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The Fun House Mirror: Distortions and Omissions in the News on Bolivia

By Dan Beeton

IN AUGUST, BOLIVIAN PRESIDENT EVO MORALES won a referendum on his term in office with 67% of the vote. The opposition, having failed to unseat Morales in the face of the largest electoral majority in Bolivian history, embarked on a campaign of violent destabilization that culminated in riots, economic sabotage, and the massacre of more than 20 indigenous Morales supporters in September. Just a day before the massacre, at the height of opposition violence, the Bolivian government expelled U.S. Ambassador Philip Goldberg, following revelations that the U.S. Embassy in La Paz had asked Peace Corps volunteers and a Fulbright scholar to spy inside Bolivia, together with growing evidence, amid official secrecy, of U.S. funding for violent opposition groups.¹

It was in this context that in November Morales paid a visit to Washington, his first as Bolivian president. Following a busy itinerary, Morales spoke at the Organization of

American States, addressed a large audience at American University, and held meetings with congressional members, among other engagements. Such visits by heads of state do not always draw much media attention. But considering that his visit came soon after a series of

newsworthy political developments in Bolivia, as well as a breakdown in diplomatic relations with the United States, the scant coverage his visit received was still surprising.

Save for one *Washington Post* article, the Morales visit garnered no full-length reports in major U.S. papers, according to a Nexis survey.² Furthermore, most editors apparently took no interest in one particularly notable meeting Morales held on Capitol Hill with Senator Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), the ranking minority member of the Foreign Relations Committee and the most influential

Republican on international issues in Congress. After the meeting, Lugar issued a remarkable statement implicitly acknowledging that the

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United States had made a mistake in failing to condemn the September violence.

“The United States regrets any perception that it has been disrespectful, insensitive, or engaged in any improper activities that would disregard the legitimacy of the current Bolivian government or its sovereignty,” the statement read. “We hope to renew our relationship with Bolivia, and to develop a rapport grounded on respect and transparency.” Lugar’s overture represented the first olive branch to Bolivia from any U.S. government figure after the diplomatic breakdown, and it came, surprisingly, from a powerful Republican. The mention of transparency was also important, since the State Department has declined to disclose whom it is funding among Bolivia’s opposition, and for what purpose.

Yet the press largely ignored it. Only the Associated Press and *The Washington Post* even mentioned it, and the AP initially misrepresented the statement completely, reporting that Lugar had said “the United States rejects any suggestion that it did not respect Bolivia’s sovereignty or the legitimacy of its government.”³ (A correction was never issued. A subsequent AP article in December cited Lugar’s statement correctly and reported Morales’s encouraging response.)

Although Lugar’s statement was handed directly to the *Post*, neither the meeting with Lugar nor Lugar’s statement made it into the print edition of the paper’s article on Morales’s visit.⁴ This is a striking omission in a 700-word article, since it was arguably the most newsworthy event of the visit. A Web version of the article did mention the Lugar meeting, but only in the 13th paragraph.⁵

Following Bolivia’s approval of the new constitution in January, Lugar

made a second statement on Bolivia, calling for respectful dialogue and a redeployment of ambassadors as steps toward building a “positive new stage in relations between the United States and Bolivia.” The statement received no notice from the U.S. press, save for one Bloomberg article.⁶

The nature of the opposition-led violence in September was also distorted or simply ignored in U.S. newspapers. During, and prior to, September’s violence, newswires including Agence France-Presse, Reuters, and Inter Press Service revealed the close ties between violent, racist youth groups and “respectable” opposition leaders like businessman Branko Marinkovic. Reuters, for example, in August reported that “although Marinkovic said he wanted to avoid violence, young people were seen coming in and out of his office building carrying batons and baseball bats.”⁷ Even more revealing was an Inter Press Service article, which reported that the campaign of violence carried out in September followed a plan coordinated by the opposition coalition, and that opposition legislators had been ejected from an early-September meeting after objecting to the violent methods under discussion.⁸

Yet major U.S. English-language media that covered the September events did not mention the planned nature of the violence, even after AFP noted that—in the midst of violent attacks, the ransacking of government offices, and the sabotage of a gas pipeline—“the conservative governors are . . . encouraging the protesters in their actions” and that “mil-

itants linked to the opposition group set up road blocks” to add pressure to the governors’ demands for more control over gas revenues.⁹

The media’s attitude toward the violence in Bolivia seemed to mirror that of the U.S. government, which neglected to condemn the violence.

