Looking in the Bolivian mirror

In a world dominated by CNN-style news, it is difficult for people to have access to real information. Needless to say that serious analysis on almost anything (except perhaps football) is particularly absent. Train accidents, sports results, wars, Hollywood stars, hunger, biotechnology, human rights abuses or whatever mix of chaotic bits and pieces of news appear to be more an excuse to inflict advertisements on people than to provide them with relevant information to understand the world we are living in.

Within that situation, it is possible that for most people –even within Latin America- the news about the ousting of the Bolivian government has not meant much. We believe it to be, however, one of the most important events that has happened in the recent years.

Eagerly and happily responding to the US government's demands, the fallen government decided, on the one hand, to crack down on coca cultivation and on the other hand to open up the country's natural gas reserves to supply the US with extremely cheap gas through a Chilean port.

The Bolivian people reacted strongly and decided to take the country's sovereignty into their own hands. Coca cultivation has since time immemorial been part of the Bolivian culture, while cocaine is a foreign invention alien to this culture. Eradication of coca is thus perceived as a US imposition having no legitimacy within the country. On the other hand, natural gas is one of the last remaining economic resources the country still has, all the rest (from silver to tin) having already been exploited first by Spanish conquerors and later by transnational companies, leaving the country poorer than before. The detail that gas would be exported through a Chilean port –which in a past 19th Century war left Bolivia without access to the Pacific Ocean- added insult to injury.

The people thus took to the streets against the government. The cost was very high -some 70 dead and more than 400 injured- but the result was a President fleeing to where he belongs –Miami- and his hard-line ministers escaping to a number of different countries. The new president has pledged to introduce radical changes to the policies implemented by his predecessor, in line with popular demands.

Why do we think this news is so important? Firstly, because it shows the inherent weakness of power based on elites alienated from their country's peoples. Secondly, because it proves that the apparent weakness of impoverished peoples hides their true and enormous strength. Thirdly, because it provides the rest of the world with a mirror of our own realities and possibilities for change. Not to copy what the Bolivian people did, but to realize that change is possible –if we try.

What is the relevance of this news regarding forests? Many of the articles contained in this bulletin show that resistance against the destruction of forests is mostly in the hands of local peoples and civil society organizations. While governments argue –with or without conviction- that little can be done in a world dominated by overwhelming economic and political powers, peoples still believe that resistance is possible –and act accordingly. While governments open up our countries to logging, oil and gas exploitation, large scale tree plantations, dams, shrimp farming, genetically modified crops

and other "development" projects, people continue fighting all the way down the line. In some cases succeeding and in others failing. But always trying.

Within the prevailing economic model implemented by governments following the advice of the International Monetary Fund and similar institutions, the future of forests is –to say the least- problematic. What therefore needs to be changed is precisely that model. It will certainly not be easy, but neither was or is the ongoing struggle in Bolivia.