who eventually incorporated the rights of nature into the first draft of the new constitution.⁵

Conclusions

The 2019 forest fires unleashed an unprecedented series of protests and demonstrations for the protection of nature. Citizens from all over the country became volunteer firefighters to combat one of the worst fires in Bolivia's history. For the first time, signs of a nationwide ecological conscience became visible, understood as an ethical and affective relationship with nature that vindicates the integrity, stability and beauty of a habitat (Leopold, 2013). This ecological awareness surfaced in the midst of a massive event of destruction and during a highly polarized electoral context. It was also accompanied by a series of expectations placed on the state to act urgently, a kind of "call for help" in the midst of an ecological and social crisis (Zavaleta, 2009).

Bourdieu (2014) teaches us about the irradiating power of the state: The state implants ideas in people's "heads" and shapes in a subtle way the imaginaries and affections that citizens develop towards the state. The awakening of ecological awareness in the Chiquitanía refers, precisely, to an incipient imaginary of a state that was expected to be capable of protecting Mother Earth in case of emergency and committed to its rights. It is an indication that the efforts to refound the state in the first decade of 2010 were partially successful, to the extent that they positioned plurinationality and its different facets – particularly a new relationship between human beings, nature and the state – as a legitimate referential framework. In fact, today, no political party questions the legitimacy of the plurinational state fundaments in its programs, while a decade ago this was a rather controversial topic.

As an effect of the rooting of a new legitimate framework of reference, social organizations that were previously considered as anti-systemic (Mayorga, 2005), such as CIDOB (Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia) and CONAMAQ (National Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyu), can now be viewed as systemic (even when they question the government), to the extent that they demand the fulfilment of established rights and not the abolition of the political system. This is one of the reasons why references to the constitution and existing legislation are recurrent, especially in the case of socio-environmental conflicts, which Altmann (2016, p. 121) qualifies as "right-based demands". The emergence of a new symbolic order is remarkable, since prior to the Constituent Assembly (2006-2007) there was no consensus on the state model to be built and the previous system identified as "republican" was strongly contested for its exclusionary and colonial character (Salman, 2009).

The idea of the rights of Mother Earth was before practically confined to a tiny group of indigenous thinkers and urban intellectuals.

However, the “plurinational horizon”, as the philosopher Luis Tapia (2018) calls it, is full of contradictions and uncertainties. This, first, has to do with the complex network of stakeholders involved in its genesis. It was the Unity Pact that initially translated different elements of the indigenous cosmology related to the Pachamama into a language understandable to legislators. The proposed Draft Bill on the Rights of Mother Earth (Pacto de Unidad, 2011), with its high levels of conceptual elaboration, reflects the culmination of these efforts. Since then, the government of Evo Morales, through a process of symbolic dispossession (Bourdieu, 2014), imbued its own interpretative stamp to the idea of the rights of Mother Earth, reflected in a grandiloquent state narrative and a rather limiting legislation (Laws No. 71 and 300) and practice. In this way, the “indigenous government” gradually dispossessed indigenous peoples of their symbolic heritage, bringing it into the national and international limelight, while at the time attempting to restrict their social agency.

Thus the MAS government turned out to be, on the one hand, an enabler of formal guarantees for Mother Earth that are unique in the region and an international example (Berros, 2021; Villavicencio Calzadilla & Kotzé, 2018). At the same time, it resulted a blocking force, by reducing them to their minimum expression and even rendering them ineffective in practice (Garcés, 2011; Souza Santos & Exeni Rodríguez, 2013). Nevertheless, the dissemination of a state discourse and aesthetics related to Mother Earth and good living, although without the depth and coherence of the initial approach, produced a social dynamic of its own – in a sort of boomerang effect. There is thus a permanent tension between a plurinational statehood originally driven from below and a centralist and totalizing statehood from above – a tension that remains unresolved. This dual dynamic of the impetus of state building seems to differ from Bourdieu’s view of the genesis of the state in Europe. In his description, local actors often certainly show strong resistance, especially peasants, against unifying tendencies (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 207), but they do not appear as driving forces of state building, a role which is apparently reserved for a “caste, a state nobility, the ‘monopolizers’ of the universal” (Bourdieu, 2014, p. 100).

The multiplicity of actors involved in the genesis of the plurinational state makes its analysis quite complex. In fact, in the so called change process (*proceso de cambio*) initiated in the 2000’s the boundaries between government, political party (MAS), state and social movement tend to blur. As a result of these ambiguities, there is a risk of explaining the emergence of the new indigenous approaches to statehood in a simplistic manner, without differentiating between stakeholders, roles and institutional dynamics. The government of Evo Morales, certainly, actively contributed to this confusion by presenting itself as the expression and agent of the refounding of the state.⁶ Especially in the first years of MAS government, many analyses tended to be permeated by this government centred view (Negri, 2010).

A second limitation of the plurinational horizon results from its position in a broader context of state reform. Starting with the constitutional preamble, plurinationality is only one of several characteristics of this new state, which is also defined as a “social state”, “unitary”, “intercultural” and “decentralized” (Congreso Nacional, 2009, art. 1). Different currents and generations of human rights (Vasak, 1977) converge in this *Magna Carta*, which accounts for the enormous spectrum of reforms and structural transformations projected, some of them openly contradictory to each other (Barié, 2014; Wolff, 2012, p. 198). This is the case of the prioritization of neo-extractives policies (Burchardt et al., 2016; Gudynas, 2015), often justified loosely with the constitutional mandate of industrialization of natural resources (art. 316, 6), which in practice ended up eroding or even annihilating the rights of Mother Earth. Along with the Pachamama narrative there is thus a developmentalist state narrative, which has its roots in the nationalist revolutionary movement of 1952 and whose effects on the social imaginary deserves separate investigations.

