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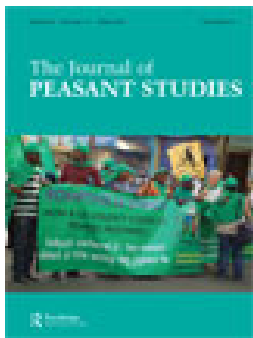
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Enacting democracy in a de facto state: coca, cocaine and campesino unions in the Chapare, Bolivia

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ABSTRACT

In Bolivia's Chapare coca growing region, the campesino union is the cornerstone of social and political organisation that governs by a principle of 'leading by obeying'. Yet, under the Morales' government, union leaders disengaged from their bases. As a more top-down approach emerged, union-led action against excess coca cultivation and cocaine production impacted negatively on some peasant households. An ethnographic analysis of popular disaffection challenges normative ideas of 'authoritarian' rule. It also contributes to debates on how state-level interventions intersect with the goals of the social movements that put them in power.

KEYWORDS

Bolivia; coca; democracy; peasant; unions; cocaine

Introduction

In October 2006 Luis Vásquez described to me how life in the Chapare had transformed since Evo Morales and the Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS) took office earlier that year. For Luis, thanks to Morales calling an end to the US backed war on drugs, there was now peace, freedom and money to be made in the Chapare: 'without Evo we would be screwed! They wanted zero coca in the Tropics,' he said. He recalled how over the preceding twenty years coca farmers like him had been repressed by the militarised police. 'We were chased down, abducted, locked up, beaten; we lost our brothers and sisters,' he said.

Fast-forward almost ten years to 2015. I was back in the Chapare and met up with Luis. We chatted about the MAS; only this time his narrative was full of anger and feelings of betrayal. Luis complained that despite maintaining leadership of the coca growers' unions and committing to take direction from the grassroots – 'to Lead by Obeying' – Morales had let the unions down. Luis said that the democracy Morales had instituted felt more like a 'dictatorship' with everything '... coming from above'. 'These are not the principles of the political instrument [the MAS], this is not what we set out to do.'

The Cochabamba Tropics or the Chapare as it is more commonly known, is a vast humid lowland forest located in the centre of Bolivia. Here a population just shy of 200,000 people live from an economy dedicated to the production of the coca plant, alongside other crops such as bananas and citrus fruit. Indigenous peoples have consumed coca for millennia; they either chew it or prepare it as tea, and it is present at

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every ritual from birth to death. But while the leaf is often considered sacred (Allen 1981), according to local growers the bulk of the Chapare crop is used to manufacture drugs and some farmers are directly involved in the processing and smuggling of cocaine paste – a first step to refining pure cocaine (Grisaffi 2021).

For decades, successive governments denounced the agricultural unions of the Chapare as narco-terrorists (Rivera 2011, 24) but since 2006 they have had a government in power, one that is committed to representing their interests. In office Evo Morales developed a programme, first instituted by Carlos Mesa in 2004, that permitted registered farmers in specific zones to cultivate a small (up to 1600 square metre) plot of coca – known as a *cato* – and encouraged farmers to self-police to respect these limits. This approach was a world apart from the old US-led policy, which demanded that local security forces forcibly eradicate coca crops. That approach resulted in two decades of violence, and neither reduced coca production nor restricted the flow of drugs reaching the US.

Immediately following MAS's takeover in 2006, coca growers were enthused by Morales – himself a former coca grower – who they saw as their saviour, and yet only ten years later many people who I spoke with described the union's increasingly authoritarian turn. They told me: 'there is no debate at meetings anymore;' 'You cannot criticize Evo or give a point of view;' and 'you are only allowed to agree'. I take these criticisms less as a comment on the party, than an observation on the unions, because it is the union that mediates the coca growers' relationship with government. And so here, I ask: How did the coca growers' unions mobilise the grassroots and what accounts for the loss of legitimacy of the leadership? What do the coca growers mean when they say that government must 'lead by obeying' and that it has failed to do so? And what can we learn about rural movements and the challenges they face more broadly?

There has always been more territory than state in Bolivia (Barragán 2009). As such the state has been described as having a 'fragmented presence' (Quiles 2019), or as a 'state with holes' (PNUD 2007, 83). That is not to say the holes represent a vacuum, rather much like the 'non-state spaces' described by James Scott (2010), these places have been filled by a variety of actors that have come to exert governing functions (PNUD 2007, 99) in a situation that can be described as 'legal pluralism' (Ellison 2018). Nowhere is this more evident than in the Chapare, where the agricultural unions constitute 'the region's primary civil authority, practicing a de-facto autonomy' (Gutierrez Aguilar 2014, 80).

Grassroots unions in Bolivia tend to be male-dominated, hierarchical, highly structured, and they use fines and sanctions, including corporal punishment, to control their members. They are also heavily shaped by patronage relationships and frequently utilised as a route to personal advancement (Makaran 2016; Zegada and Komadina 2017). Ellison (2018, 73) notes that pundits, op-ed writers, and ordinary citizens have long denounced Bolivia's social movements and their leaders for being autocratic, citing community justice, use of sanctions, and the way they impose rules on private activities. The Chapare unions, which form the backbone of the MAS party, have come in for the sharpest criticism, provoking headlines such as 'MAS-ista dictatorship in the Chapare' (Los Tiempos 2015); '... The Chapareños (residents of the Chapare) are prisoners of union leaders and drug traffickers' (Unitel 2020) and 'the Chapare is an independent narco-terrorist micro-state' (Vargas 2020).

But as I soon came to learn, the reasons coca growers like Luis complain of dictatorship are not the same as those given by outsiders. Formal western democracy is rooted in the

idea of competitive elections, individual liberties, universal suffrage and the secret ballot. But these are not the qualities that coca growers recognise as salient features of the democracy they practice in their agricultural unions. Within their organisations, coca growers put emphasis on face-to-face interactions, high levels of participation, consensus building and conformity. Most importantly, leadership should remain deferential and accountable to the grassroots, leaders should ‘lead by obeying.’ In the face of the historical absence of the government, each grassroots union has acted like a state and exerted control over its members, thus along with an expectation of participation, coercion is levelled against anyone who transgresses communal values (Spedding 2004, 299).

