

A Road Paved With Hope

Bolivia's Indigenous Travel Hundreds of Miles for Drafting of Constitution

The Washington Post
August 6, 2006

LLALLAGUA, Bolivia, Aug. 5 -- About 40 people crammed into the back of the truck, some leaning against swaying side railings that threatened to completely give way with each turn. Dust from unpaved mountain roads billowed through cracks in the splintered floor. Every bump sparked a jarring current that started in the tailbone and climbed the spine.

Over the course of about 30 hours, the truck would take the group of Quechua and Aymara Indians on a journey from this highland mining and farming region to the city of Sucre, where a Constituent Assembly will be inaugurated Sunday to create a new Bolivian constitution.

Indigenous-led civil unrest toppled two presidents between 2003 and 2005, and redrafting the constitution to ensure more equality became a rallying cry for Bolivia's indigenous majority during that turmoil. December's election of President Evo Morales -- a longtime backer of constitutional reform who claims Aymara ancestry -- officially sealed a redrafting process that he calls "the re-founding of Bolivia."

Fueled by optimism and gallons of diesel, the pilgrims from Llallagua dismissed the crude conditions of their transport as mere afterthoughts. Less than a block into the trip, they lighted fireworks and began to sing. They banged on goatskin drums, played pan flutes and strummed charangos -- traditional Andean stringed instruments that resemble mandolins -- as the last of the town's adobe houses disappeared from sight.

This wasn't just a road trip; it was a party.

"Viva la Asamblea Constituyente!" they shouted.

On rural roadways all across Bolivia in the past few days, indigenous caravans like this one have snaked their way toward Sucre, about 250 miles to the southeast. Most of the people packed in the backs of the trucks won't have official business in the assembly. They went because they want to witness history, many said, and they want their presence to serve as a reminder to assembly members of the indigenous protests that led to the formation of the 255-member body.

"We're going to march through the streets and represent our people," said Roman Arosquipa, 28, one of several farm peasants who walked eight hours from the village of Jachavi on Thursday night to hop a ride on the truck from Llallagua. "The assembly is a great hope for us. We need to improve our lives, and we also need to preserve our culture."

Arosquipa's life centers on his small adobe house in the North Potosi region, the poorest pocket of the poorest country in South America. He grows crops such as corn and wheat -- not to sell in a market, but to feed himself and share with his neighbors. His house -- like all of them in Jachavi -- lacks electricity. He wears a colorfully embroidered vest with white fringe that indicates to other Indians that he's single, but his headgear is anything but traditional -- a Spiderman baseball cap.

Finding the right balance between the traditional and modern is going to be the biggest challenge of the assembly, according to political analysts. Although the indigenous community is well represented among the assembly members -- particularly among the 137 from Morales's party, the Movement Toward Socialism -- no one party or special interest has the two-thirds majority required to approve constitutional changes.

But even before the assembly has begun, tensions between those seeking to strengthen the presence of indigenous culture and those advocating other views have suggested that rewriting the constitution could be a lot like this trip -- far from smooth.

When the truck reached the small village of Lagunillas, the driver parked near a lake that shone like a silver coin dropped between the blunt peaks of the Andes.

"This is it," said Zacarias Colque, one of the leaders of a local federation of indigenous workers, which paid to rent the truck. "Come down, everyone. Careful with the drums."

With their musical instruments in hand, they walked to a clearing in the village's main square, which is anchored by a small church topped with two wooden crosses. Some took off their baseball caps and donned traditional broad-brimmed hats with feathers jutting from the bands. A group of villagers joined them in the square. The musicians played and danced around a jug of alcohol on the ground, while others held hands and encircled them. A few minutes later, the ceremony moved into the nave of the church.

"We're praying for the trip, to ask Mother Earth that nothing bad happens," said Victor Chocotel, 42, one of the Lagunillas residents gathered in the square.