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Cletus Gregor Barié is a researcher in the field of indigenous rights and social dialogue with a focus on the Andean region. He lived in Bolivia working in development cooperation programmes between 2000 and 2009, and visited Bolivia several times since then to conduct field studies. He is currently an external doctoral candidate at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the Centre for Research and Documentation on Latin America (CEDLA) in Amsterdam, focusing on conflicts over the construction of plurinational states in Bolivia and Ecuador.

Address: Deutsche Welle (DW), DW Akademie, Voltastr. 6, 13355 Berlin, Germany.

Email: barie@web.de

Moira Zuazo has a PhD in Social Sciences from the University of Konstanz and a Master’s degree in Democracy Studies from the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés in Bolivia, where she currently teaches. Her research focuses on the evolution of democratic systems. Until 2016 she was responsible for policy dialogue and development alternatives at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Bolivia. She is currently based in Berlin, where she works as a postdoctoral researcher at trAndeS – Free University of Berlin, a programme on Sustainable Development and Social Inequalities in the Andean Region.

Address: Möllentordamm 10, 13597 Berlin, Germany.

Email: moira.zuazo@gmail.com

Acknowledgments: Special thanks to the interviewees for their time and generosity in sharing their knowledge and experiences. We are also very grateful to Raquel Melina Aguilar Jiménez, political scientist, for facilitating the interviews in times of pandemic and for many inspiring conversations.

Notes

- 1 All translations of quotes in Spanish by the authors.
- 2 "In the anthropocentric ethic, humans consider themselves the dominant and most important life form; non-human lives are important only insofar as they are useful for maintaining the position of humans at the top of the social hierarchy. Ecocentrism, on the other hand, is an ethic premised upon nature's intrinsic value, wholly independent of its instrumental value to humanity." Kotzé and Villavicencio Calzadilla (2017, p. 398).
- 3 As a product of the 1952 revolution, Bolivia created the National Institute of Colonisation with the task of granting fiscal land to landless peasants who decided to migrate from the altiplano to the lowlands. The peasant collectivities of Andean origin were consequently called the Union of Colonisers (Unión de Colonizadores). This name was maintained until the first decade of the 21st century when during the constituent process the colonisers renamed themselves intercultural communities, a term that was also introduced in the new Constitution.
- 4 CIDOB, like most indigenous organizations in Bolivia since 2011, at that moment was internally divided between the "organic" (independent) CIDOB and the "officialist" (pro-government) CIDOB. The latter fraction desisted from participating in the march and even tried to block its departure.
- 5 "On the rights of Nature. Nature has the right to have its existence respected and protected, to the regeneration, maintenance and restoration of its functions and dynamic equilibrium, which include natural cycles, ecosystems and biodiversity. The state through its institutions must guarantee and promote the rights of Nature as determined by the Constitution and the Laws" Convención Constitucional (2022, art. 4). The proposal for a new Constitution was in any case rejected in a national plebiscite in September 2022 by a margin of 62 per cent to 38 per cent of Chileans.
- 6 In fact, among some MAS leaders and former officials there exists the conviction that the party is the author and executor of the refoundation of the state and that Evo Morales should be considered the "historical commander" of this process: "Comrade Evo is irreplaceable because he is the architect of the new plurinational state", Juan Ramón Quintana, former Minister of the Presidency, in Mamani Cayo (2021).

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Appendix. List of interviewees

Ruth Alipaz	Leader of the National Coordinating Committee for the Defence of Native Indigenous Peasant Territories and Protected Areas of Bolivia (CONTIOCAP)	7-12-2021
Agustín Cahuana Choque	Indigenous Authority, National Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyu (CONAMAQ)	16-12-2020
Paola Cortés Martínez	Environmental Lawyer	15-10-2021
Enrique Cunai	Deputy for the Indigenous Seat for Beni in the National Assembly	22-12-2020
Marcelino Higueras	Natural Resources Engineer	28-12-2021
Fátima Monasterio	Lawyer and Human Rights Activist	13-08-2021
Cecilia Moyoviri Moye	Senator, Chairwoman of the Land and Territory, Natural Resources and Environment Committee	17-12-2020
Cecilia Requena	Senator, political party Comunidad Ciudadana	24-11-2021
Wilson Rocha Vera	Climate Change and Indigenous Peoples Specialist	21-09-2021
Vivian Schwarz	Director at Ciudadanía - Comunidad de Estudios Sociales y Acción Pública (Citizenship - Community of Social Studies and Public Action)	22-06-2021
Elva Terceros	Magistrate and ex-president of the Agro-Environmental Tribunal	21-01-2022 29-01-2022
Miguel Angel Uche Uche	Ethnic Peoples Central (Central de los Pueblos Étnicos Mojeños de Beni, CPEM-B), Indigenous Multi-ethnic Territory	01-12-2020
Lui Laura Zapana	Environmental Lawyer and Activist	20-11-2021