What makes the coercive elements of this form of democracy socially acceptable is that decisions are said to come from the bases, defined at assemblies and agreed via consensus, as such they are based on consent and are deemed to be legitimate. These principles of bottom-up control informed how rank and file members expected Morales and his ministers to act in government. But there are challenges to scaling up grassroots models of democratic engagement and remaining true to largely consensual decision-making. Once voted into government the principle of subservient leaders becomes difficult to enforce as the idea of ‘the people’ becomes abstracted from the concrete into an ‘imagined community’ to be governed.

On a local level, the coca unions had pursued a ‘politics of bread and butter’ (Koch 2016) that appealed to the growers’ material and everyday demands. Decisions were made amongst kin and neighbours at the level of the grassroots union (*sindicato*) and were premised on a shared set of economic and social experiences as well as a lived reality around involvement in the illicit drugs economy. But when the MAS took national office, it was no longer only beholden to its social movement base, rather it had to govern for all citizens and to abide by international frameworks – constraining the Morales regime’s abilities to enact the social movement’s agenda relating to coca production.

Historically, there was an unspoken understanding that community members were directly or indirectly involved in the illicit cocaine trade, which was not seen as morally reprehensible or ‘legally’ enforceable (‘legal’ referring to the union’s own policing mechanisms) (Grisaffi 2021). The sense of betrayal then, stems from the fact that the same union leaders who had previously tacitly accepted cocaine paste production and unlimited coca cultivation now had to officially reject it, as enshrined by the ‘cato accord’ (the right to limited legal coca) and the enforcement apparatus that comes with it. It is not the violation of individual rights and liberal principals that leads to claims of betrayal then, but rather the union leaders’ inability to safeguard the member’s livelihoods.

This article builds from the anthropological literature that studies how citizens employ their own criteria for evaluating democratic practice and how these ideas are rooted in deeper social processes (Michelutti 2008; Nugent 2008; Koch 2016). It shows that while both coca growers and right-wing commentators use words like ‘dictatorship’ and ‘authoritarian’ to describe their political adversaries the allegations at the heart of what they are articulating are different. For the union’s mostly middle-class, western-oriented critics, any system that fails to uphold the individual as the preeminent bearer of rights is authoritarian. By contrast, for the coca growers, union leaders are authoritarian when they do not ‘lead by obeying’ – that is when they act autonomously, not respecting collective decisions.

In this article, there are three different levels of meaning attributed to ‘dictatorship’: first the dictatorship coca growers experienced prior to the election of Morales; second

the dictatorship they have experienced under Morales; and third, dictatorship in the liberal-democratic sense of the word. The first two uses are vernacular, the latter is what could be described as 'normative'. I use the terms authoritarianism and dictatorship interchangeably as these are terms coca growers use to explain the transformations they have observed.

During more than three years of ethnographic fieldwork between 2005 and 2019, I collaborated with reporters at the coca union owned and operated radio station, Radio Sovereignty, accompanying them on an almost daily basis. Arriving in communities as a member of the radio team, people offered me a warm welcome, allowed me to attend their meetings and were willing to talk to me. I was always clear, however, about my role as a researcher and sought consent from people to participate in my research. As well as observing the dramatic events of union life, I entered more intimate spaces: working alongside farmers in their fields, cooking together, going on fishing trips and participating in celebrations like birthdays and weddings. Along with participant observation, I conducted dozens of interviews with union members, leaders, and local officials. Given the sensitive nature of the data, all names have been changed apart from those of public figures.

Social movements and left-wing states

In 1995, responding to the opportunities presented by an ambitious state decentralisation programme, a confederation of peasant unions – led by the coca growers – established the political vehicle which would eventually become the MAS. The objective was to scale up the struggle against neoliberalism, to ensure access to land, to implement pro-peasant policies, but also to defend the right to cultivate coca, which was under attack as part of the US led 'war on drugs' (Zuazo 2009). It was not a foregone conclusion that the cocaleros would follow the electoral route, over the preceding ten years union leaders, including Morales, had argued in favour of armed insurgency (Escóbar 2008, 179).

The political vehicle, then running on the Izquierda Unida (IU) ticket, had immediate electoral success. The same year it was established, IU won control of ten town halls in Cochabamba, including all five in the state's coca grower heartlands. Local government proved to be a good training ground for the party, which soon developed a national profile. By 2002, the MAS had become the main opposition with 26 seats in the lower house and 8 in the senate (do Alto and Stefanoni 2010, 308). Against the backdrop of political and social turmoil, Morales was elected as president of Bolivia with 54% of the vote in 2005. The MAS scored equally impressive victories in the 2009 (64%), 2014 (61%), and 2020 (55%) national elections.

Initially, the MAS was more a federation of social organisations than a political party and coca growers remained committed to pursuing a dual strategy of conventional political competition and non-conventional political protest (Prest 2015). Members came from workers' and small farmers' unions, village committees, popular urban movements and indigenous communities (Anria 2018, 61–97). These organisations were largely run by men with parallel women's organisations in place – including the coca growers, from 1994 on.

The MAS party's aim was to take grassroots concerns to the electoral arena for the first time in Bolivian history, through putting social movement leaders into elected office and submitting leadership decisions to grassroots scrutiny via participation in large scale

assemblies (see Zuazo 2009, 38). Alejandro Peredo, the MAS President in Cochabamba, explained in 2014 that the MAS is not a party but a '... political project of the social movements.' In his view, the traditional political parties were owned by individuals who dispensed cash and hand-picked candidates, but in the MAS '... each militant is an owner; all of the organisations are owners' and he stressed that '... nobody can override the bases (rank and file).'

Within the Chapare, the party is thought of as an extension of grassroots collective action, and the townhalls operate as an appendage of the union. Mayors and councillors are selected at union meetings and they remain accountable to the organisation during their tenure, in this way the unions superimpose their assembly culture onto local government (Grisaffi 2013). Drawing inspiration from Nugent (1999), in the Chapare state and society cannot be said to be distinct entities with clearly identifiable boundaries, because they blur into one another (see also Guimarães 2009). When I began fieldwork in 2005, union members described the MAS as 'our political instrument' or said, 'we built it', 'we suffered for it' and 'it belongs to us' (see also García, Soliz, and García 2015). One ex-leader made clear the motivation for setting up the party: 'before it was like a dictatorship – politics was just for the elites. The idea was to form a party that could involve 100 per cent of the bases (in making decisions) and that leaders would answer to us.'