Amateur video and images posted online easily demonstrate the violent and racist nature of many incidents and many groups and persons in the opposition. (One example, available at the time of this writing on Youtube.com, is a video of violent attacks in Santa Cruz titled “Autonomistas fanáticos y desesperados enlodan imagen de Santa Cruz.”) Even though videos and images are readily available on the

Web, U.S. media reports,

while sometimes noting racial overtones or racist incidents, have often failed to present details of the many attacks that have been carried out against indigenous Bolivians when they have occurred, or the common talk of assassinating Morales, Bolivia’s first indigenous president.

According to sources in Bolivia, a cell phone image depicting Morales being shot in the head was popular with some in the opposition, and in January a few wire services did report on an incident in which a Virginia-based Facebook user had posted a message encouraging others to contribute funds in order to hire a hit man to kill Morales.¹⁰ A particularly egregious example of racist violence occurred in May 2008, when opposition activists assaulted a group of indigenous Morales supporters in Sucre, stripping them and forcing them to publicly denounce Morales and the MAS government, while berating them with racist epithets.¹¹ This incident was only reported by Inter Press Service and *The Miami Herald* at the time.¹²

The disturbing nature of Bolivia's right-wing youth groups did not prevent the *Los Angeles Times* from publishing a 928-word profile of Edson Abad Ruiz, a young man killed in fighting with government supporters. Abad was a member of the Cruceño Youth Union (UJC), identified by the newspaper as a "group dedicated to defending this rebellious eastern region of Bolivia from its chief foe, the leftist administration of President Evo Morales."¹³

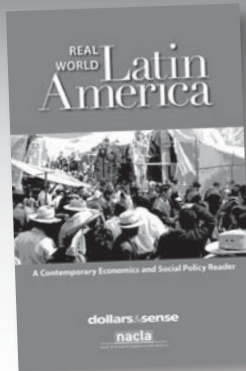
As observers familiar with Bolivia's conflicts know, the UJC is a far-right militant group that has attacked Morales supporters many times in recent years. While the *Los Angeles Times* should not be faulted for giving a human face to Bolivia's violence, the context in which the article appeared

made it perhaps an unusual choice. Racist groups, including the UJC, had massacred more than 20 indigenous Morales supporters in Porvenir, in the department of Pando, just nine days earlier. The *Los Angeles Times* has yet to run a human interest story on indigenous, or pro-government, victims of Bolivia's recent violence.

The media's attitude toward the violence in Bolivia—some of which was publicly supported by opposition leaders who had been in contact with the U.S. ambassador—seemed to mirror that of the U.S. government, which neglected to condemn the violence. In contrast, a commission to investigate the Porvenir massacre was quickly established by the Union of South American Nations (Unasur). The commission found

that more than 20 people had been killed in a "massacre" and that the perpetrators had acted "in an organized fashion," responding "to a chain of command" leading up to the Pando prefect, Leopoldo Fernández, who was also said to have provided funding.¹⁴ The Unasur report went generally unnoticed in U.S. news. Only the Associated Press, Reuters, *Indian Country Today*, and *The New York Times* (which noted it only in passing) even mentioned it.¹⁵

BY ANY STANDARD, MORALES HAS a sizable political mandate. He not only triumphed in the August referendum on his presidency but gained 13 percentage points over his initial election in 2005. Yet much U.S. reporting



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has portrayed his electoral successes as an entrenchment of political polarization, especially between the pro-Morales western highlands and the opposition-dominated eastern lowlands. While there is some truth to this depiction, Bolivia's geopolitical reality is more complex, as was apparent in the recall referendum's results. Morales won six out of Bolivia's nine departments, and of the three where majority No votes prevailed, only two had strong majorities against Morales—Beni (56.28%) and Santa Cruz (59.25%).

