



Social Protests in Bolivia: Miners' mobilization in La Paz

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1. Briefly explain the reasons behind the mining rallies in La Paz and the police reaction towards protests?

In July 2015 miners from the historic city of Potosí held protests against President Evo Morales in the Bolivian capital, La Paz. The protests were organised and coordinated by the **Civic Committee of Potosí/Comité Cívico de Potosí (Comcipo)**. Comcipo is a platform that brings together 23 organisations including social groups and unions and its objective is to defend the regional interests of Potosí. Comcipo continues to call on the President to fulfil pledges made by his government to the region. Some of the pledges include: construction of an international airport, a hydroelectric plant, hospitals and cement, lime and glass factories. The July protests in La Paz, were therefore the result of the government's failure in meeting the demands of the region and the frustration nursed by its citizens over broken promises made. The region is home to one of the richest silver mines in the world but ironically remains one of the poorest in Bolivia.

Previously in 2010, Potosí experienced another civic protest in the region and the objective then was to obtain commitments from the government. Representatives of Potosí then held talks with the President and Vice-President of Bolivia and agreed to promote social and economic development using a document that contained 26 key issues to be addressed. Sadly, five years later the government has not fully implemented most of the commitments made. In 2015 the Comcipo used different strategies to engage in an honest dialogue with President Morales. In what is known as the Pacific March, over two thousand miners walked for over 530 KM from Potosí to the capital La Paz. When they got to La Paz, they organised massive protests, blocking the streets in an effort to get their demands heard. The protests went on for weeks and dialogue remained elusive.

The police responded with violence, using excessive force to disperse protesters. 33 protesters were arrested and 4 of their leaders were detained for a week and now face legal charges. The absence of any valid government response towards the demands of the protests, the heavy-handed manner in which the police responded to the demonstrations and the judicial persecution of some of the protesters forced the group from Potosí to return to their region. There is a truce in place at the moment but the position of the authorities

regarding the demands of the protesters remains unclear. After the return of the protesters, President Morales sarcastically noted that he “laughed at Potosí’s demands,” and this demonstrates how insensitive the government is towards the issues the region which continues to bear the brunt of poverty and distress.

2. How is civil society responding to violations of the right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, in the context of protests in Bolivia?

Despite the fact that the protests had caused disruptions in traffic, the people of La Paz showed solidarity towards the protesters from Potosí. The iconic Assembly for Human Rights issued a statement calling for dialogue, peace and respect for freedom of assembly and the protection of the right of citizens to engage in social protests.

3. How would you describe the overall environment for civil society in Bolivia?

The space for civil society in Bolivia is increasingly restricted and continues to be scrutinised by the government. Fear of reprisals from the state has forced many organisations and activists to resort to self-censorship. Also political, legal and administrative conditions are not very conducive for human rights NGOs to effectively carry out their work.

4. What can be done to address the main challenges of the civil society in Bolivia?

I believe it is very important to coordinate a process aimed at building and strengthening the capacity of civil society organizations to work jointly and form a variety of networks. This will enable the sector to effectively monitor violations of human rights and advocate for compliance with international human rights agreements, which in Bolivia has acceded to.

5. What solidarity can international and regional groups offer colleagues in Bolivia?

With the deterioration of human rights in Bolivia, it is important for regional and international civil society to observe and report violations. Such international solidarity is important as it enables the world to know about the state of human rights in the country. International solidarity should lead to concrete actions and interventions, development of advocacy strategies in regional and international human rights organisations, increase awareness and the exchange and dissemination of timely information across platforms.