The MAS is one of several left-wing parties that was elected with the support of, or in alliance with peasant movements in Latin America in the 2000s including Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay and Venezuela. Vergara-Camus and Kay (2018) refer to the pink tide governments as 'new agrarian democracies', because they positioned themselves as firmly anti-neoliberal and proposed policies in favour of rural popular sectors including land reform, credit assistance, and a more equitable distribution of natural resources. Significantly, these governments also emphasised forms of participatory planning so that peasant and urban popular communities might exert more control over their own development.

But, with fifteen years hindsight, few of the promises were fulfilled. Vergara-Camus and Kay (2018) suggest this is because rural social movements were unable to hold the government to account. This is not just a story of the simple co-optation of social movement leaders, although this is undoubtedly important (Becker 2010, 104–105). Rather it has to do with the government's inability to create a space for alternative notions of development in the face of entrenched neoliberalism and powerful regional elites (see also McKay, Nehring, and Walsh-Dille 2014; Goodale 2019, 98–133). They write: 'The pink tide governments surfed the wave of a long commodity boom and took the easy route of state social rentierism. None of them democratized access to land or challenged private property and all facilitated the growth and power of agribusiness' (Vergara-Camus and Kay 2018, 239).

The MAS is a paradigmatic example of a 'New Agrarian Democracy'; it was the only pink tide government to come to power on the back of rural mobilisation and advanced the most significant land reform in decades. Morales pushed back against US hegemony. In 2008, he declared the US ambassador persona-non-grata, stopped USAID from operating in the Chapare (and the whole of Bolivia by 2013), and expelled the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). In response, the US decertified Bolivia: putting an end to all US financial assistance and trade preferences.

But while the MAS stood up for Bolivian sovereignty and made attempts to regulate the worst abuses of foreign capital, scholars have questioned its status as ‘post-neoliberal’. Jeff Webber (2010) characterises the MAS as an ‘oscillating force’ that belongs to neither the left-indigenous bloc constituted by worker and peasant organisations in the highlands, nor to the eastern-bourgeois bloc of agro-industrial, financial and petroleum capital. Instead, the MAS cut a middle ground and was reformist rather than revolutionary (see also do Alto and Stefanoni 2010).

Once in power Morales implemented a more stable version of the model of accumulation inherited from previous governments, what Brabazon and Webber (2014, 437) have referred to as ‘reconstituted neoliberalism’. As a result, the new regime was unable to fully deliver on its promises of greater social inclusion and economic justice (Webber 2016). Researchers have explored MAS’s shortcomings in relation to the government’s ongoing support for agri-business elites (Brabazon and Webber 2014), extractive industries (Marston and Kenmore 2019) and the weak protection of indigenous territories (Canessa 2014).

The MAS oversaw efforts to broaden participation of women and indigenous peoples in politics and to incorporate forms of direct democracy found in grassroots organisations, but just how much influence social movements really had in government is debated (Albó 2015). MAS ideologues saw the party as building a new political system, one that collapses social movements into government (Mayorga 2009, 110). A 2012 manifesto argues for a shift from representative to ‘communal democracy’, where ‘decisions are taken by consensus’ and ‘the people ... govern themselves in the framework of leading by obeying’ (MAS 2012, 8). And, although Morales mentions it less frequently now, he has often said he rules by obeying the people – making clear that he will work with Bolivia’s social movements (Schavelzon 2012, 29).

But, in a bid to win more votes, after 2002 the MAS moved away from its model of affiliation through membership in a peasant organisation to admit virtually any citizen. As it transformed into a more urban, middle-class and ultimately ‘traditional’ political party, decision making was increasingly geared to the needs of government rather than its social movement base (Vergara-Camus and Kay 2018, 229). Komadina and Geffroy (2007, 103) explain how MAS leaders distorted grassroots democracy by intervening in assemblies and ignoring the grassroots selection of candidates. In a similar vein, Makaran (2016) argues that the MAS took a top-down approach to governing, relying on the distribution of patronage to buy political support and the co-optation of social movement leaders (see also Zegada and Komadina 2017).

The centralisation of power alienated some pro-government social movements, which voiced concerns over favouritism and corruption (Crabtree 2020). Despite these limitations, Anria (2018) argues that nonetheless the MAS in power maintained an important element of bottom-up participation, and Valdivia Rivera (2019) stresses that at specific junctures, social movements maintained critical distance from government.

This article contributes to debates on how state-level interventions interact with the goals of the social movements that put them in power. The literature on the MAS has largely skirted around the key issue that impacts the party’s core support base, namely the coca growers direct and indirect involvement in the illicit cocaine trade. While in opposition Morales and other coca grower leaders never had to be explicit on coca’s ties to cocaine. In the face of U.S. Drug War repression, leaders promised to demilitarise the region and defend coca leaf cultivation. But once in power, Morales was forced to

abide by international drug control frameworks that criminalise coca leaf (even while challenging them at the UN). The MAS government continued the restrictions put in place through the 2004 cato accord and attacked illicit drug production. So once again the coca growers had to face up to a what they saw as a threat to their livelihoods. But this time, the coca growers experienced it as an attack on their grassroots political ethics, because Morales is one of them – a Union leader who is subject to their ideas of ‘to lead by obeying’.

Grassroots democracy: between solidarity and coercion

Scholarship on rural movements in Latin America and beyond shows how indigenous and peasant organisations control territory, exercise self-governance, practice leadership rotation, emit sanctions and enforce discipline (Postero and Tockman 2020; Wolford 2010). Such practices are not restricted to indigenous or even rural communities but are found in urban workers movements too (Larrabure 2017). What makes the coca growers’ case unique is that their political party – the MAS – became responsible for governing a country and they scaled up their grassroots ideas of direct democracy to inform state practice.

The predominant form of social organisation in the pre-conquest era, and still practiced in some parts of highland Bolivia, is the Ayllu. The Ayllu is ‘... a group of persons related to each other by kinship ties, and collectively inhabiting a territory which they also own’ (de la Cadena 2013, 59). Ayllu members are required to carry out community service, rotate leadership positions and participate in extensive community consultation in decision-making (Rivera 1990, 102–103). Instead of market exchange, inhabitants rely on *ayni*, defined as ‘a symmetrical exchange of delayed reciprocity between equals’, which might take the form of labour or goods (Allen 1981, 165). de la Cadena (2013, 59) stresses the interdependence of ayllu members, describing the ayllu as a ‘relational practice’.