The third, Tarija, was split almost evenly down the middle, with a 50.17% No vote.¹⁶ Even outside the city of Santa Cruz, more voters supported Morales in the rest of the "opposition dominated" Santa Cruz department than voted against him, with a 53.1% Yes vote against 46.9% No.¹⁷ Yet many U.S. press reports presented the results as a deepening of divisions. "Bolivian Deadlock Remains as President, Foes Are Returned to Office" a *Washington Post* headline announced.¹⁸ *The Miami Herald* likewise ran an article titled "Voters Give Morales and Foes a Stalemate," which stated: "Bolivian President Evo Morales survived an election test, but his foes gained as well, which means the stalemate between them will continue."¹⁹

The reporting on the January 25 constitution vote, in which more than 61% of voters approved a new constitution long called for by indigenous groups and social movements, continued this pattern. Many articles summing up the results of the constitutional referendum emphasized that Bolivia remains "sharply divided," claiming that the country "is split on ethnic and geographic lines."²⁰ While it is true that four departments in the eastern lowlands did have strong

majorities against the new constitution, the media's framing of the vote was similar to coverage of the August recall referendum, stressing opposition to Morales and his government, despite his unprecedented electoral popularity.

The media framing of Bolivia's recent votes comes into sharp relief when we compare it with how the media framed the election of Barack Obama. Morales won his first election, in 2005, with slightly more than Obama's near 53% of the popular vote in 2008 (53.7% voted for Morales, while Obama received 52.9% of the popular vote). Yet by comparison, coverage of Obama's win has often been framed as not only an overwhelming rejection of George W. Bush policies but a moment of national reconciliation and unity. Obama's inauguration, for example, inspired the *New York Times* editorial board to suggest that "this battered nation will be able to draw together and mend itself." The accent on unity was so strong, as media critic Janine Jackson pointed out, that it led some in the media to declare a "post-racial" United States, in which the Obama victory would "absolve us of any need to talk about racism anymore."²¹

Capturing 53% of the popular vote in a U.S. presidential election is not unusual, historically speaking—George H.W. Bush in 1988, Ronald Reagan in 1984, Richard Nixon in 1972, Lyndon Johnson in 1964, and Dwight Eisenhower in 1956, among others, all won with more than that percentage.²² But when Morales won with this percentage in

2005, it was unprecedented in Bolivia's current period of democracy, going back to 1981 (to say nothing of his recall referendum victory by almost 70%).²³ Yet the framing of Bolivia's recent elections and referendums has tended to underplay this and stress divisions in the country, even though Morales is Bolivia's most popular democratically elected president, measured in both votes and approval ratings.²⁴

Coverage of Obama's win has often been framed as not only an overwhelming rejection of Bush policies but a moment of national reconciliation and unity—unlike coverage of Morales's victory by a similar margin.

Of course, what made both the elections of Morales and Obama even more significant was that both came from a social group long excluded from higher office to be elected to the highest office. Here the contrast between the media's framing is also striking: Whereas Obama's win has often been framed as a historic maturation of the U.S. electorate, which is described as moving beyond prejudices and racism, Morales's electoral successes have been framed to stress ongoing ethnic and racial divisions. This is all the more conspicuous in that indigenous people compose the majority of Bolivia's population.

Bolivia's history, both recent and distant, is, of course, unique, complex, and worthy of careful analysis. When it pays attention to Bolivian politics, however, the U.S. press sometimes offers coverage that treats the current government of Bolivia as a threat, and one that perhaps lacks appropriate popular support. One can only hope other U.S. media outlets will be more even-handed in their future treatment of Bolivia. ■

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