
[Bolivia: Peasants and indigenous peoples march in favour of the right to natural resources](#)

Starting at different points of Bolivia, peasants and indigenous peoples have been carrying out marches in favour of the right to lands and natural resources, arriving in the city of La Paz in the next few days.

In spite of recent efforts to clarify the situation regarding land and forest ownership, there is still an overlap between protected areas, indigenous territories, logging concessions, farms, mining concessions and areas used by the informal sector in the production of wood and gathering of nuts and heart of palm. The deforestation rate in Bolivia is 168.000 hectares a year.

The local peoples, seeing that their rights regarding community property were not recognised, while the estate owners occupied more and more lands, threatening their subsistence, went from local resistance to co-ordination with other regions in the country, attempting to achieve benefits on a national level. Thus, for the past few years, women and men, people from high lands and low lands have been uniting their forces and demonstrating their discontent, trying to be taken into account when political decisions are being made on subjects which will directly affect them and which will benefit the large scale ranchers, logging and oil companies that are appropriating their lands.

The objectives of the on-going struggle are: the establishment of a Constituent Assembly with the participation of all social sectors, the definitive filing of the Sustainable Development Bill and the Reform to Forestry Law and the public and written commitment by the Executive that they will not adopt the projected regulations set out in the so-called “Agrarian Package”.

The demonstrators have denounced that this “Agrarian Package” consists of legal instruments that will benefit the most powerful sectors in agriculture: loggers, ranchers, estate owners. Through an Administrative Resolution, the risk of the process of land ownership deeds ending in favour of the estate owners is increased: it contains provisions establishing that companies carrying out oil exploitation, mining or electrification activities, and which already have concessions for the exploitation of natural resources, may also obtain property rights on the land where they are settled, submitting documents of acquisition or possession that are very easy to obtain in rural areas.

Legislation presently in force sets out that peasants who are individually legal owners of lands – having lived and worked on them for years but who do not have agrarian deeds – may consolidate them in their favour at much lower concession values than the market values, considering that they are small farmers who do not have any great net worth or heritage. The modifying decree abolishes this, and stipulates that these farmers must purchase their lands from the State at market values established by the Agrarian Superintendent’s Office. Furthermore, the present law establishes at 500 hectares the minimum unit per family in peasant and indigenous communities devoted to the extraction of non-woody products (nuts, almonds) in the Bolivian northern Amazon zone. The modifying decree converts this minimum unit into the maximum one, something like turning the floor into the ceiling.

Regarding forestry, application of the Sustainable Development Bill and Reform of the Forestry Law will imply a drop in the price of the forestry license paid annually to the State. This will only benefit the major logging concessions presently paying their license on the basis of the area actually being used annually, and not on the area covered by the forestry concession. As an example, a logging company having a concession of 150,000 hectares, will pay a tax on the 50,000 hectares that have been used during the year, but will maintain rights over the remaining 100,000. Furthermore, the logging companies obtaining these benefits are the very same ones that owe large amounts of money to the State for unpaid licenses.

The pressure is making itself felt. Although the peasants and indigenous peoples are carrying out a peaceful march, they have denounced that they have felt the permanent harassment of military helicopters flying overhead and, during parts of their journey, the intimidating passage of lorry-loads of armed and threatening soldiers.

During the march and as a result of their mobilisation the first objective was achieved: failure of the Constitutional Reform Bill. At all events, the indigenous leaders have stated they will not halt their march until the Constitutive Assembly is called, during which the Reforms to the State Political Constitution should be analysed with the participation of the indigenous peoples, peasants and civilian society.

With the forthcoming elections almost a month away and after having achieved failure of the Reform and withdrawal of the Sustainable Development Bill and Reform to the Forestry Law, the struggle continues to avoid the regulations foreseen in the “Agrarian Package” being adopted and in favour of the indigenous peoples and peasants’ right to the land, the territory and the natural resources.