Bolivia also has an unusually strong tradition of trade union organising, particularly the tin miners who were famed for their militancy. Inspired by various strains of Marxism, Bolivia’s workers unions are highly participatory and have a rigid hierarchical structure (McNelly 2019, 902). The closure of the mines in the 1980s as a result of neoliberal austerity put up to 35,000 people out of work (Durand Ochoa 2012, 96). Some went to the slums of the big cities, but many migrated to the Chapare where they mixed with indigenous peasants and built a novel form of organisation that fused syndicalist forms with indigenous traditions and motifs – including the veneration of the coca leaf (García Linera, Chávez, and Costas 2004, 415)

The extant literature reveals that when it comes to analysing political life in Bolivian peasant and popular urban communities, we cannot start from the assumption of the pre-eminence of the self-reliant individual. Rather grassroots political ethics are grounded in kinship and particular understandings of sociality that value care, solidarity, and place over self-interested behaviour. That is not to say that people are pre-determined to act collectively; organisations have to actively work towards building a sense of collective self (Lazar 2008). To tame individualist tendencies, movements employ what some outsiders might consider to be repressive tactics, such as closed meetings, compulsory participation, fines, and conditioning access to union-controlled assets on involvement in collective actions (see Zibechi 2010). But while sanctions are

effective in the short term, they run the risk of alienating some members (Fabricant 2010, 95).

The point is that even amongst members there is no singular vision of what constitutes appropriate political ethics. From her research with low-income indigenous people in El Alto, Ellison (2018, 13) writes: '... the same political tactics some activists described to me as undeniably and even radically democratic, others characterised as grossly antidemocratic, authoritarian, and a violation of individual rights'. I examine a similar tension, but the conflict here is between a grassroots base and those higher up – in other words, between two differently constituted collectives.

Coca, cocaine and colonisation

'Well ... we just fell here, really!' said Mercedes Aguayo. While working as a maid in the mining city of Oruro, she met Jose Meneses, an ex-miner driving a taxi. At the end of the 1970s, Jose suggested that they move to the Chapare. Mercedes recalls: he said ... 'They talk so much about Chapare. ... Why don't we go there? Let's go one day to see if we can make some money'.

Jose's enthusiasm was stoked by the fact that the Chapare was in the throes of an economic boom driven by rising demand for cocaine in the US, which caused the price of coca leaf to soar (Painter 1994, 15). The so-called coca boom (1979–1985) could not have come at a better time. The Bolivian economy was battered by the combination of a severe drought, hyperinflation, and in 1985, a draconian government-engineered deflation that pushed unemployment to over 20% (Dunkerley 1990, 32–39). Bolivia's economic safety net through this tumultuous time was the coca and cocaine trade, which generated up to \$1 billion dollars annually, matching – if not exceeding – total revenue from all legal exports (De Franco and Godoy 1992, 387).

Throughout the 1980s, tens of thousands of unemployed workers, miners and hard-pressed farmers flocked to the Chapare to claim land and seek jobs in the illicit industry. Work was abundant including planting, harvesting and drying coca leaf or processing cocaine paste in the artisanal workshops located close to the coca fields. At its height in 1989, the coca-cocaine economy provided direct employment for between 120,000 and 243,000 people, and even more jobs in support roles such as cooks, transport, and commerce (Painter 1994, 41). The coca/cocaine economy was a source of stability and a driver of economic growth, enabling relegated territories, like the Chapare, to be inserted into global markets (Gutierrez 2020, 1020).

In 1978, Jose and Mercedes loaded up their pick-up truck and set out to start a new life in the lowland village of Aurora. 'Back then, there were no more than ten houses, and all of them were made of wood. There was no power. We went around with kerosene lamps,' Mercedes told me. The couple sold products from the back of their truck. Mercedes said: 'They made good money those *pichicateros* (drug workers) and we did too, my pockets were full of money.' Jose told me fantastic stories of the boom years: he said that a peasant would turn up from the highlands dirty and wearing rubber sandals but within the month 'he turned into a gringo already', wearing leather boots and sporting two gold watches. 'Peasants with perfume!' he joked.

To this day the illicit cocaine trade is a cornerstone of the local economy; almost everyone has a family member or knows someone who works in the trade, and they turn a blind

eye to it. In the words of one grower, '... everyone is involved in the White Factory (cocaine production) ... somehow.' Many people find work either directly processing cocaine paste, or else in support roles such as smuggling precursor chemicals like gasoline or sulphuric acid or acting as a lookout for drug workers. Others benefit indirectly: the cocaine dollars keep local hardware stores, bars and transport firms afloat. Cocaine paste production is organised around closed kinship networks that help to regulate the trade, and profits are reinvested into the community, as such the local drug trade advances in relative peace (Grisaffi 2021). Growers and paste processors are not the major beneficiaries of this trade, however. In 2014 people who worked in cocaine production earned around \$30 per *entrada* (a session lasting about 5 h) for intermittent and dangerous work, and even the owners of the artisanal production sites only netted around \$1000 a month (Grisaffi 2021, 50).

Building a union and defending coca

Not long after Mercedes and Jose moved to the Chapare, the United States launched its 'War on Drugs'. Militarised interventions with names like 'Operation Blast Furnace' sowed chaos in the Andes, while doing little to stem the drugs flowing North. In 1988, the Bolivian congress passed anti-drug Law 1008 (in force until 2017), under significant US pressure, which outlawed all coca cultivation in the Chapare. The region was declared a 'red zone' subject to special policing measures and the peasant farmers were the 'enemy' (Gutierrez Aguilar 2014, 86). For many growers, US drug policy appeared ironic: Jose pointed out that the US attacked them for growing coca while at the same time demanding cocaine: '... the Gringos go crazy for this shit!' he said.

Initially, the Bolivian government paid farmers \$2000 dollars per hectare to eradicate their crops, but this policy failed. For every plant destroyed, the farmers planted new seedlings elsewhere, and total acreage kept creeping up. In 1997, the Banzer-Quiroga administration (1997–2002) implemented a no holds barred forced eradication campaign. This war on peasants saw military conscripts accompanied by heavily armed members of the police force (known as the UMOPAR) enter small farmsteads to manually uproot crops. UMOPAR killed, abused, and seriously wounded scores of coca farmers, torched homesteads, and incarcerated hundreds of people. Women suffered sexual assaults at the hands of the anti-drug police (Ledebur 2005).