Blurring the lines between indigenous religious rites and Christianity is common in Bolivia, though not without occasional controversy. Last month, the education minister, Felix Patzi, suggested that courses on Catholicism -- the religion taught exclusively in most public schools -- be shelved in favor of instruction that puts more emphasis on indigenous faiths. When supporters of the Catholic Church balked, Morales weighed in by saying the church hierarchy was behaving as if it were stuck "in the times of the Inquisition." His approval rating dropped from 75 percent to 68 percent.

Last week, the church and the government came to a vague agreement that Catholic courses would remain, while respecting the country's religious diversity. In an interview in La Paz last week, Eduardo González Saá, head of the Catholic Church's education commission,

said the details of the agreement would be determined at an education summit and would likely resurface for debate in the Constituent Assembly.

"Issues related to indigenous religions are not limited to just education," said Eduardo Burgoa Zeballos, 26, who rode in the truck from Llallagua. "The justice system is affected, too, and reforming the judiciary is one of the most important things that the assembly could do."

He nodded at Chocotel, who wore a feathered, conical helmet made from bull hide. The helmet is normally worn during *tinku* fighting rituals, which pit members of neighboring villages against each other in hand-to-hand combat. If blood is spilled, it is considered a blessing to the earth. Sometimes the fights end in death.

Like many others on the truck, Zeballos said he wants the assembly to create a judicial system that guarantees more indigenous judges who would preside over indigenous cases.

"The ordinary courts do not understand that if someone dies in a *tinku* ritual, it's not considered a bad thing to us," he said.

When the group finished the ceremony, about 20 residents of Lagunillas hopped in the truck to join the trip. They sat shoulder-to-shoulder, back-to-back.

Less than 30 minutes after getting back on the road, a tire blew. While everyone waited under the unfiltered glare of the sun, one man grabbed his charango and began to play.

"Viva Bolivia!" he sang.

After spending the night at a nonprofit institute in the town of Ocuri on Friday night, the group filed back into the truck early Saturday morning and bumped over five more hours of roads. They arrived at the outskirts of Sucre around noon, unloading at a garage near the airport where they planned to sleep during the weekend.

In the cab of the truck, Colque carried a copy of a proposal drafted by North Potosi's indigenous workers federation that provides suggestions for the assembly members: The focus of education should provide indigenous philosophies, the health system should incorporate indigenous treatments and the state should recognize intellectual property rights of ancestral communities.

Bolivian political experts say that many in the indigenous community are expecting a blanket reformation of the government -- something that's unlikely to happen given the lack of a dominating faction. A pitfall, they said, would be trying to write specific policies into the constitution instead of creating the broad parameters for lawmakers to work within. Critics of Morales have warned that he could try to steer the assembly toward giving him broader powers and the opportunity to serve indefinite terms.

Other groups, including many who live in the relatively wealthy eastern lowlands, are hoping the assembly could help them advance an autonomy project that would give them more local decision-making power -- a change adamantly opposed by Morales and most of the indigenous groups. The clash of the viewpoints in the assembly raises concerns that the process could further pry apart divisions in a country that has witnessed more than 200 coups since emerging from Spanish rule in 1825.

"It's important for Bolivians to realize that while this might change the overall rules of the game, it does not allow for specific political projects to be advanced," said Gonzalo Chávez, a political scientist at the Catholic University in La Paz. "Unfortunately some in Bolivia think that the assembly will be the place to pass some sort of revolutionary political project."

Nestor Hugo Torres, who will represent North Potosi in the assembly, said he has tried to temper the expectations of his constituents.

"A new constitution is not going to help the indigenous groups directly, but the one thing that it does -- and has done -- is to get them interested in the political process," said Torres, who rode in the truck early in the trip and met up with the group again when it arrived in Sucre. "Three or four years ago you never saw anyone in the indigenous community who talked about things like the constitution and the judicial system. Now look."

Late Saturday afternoon, the group from the truck began a trek of several miles from the edge of Sucre to its colonial central square.

They melted into a crowd of thousands, most of them waving indigenous flags, banging drums and celebrating the beginning of the unpredictable political process they had created.