Eradication caused economic hardship and fuelled discontent. In the face of on-going repression, beginning in the late 1980s, coca growers built a powerful resistance movement. The rebellion was born, like most peasant struggles (Wolf 1999, 276–279), as a reaction to the social dislocations, set in motion by the diffusion of 'North Atlantic capitalism' – namely the neoliberal policies imposed on Bolivia by Washington, which led to massive layoffs in mines and factories and undermined peasant livelihoods (Kohl and Farthing 2006). Once unemployed miners and impoverished highland peasants were forced into illicit coca cultivation, they found themselves attacked yet again by the neoliberal state, but this time in the name of the 'war on drugs'. Hit twice, they saw few options but to mobilise in defence of the only livelihood open to them. In the words of one leader: 'necessity forces us to plant coca ... that's why we built the union – to stop the politics of zero coca.'

The first agricultural federation emerged in the mid-1960s to represent the interests of the area's peasant farmers to the state, but also within the labour movement more

broadly (Healy 1991, 92). Women pushed for the formation of a parallel women's federation – the Federación de Mujeres Campesinas del Trópico (FECAMTROP), which they won in 1994. The impetus to have a separate organisation stemmed from concerns about lack of representation in the male-controlled unions and to push for equal access to land (Ramos Salazar 2013). Before the formation of a separate women's organisation, Roxana Argandoña recalled how the union was a male-dominated space. 'There was a position in the union called Secretary of Women's Affairs, but we weren't taken into account; we were expected to prepare food for the men's meetings,'¹ she said. The separate structure allows women's organisations to promote their own agenda, while also facilitating shared demands for the benefit of all producers (Cruz et al. 2020, 9).

Today there are six coca federations – including male and female executive committees – and, with over 45,000 members, it is one of the most powerful social movements in the country. Until 1985, the unions were mostly concerned with internal organisation and they were politically incoherent, with coca growers supporting various parties (Brewer-Osorio 2020, 270). The union even acted as a mechanism for governmental control through corporatism (Escóbar 2008, 194). But the onset of US backed eradication radicalised the cocaleros and united them against their common enemies, namely the Bolivian state and the US embassy (Healy 1991, 87).

The cocaleros were bolstered by the arrival of the displaced miners in the mid-1980s, who brought with them their union experience, infusing the Chapare unions with a more militant brand of leftist working-class politics (Oikonomakis 2019, 150). The Six Federation's adopted the miner's command structure and protest strategies, such as blocking major roads to force the government to negotiate (Brewer-Osorio 2020, 267). The unions established lightly armed self-defence committees to prevent the military from eradicating plantations. But, given the role the unions played regulating behaviour and the cocaleros' political identity premised on non-violence, they remained committed to the electoral path (Prest 2015; Oikonomakis 2019).

The criminalised international status of the coca leaf – due to its links to cocaine – meant that the arguments inherited from the displaced miners regarding class and the right to dignified work were no longer valid. The farmers needed a new discourse, one that would legitimate why they should be granted the right to grow coca: indigeneity was one way this could be achieved (Healy 1991, 93–94). Given the 1990s resurgence of indigenous-identified movements in Bolivia and Latin America more broadly, and the neoliberal onslaught on labour, the coca unions (as well as peasant unions throughout Bolivia) renewed an emphasis on indigenous traditions within their understanding of themselves as a class. The ubiquitous coca leaf, which is consumed throughout the country, became a leitmotiv of decolonisation, and defending it was synonymous with standing-up for '... Bolivia's sovereignty, indigenous cultures and the historically excluded' (Durand Ochoa 2012, 180; Grisaffi 2010). Morales and the MAS also adopted the vocabulary of indigeneity which emphasised the coca leaf to build broad-based support in a heterogeneous society (Postero 2017).

¹Interview by Kathryn Ledebur. March 2020.

A state within a state

When the first wave of settlers to the Chapare arrived in the 1950s they made the most of penetration roads, paid for by the US, and spontaneously settled the area. Given the almost total absence of the state and lack of basic social services, the settlers began to organise themselves. Initially, the agricultural unions were a way to distribute and control land, but they soon transformed into an organ of self-government that addressed the community's development needs (Spedding 2004, 93–94). Silvio Zavala, a man in his 70s, said: 'back then (in the 1960s), there was plenty of land, it was free. All you had to do was to say that you would farm it and join the union'. He went on. '... We cut out our own roads, built our own schools, made our own laws ... there was no help from anyone outside, it was us ... we made the state present.'

Today, over 1000 grassroots unions – that include both male and female membership – maintain the role of local governance. Each base level union, which are male-controlled as women's unions only operate at the higher organisational levels of the central and federation, is responsible for regulating relations between members, administering justice, taxing and regulating local businesses, managing environmental protection, and investing in and building small-scale public works. The sindicato owns and operates the coca markets located in larger villages and towns, and as such has an economic function too (Spedding 2004, 275).

The sindicato exerts control over coca growers' everyday lives. Mercedes put it this way. 'It's as if it is a mini state ... we have certain laws to try to solve our problems ... we try not to involve outsiders.' When there is a dispute, they bring the problem to the monthly meeting where it is discussed with the participation of all union members. The two sides are given the opportunity to present their version of events and the aim is to reconcile the demands of both parties. The sindicato's power reaches into the domestic sphere, intervening in conflicts between spouses or heirs to an inheritance. Given the hegemony of the unions, people who live in the region but have no formal connection to the union are also subject to its authority (see Grisaffi 2019, 105–107). For these reasons I was told, 'around here the federation is the law'.

To access land, one is obliged to join the union. But much like the 'closed corporate communities' described by Wolf (1957), the cocaleros put strict conditions on membership and limit privileges to insiders. Unions grant membership to the head of the family, who is most often male except in the case of widowhood or single mothers. The unions normally only allow acquaintances or people who are related to a current member to join. This strict selection procedure is, in the words of Jose, because: 'here we are like a family, we don't want anyone who will cause us a problem.' Consequently, family members, fictive kin such as godparents, and neighbours also meet as union members.

As well as attending regular meetings, paying a monthly subscription fee, and taking part in communal work parties, membership in the union entails being present at protests or rallies and mobilising and voting for the same political party. If these duties are not fulfilled, sanctions such as fines, depriving people of the right to grow coca, or additional community work ensure compliance. These sanctions are set by the grassroots unions and form part of the local by-laws. If people act against the interests of the community then the sindicato's retribution can be severe, including corporal punishment (hanging, beating, whipping) and expulsion and the forced re-sale of land (at a price determined

by the union). One of the radio reporters explained: 'if you commit a murder, rape, or if you become a person who is against the political instrument (MAS), if you are trying to divide the community – that's when they might use stronger sanctions.'

Union democracy

The unions are characterised by a strong communitarian ethic: decisions are taken at regular face-to-face meetings that involve the entire community and the emphasis is put on reaching consensus and thereby achieving consent. Assembly culture does not allow much space for positions that contradict communitarian values or loyalty to Morales and the MAS. When the organisation is working well, 'all are in agreement,' farmers told me. Although Jose used the phrase 'enforced conformity' to explain how some members are afraid to contradict the leaders for fear of being ostracised or even punished.

Across Bolivia, the assembly culture of indigenous and peasant organisations is based on gendered exclusions and female leaders are often victims of bullying and violence (Córdova 2017; Maclean 2014). In the Chapare, women hold titles to 48% of the land, they lead their own federation, and the unions have formally adopted a policy on gender parity (Cruz et al. 2020, 9). And yet, women still face barriers to participation. Union leadership is overwhelmingly male, and women's voices are not accorded the same weight as those of men. During fieldwork, I witnessed women being talked over, hushed, or ignored when they spoke at union meetings (see Ramos Salazar 2013, 163).

In 2019, Segundina Orellana, the general secretary of FECAMTROP told me that while women had made progress and now occupy important leadership roles: 'there is always this feeling that women are somehow inferior'. Apolonia Sanchez, an ex-FECAMTROP leader explained that twenty years ago men would not allow women to be leaders but, 'Now we talk as much as the men (at meetings). But there is still not total equality, the men are jealous of us'. Apolonia explained that domestic labour is still viewed as women's work, and this impacts on the female leaders' ability to enact their union duties (see also Zurita 2005). As such the vernacular meaning of dictatorship can also be gendered. Women have been disenchanted with the union organisation for far longer and for different reasons than the men.

Leaders are selected via a popular vote. Leader Ruth Pinto explains: 'we are not named by our highest leaders ... it's the bases that have to choose.' The most important feature of grassroots democracy is that all major decisions should be taken through a process of collective decision making and leaders must respect the will of the bases. Taking leadership from below is not an abstract ideal, but deadly serious: leaders must do what the bases say. At monthly union meetings the doors are locked, a register is taken, and members can spend up to ten hours discussing important issues. Because everyone is related through shared residence or kinship, it is difficult for local leaders to not respect community decisions. These coercive practices are not unique to the coca growers but represent a common pattern among social movements across Latin America (see Wilde 2017; Zibechi 2010).

The rank and file keep their leaders in check through chastisement or recalling them, but they can also use physical punishment to force leaders into compliance. Ruth Pinto explains 'if they [the bases] have given you their trust, and you break it ... well they

can kick you out ... you can even lose your land'. This operating logic is scaled up from the lowest level of the organisation – the *sindicato* – to the central, federation and confederation level, creating lines of accountability by which leaders can be judged and if needs be, forced out.

Being a member of a *sindicato* is about more than simply abiding by its rules and turning up to meetings for fear of a fine, however (Spedding 2004, 298–299). Coca grower ideas about how democracy should be enacted are not enshrined in abstract codes and procedures, but rather are anchored in deeply held understandings of what it means to be a good person – what the coca growers refer to as being *bien cumplido*, that is, fulfilling one's duties towards kin, neighbours and the organisation. As such, people actively participate in what they refer to as the organic life of the organisation (*vida organica*); and they expect the union to act like a corporate person – one whose qualities as an organisation reflect the values of what they perceive to be a good person (Koch 2018).

Coca growers use the word *Ayni* to describe the system of mutual aid that prevails in the region. *Ayni* can be practiced in many ways, from low-level daily exchanges of food, drinks, or invitations to sit and chew coca, to working in a neighbour's fields for no pay, or gifting crates of beer for a celebration such as a wedding. Each person has to be entangled in the lives of others, offering support when called on, but also asking for assistance in turn. By engaging in these daily exchange networks coca growers express care and commitment to one another. These relationships become central to boundary-drawing processes between insiders and outsiders.

The use of sanctions and the fact there is little public dissent supports the view that the coca unions are authoritarian. But it is understood differently from within. When I put the question 'are the *sindicatos* a form of dictatorship?' to Pedro Sejas, a coca grower in his late 30s, he insisted, 'The decisions, we make them in a democratic way, any decision that we are going to make, it's always a group decision.' He went on 'The leader cannot use his authority, rather he is always asking the bases what he is going to do. The decision is always collective.' From the coca growers' perspective, a decision is only valid if it has been made with the direct participation of all community members. Why then have some coca growers, like Luis Vásquez, come to call into question the union's assembly culture?

The incorporation of leaders

Edgar Jimenez – a coca grower in his 60s – was listening to Radio Sovereignty. He became agitated by a speech broadcast by the Federation's General Secretary calling for 100% of the rank and file to attend a rally in Cochabamba. Edgar complained that he would rather work in his fields but reminded me that if he did not participate then there would be a steep fine to pay. He complained that in the past people mobilised because they wanted to, but now he says 'it's all politics'. '... What do they call it when they (union leaders) oblige you to go, when they haven't even consulted the rank and file? ... They call it a dictatorship!'

Scholars researching Bolivian social movements have noted how grassroots members use critical rhetoric towards leaders as a means to counterbalance the centralisation of power (Lazar 2008, 262). But Edgar is not disapproving of a specific decision or leader, rather he calls into question the very essence of the union's assembly culture. What

Edgar alludes to, is that today sanctions are seen to come from above, thereby breaking the link between the leadership and the grassroots.

In his analysis of the transformation of Bolivia's trade union federation, the *Central Obrera Boliviana* (COB), McNelly (2019, 897) argues that the MAS has built corporatist relationships by '... aligning the personal interests of the union leaders with those of the MAS.' The creation of a 'MASista labour officialdom' has neutralised the risk posed by experienced leaders opposing government, and in so doing undermined the COB's ability to represent the working classes (McNelly 2019, 906–909).

Similar processes of incorporation are afoot in the Chapare where coca growers like Edgar have increasingly come to see themselves as foot soldiers for the MAS, rather than as its backbone. This shift has a deeper history. Viola (2001, 90) witnessed how, by the mid 1990s, the highest tiers of the union leadership already represented a 'differentiated superstructure' and acted 'autonomously' from the rank and file. These processes only accelerated with the consolidation of the MAS, as officials '... built a party in the traditional authoritarian style' (Oscar Olivera cited in Komadina and Geffroy 2007, 92); here Olivera uses the word authoritarian in the 'normative' sense of the word.

The shift to more top-down control was evident during the 2015 municipal elections in the Chapare, when Morales overturned the popular grassroots nomination for Mayor of Shinahota. Morales's intervention provoked a strong reaction from the rank and file. When Morales visited the Six Federation's Headquarters (located close to Shinahota) for a routine meeting, 500 cocaleros barricaded the gates, holding him hostage for over five hours. Over the following weeks some members aligned with a new political party, 'United for Cochabamba' (UNICO), to contest the election with their own candidate. The Six Federations' leadership harshly punished the ringleaders, expelling ten people from the organisation and ordering the Joint Task Force (JTF) to uproot their coca (Grisaffi 2019, 168–169).

Grassroots union members who I spoke with were critical of the way the situation had been handled. One farmer recalled that Morales had said that he would lead by obeying: 'why then doesn't he let the candidates the bases chose go to the elections?' Base-level members saw this as just one more example of how they had been side-lined in favour of a more top-down approach to governance. They said that leaders had been bought off with the promise of government jobs and that higher-level posts were not selected by the bases at all, but rather were personal appointments made by senior leaders, including Evo Morales himself. It was said that as a result, leaders now prioritise the needs of the party over the goals of the rank and file.

Some complained that bottom-up control of the union no longer meant anything. This much was confirmed when Morales ordered the dismissal of the coca union's radio team once they started to air criticisms of government policies (Grisaffi 2019, 184–190). In this context, some cocaleros, like Edgar, describe the union's use of sanctions as illegitimate, and even as a form of 'extortion', to silence dissent and turn them into political pawns of the MAS.

Drug policy: the limits of reform

Since entering office, Morales has made efforts to defend coca. The 2009 Constitution gives coca legal protection for the first time, and the government petitioned the UN to

remove coca from the list of globally banned substances. Bolivia successfully gained an exception in 2013, allowing for traditional uses of the leaf on its territory. The international export of coca or coca-based products remains proscribed, however (Pearson 2020, 285). The amendment was an important symbolic victory, but it had little impact on the Chapare coca economy, because most of their coca is not destined for traditional consumption, but the cocaine trade (Grisaffi 2021, 51).

Given coca leaf's continued status as an internationally restricted substance (even if chewing is now permitted within Bolivia) the MAS government advanced a policy that, while acknowledging the importance of coca to Andean culture, limited its cultivation and attacked drug production. Continuing a policy first launched in 2004, the *cato* system requires farmers to acquire an official land title, something that the unions had always fiercely resisted, have their plot mapped by UDESTRO, the state coca control agency, and to register for a biometric identity card. As a result, today the Chapare and its population are 'legible' to the state (Scott 1998), and while this has given farmers some security and allows them to use their land as collateral for loans, it has also made the unions more amenable to state control (Lerch 2014, 150). By taking the control of land away from the unions, the government has disempowered them, contributing to a process of demobilisation (Grisaffi 2019, 145–147).

Under the *cato* system, the unions are called on to self-police to ensure individual growers respect the limit. Higher level union leaders vigorously enforce the policy – organising annual revisions and authorising the uprooting of any coca over the limit. People who do not respect the rules face sanctions, including a two-year growing ban. Researchers have hailed the approach as a non-violent alternative to restrict coca cultivation (Farthing and Ledebur 2015). Along with keeping coca to the lowest levels in the Andean region, the policy, which prioritises development assistance, raised incomes and expanded access to services like education, health and potable water (Grisaffi et al. 2017, 146–147).

And yet, the *cato* policy does not entirely resolve the broader structural questions of marginalisation that made coca and cocaine production the most viable option in what continues to be the poorest country in South America. Many communities still lack roads, schools and healthcare, the price of agricultural products like tropical fruit is low, and there are relatively few off-farm job opportunities – even for those with a college education. The 2012 census indicates that 50% of the Chapare population live in moderate poverty and close to 20% are 'destitute' (Córdova and Ledebur 2020, 10).

Over more than ten years of fieldwork, dozens of rank-and-file members described the sacrifices they were making to honour the policy and said they hoped Morales would lift the cap on coca cultivation. The *cato* policy was only ever supposed to be a temporary arrangement until a study on national coca consumption could be completed, which would form the basis for a new policy. It took until 2014 for the study to be finished and another three years for a new coca law to be passed because of resistance in traditional growing zones in the Yungas, Bolivia's other major coca growing region. The 2017 law made the *cato* permanent, permitting up to 7,700 hectares of coca in the Chapare and a further 14,300 in the Yungas and expansion zones. The new penal code continues with the extremely high sentences for drug offenses provided under Law 1008 (Ledebur and Youngers 2018, 9).

Some accused the government of selling Chapare coca growers out, arguing that the *cato* does not generate enough cash to support a family. The feeling was particularly strong in more remote areas, such as the Isiboro colonisation zone (Polígono 7), where most cash crops (other than coca) will not grow because of sandy soil and steep slopes. Farmers have argued for the right to two *catos* of coca, if not more. They see this as a fair pay back because in the local narrative it was the Isiboro unions that put up the strongest resistance to past eradication campaigns. Leader Samuel Pozo explained: 'We were the *Guerreros* (warriors) in the battle to defend coca, we have the most martyrs ... but all we got is this lousy *cato*! What did we bother fighting for?' He said that farmers were angry about a government proposal to install a military base in Isiboro to attack drug production. Area *cocaleros* have faced down troops on eradication and interdiction missions (Paco 2019).

Some farmers engage in low-level acts of resistance including planting over the one *cato* limit. Many people who I spoke with in 2014 said that while they respected the accord their neighbours did not. The most common reasons given were: 'they are selfish', 'they are ambitious' and 'they always want more.' I came to realise that one of my close friends, who was also a union leader, had three *catos*, each registered to a different family member. When I asked why, he told me 'I have always dedicated myself to coca – that's what we do, we are *cocaleros*.' In so doing he mobilised the union's narrative on collective identity linked to coca to justify his illegal activities.

Those engaged with cocaine production also felt that their interests were under attack. In the past, the unions could largely ignore drug trafficking – but Morales and the MAS have leaned on the unions to put an end to illicit activity. Ambitious union leaders – with one eye on a government job – call on the grassroots unions to set up roadblocks to search vehicles, check for drugs workshops, and expel those who are involved in drugs trafficking. If the grassroots unions do not comply then as a collective, they face a range of sanctions, from fines to being banned from cultivating legal coca. This has forced drug workers to re-locate their activities deeper into the jungle, away from union-controlled areas – and this has negatively impacted them (Grisaffi 2021, 57).

Speaking about coca and its connection to drugs is a taboo subject which was never discussed at any union meeting I attended. Most people worried that if they voiced a criticism of current policy, they risked being punished, including having their coca plot taken away. One told me that with the *cato* they were 'held to ransom' by the MAS government and that the government can use it as leverage to control the union. The lack of accountability is often narrated as a betrayal of grassroots democratic ideals; they argue that their leaders now serve the party not the bases.

Luis Vásquez says that the union is no longer democratic – not because of the use of sanctions to ensure compliance, but rather because the sanctions are said to come from above, and leaders are no longer answerable to the rank and file – they are not 'leading by obeying'. But despite this frustration and dissent, following Morales's ouster in November 2019, the *cocaleros* were among the first to protest and suffer repression by the Áñez government.

The Sacaba Massacre

In November 2019, following disputed elections, a violent protest supported by the military and police forced Evo Morales into exile and replaced him with a hard-right interim administration led by Jeanine Áñez. On 15th November 2019 coca growers staged a peaceful march to the city of Cochabamba to demand new elections. When they reached Sacaba, a suburb about 10 km from the city centre, the police backed by the military fired gas and live bullets, killing eleven, injuring 120 and arresting over 180 people. In protest, union members set Chapare police stations on fire, forcing the police to temporarily abandon the region. Union members hung up mannequins along the main road dressed in police uniforms each bearing a placard 'police caught, police lynched'.

It was in this context that I arrived in the Chapare in December 2019. All coca growers I spoke with described the toppling of Morales as a coup – and decried the Áñez government as a 'dictatorship'. Pedro Sejas explained how the police and paramilitary groups (the so-called *motoqueros*) attacked coca growers and burned down the Federations' headquarters in the city. 'This is a dictatorship – no one can say that we are in a democracy now'. At an emergency meeting of Radio Sovereignty, the reporters worried that the military would invade the region and close down the station. The director warned 'they are going to target the leaders – there will be recriminations ... people are afraid.'

And yet, while growers identify the Áñez administration as 'the enemy', some also criticise their own leaders for what happened. Members say that after fourteen years in power, union leaders became weak. One male coca grower explained: 'They (leaders) only wear the blue t-shirt (the MAS logo t-shirts) and shout about revolution when there is no risk – they are only there to inaugurate public works. But when we need them most, they have disappeared.' People also laid the blame at Morales for not 'leading by obeying.' Pedro said that from the very beginning the union had told Morales that they would occupy city plazas to safeguard the 2019 election, but he rejected the idea, saying that if they did, the opposition would accuse him of being a dictator. Pedro explained that when Morales resigned 'we blamed our highest leaders. We should never have retreated'.

Honorata Choque, a veteran leader, spoke about a level of despondency amongst members: 'now there is so much fear, fear is the enemy of the movement ... We have to be strong, united, like in the old days.' But even as Covid-19 hit, and the government persecuted MAS supporters and coca growers, there were glimmers of hope. Union members spoke of an awakening of a new generation of leaders who have been politicised by the massacre – and there was talk of rebuilding alliances with other social sectors that had been neglected. In Pedro's words, 'They wanted to humiliate us – but the people will not allow it. They have not stopped us – not yet.'

Following the coup, the coca growers had to deal with an external threat that is more perilous and significant than the internal conflicts outlined in this article. In the face of the militarisation of the Chapare and the proposed return to forced eradication, the coca growers voiced strong support for Morales and the MAS. General elections were held on 18 October 2020, resulting in a landslide victory for Luis Arce of the MAS. But this victory does not resolve the deeper economic and social challenges the Chapare faces,

which have only been made worse by Covid-19. The tensions outlined here relating to how to control crop and drug production will continue to occupy people at the local level.

Conclusion

Within the Chapare, the unions represent a de-facto state, but this is a very particular kind of state, one that is grounded in personalised connections, kinship and common local knowledge. Most of all, it is premised on shared livelihoods around the production of coca and direct and indirect involvement in the cocaine trade. Within coca grower organisations, grassroots democracy is highly participatory, but once decisions are made then members are expected to toe the line. There is no formal space for pluralism, anyone who opposes the consensus risks being deprived of rights, fined, and even expelled from their community. From the outside, it does look like the 'union dictatorship' so feared by right-wing commentators.

The coca growers understand it differently, however. The use of sanctions is accepted because the union's goals are believed to reflect those of each and every member, collapsing executive power and legislative will. But it is precisely this bottom-up control that was gradually but steadily subverted once the MAS entered into power. The biggest challenge the MAS government faced in relation to coca growers was limiting coca and drug production, and they shifted from an emphasis on ensuring peasant livelihoods to more top-down control. Union-led action against excess coca and drugs has impacted on some peasant households negatively and criticism that the cato was insufficient to provide an adequate family income is ubiquitous. Even among loyal followers, growing numbers of coca growers came to see Morales as increasingly authoritarian in failing to heed the principle of 'leading by obeying'.

The cocaleros growing disillusionment, and their shift from a language of mutual solidarity to one decrying top-down control, shows that people are rarely just one thing or another. Authoritarianism, then, is not an inherent feature of a movement or a political position, an essentialising attribute of the anti-democratic will of the coca growers and their unions, as some Bolivian media and political commentators would have it (see Campero 2011, 26). Rather, it has to be thought of as an attribute of the relationship between those who govern and those who are governed. In this way, the article draws attention to vernacular ideas of 'authoritarianism' and 'dictatorship' where democracy 'goes wrong'. As such we might understand authoritarianism as a moral language that captures a disjuncture between political expectations and practices, one that is deeply felt in Bolivia and beyond.

Even if grassroots ambitions for more participatory governance were realised, the MAS government would have been unable to satisfy the coca growers' material aspirations, because their livelihoods are intimately tied to an illegal economy. Policies tackling the illicit drug trade are to a great extent dictated by an international agenda, reinforcing Vergara-Camus and Kay's (2018) contention that it is impossible to separate local democratic movements from broader geo-politics, and this needs to be a key feature of any account of emancipatory peasant struggles.

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