

# Plurinationalism as sovereignty: Challenges of Indigenous recognition in Bolivia

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## Abstract

Plurinationalism promises to reconcile the complicated colonial histories of Andean states with their modern political realities. However, the disparity between official Bolivian policy and national infrastructure projects exposes the tensions between sovereignties within the plurinational framework. These tensions stem from the underlying relationship between Indigenous autonomy and modern state sovereignty, manifested in both practical and symbolic terms. To make sense of the interplay between these sovereignties, this article analyses how Bolivian policy and politics separate Indigenous groups from the majority population through recognition of Indigenous autonomy. In particular, I examine how the concept of ‘the Border’ informed Bolivian identity discourse in a dispute over a proposed highway construction through Indigenous lands in 2011. I conclude that while plurinationalism offers a political vision of diffused power, it functions to subjugate Indigenous communities within the state structure. In doing so, it propagates the very issues proponents of plurinationalism had hoped to solve.

## Introduction

Since the election of Indigenous president Evo Morales in 2006, ‘plurinationalism’ has become a core element of Bolivian national discourse and identity. As a state structure that attempts to recognise the plurality of nations within a single state, it has been advocated as a solution to the competition between differing types of governance that exist in states formed through colonial processes. However, the question of the efficacy and justice of this paradigm—and to what extent it differs from multiculturalism—remains. In particular, in what ways and to what degree do the policies of the Bolivian state reflect its plurinational politics? To answer this question, I define politics as the structure of power dynamics based on the ordering of values and norms, and policy as the official rhetoric, agenda, and practices of the state. In the case of Bolivia, the vision of plurinationalism is inherently weakened by competing sovereignties that are ultimately managed by state authority. I utilise Maldonado-Torres’s concept of ‘the Border’ as a means of exercising sovereignty to describe how plurinationalism constructs conceptions of ‘the Other’ within the state. Ultimately, this creates a political dynamic that subjugates the Indigenous ‘Other’ under the plurinational state. I compare the Bolivian Constitution with Postero’s analysis of the Bolivian Government’s 2011 plan to build a highway through collectively titled Indigenous land. Through this case study, the practical reality of plurinationalism as a system of domination—instead of a system of recognition and cooperation—becomes evident.

## Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People

In 2007, the United Nations issued a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The Declaration built on the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR), extending it in two areas. The first was to ensure ethno-cultural justice to a degree that is not covered in the first UDHR (Musafiri 487). The second was to counter the individualism of the UDHR, instead recognising the collective nature of Indigenous life and acknowledging the functioning societies which existed pre-colonisation (Musafiri 488). This focus on ‘the collective’ in the UNDRIP has social, cultural, and political

implications. However, it is the political that has been most contentious. The UNDRIP states that Indigenous people ‘have the right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs’ (*United Nations*, Article 4). This right to self-determination poses a serious question to existing structures and conceptions of government, and complicates the governance of minority and Indigenous populations. The United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada initially resisted the UNDRIP on the basis that it challenged their internal laws, existing government structures, and manifestations of state power (Fromherz 1346; Martinez 67; Moreton-Robinson 176). These states are all former colonies with significant Indigenous populations, and they viewed the UNDRIP as a threat to national sovereignty. Despite having a prominent Indigenous population, Bolivia was the first state to ratify this Declaration into their internal laws and constitution; however, the ideals of the UNDRIP are not realised in its acknowledgement, but rather its implementation (Rice 59). Under Indigenous president Evo Morales, Bolivia was renamed the Plurinational State of Bolivia, acknowledging the existence of alternative systems of governance. But to fulfil the aims of plurinationalism, this recognition must be complemented by the implementation of policies that align with the UNDRIP’s declaration of Indigenous autonomy. How do competing sovereignties theoretically and practically function in a plurinational state and what are the implications of these dynamics?

## Plurinationalism and sovereignty

The plurinational system is designed to manage the distinct sovereignties of various polities: it has power to do so as the overarching structure that encompasses and legitimises these groups. In this arrangement, a renewed vision of the state is formed, one that separates the state from the nation and attempts to build a sense of unity through acknowledgement of diversity (Gustafson 991). Tockman and Cameron’s analysis of plurinationalism identifies its key concepts; importantly, they recognise that plurinationalism is not solely political, but also has implications for culture, language, health policy, and education (47). Although plurinationalism is indeed multifaceted, each of these facets is itself an axis of power, in which ‘Indigenous autonomy represents one of the most important tests of plurinationalism in practice’ (Tockman and Cameron 47). In each aspect, practical plurinationalism challenges the current balances of power, as it redistributes power from the state to autonomous Indigenous groups. This reordering of power is ultimately a question of sovereignty, as plurinationalism demands some degree of self-governance for Indigenous peoples.

Proponents of plurinationalism claim that it does not threaten state sovereignty; rather, ‘it replaces the unilateral system of domination with bilateral relations of mutual respect and consideration’ (Rice 60). In a plurinational system, Indigenous groups are acknowledged by the existing governments. The result, however, is that Indigenous Bolivians’ right to self-determination is not a ‘bilateral relation’ but contingent upon the Bolivian Government’s continued recognition of this right. Consequently, within the plurinational system Indigenous sovereignty ultimately functions to reinforce the existing power structures of the state. This paradox of simultaneous recognition and restriction is evident in Bolivian federal policy, where ‘government officials and policy serve principally to constrain the exercise of Indigenous autonomy, allowing it to function only on a limited scale and with limited jurisdiction for largely symbolic purposes’ (Tockman and Cameron 47). The distinction between practical and symbolic sovereignty is evident in the Bolivian case, which demonstrates an Indigenous sovereignty that is symbolically recognised but practically maintains the status quo of overarching state power. Practical sovereignty is therefore the distribution of power: Davies uses the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition, as ‘the authority of a state to govern itself’ (1). Sovereignty centres on the control of power and people by states. For Bolivia, symbolic sovereignty actually works to reaffirm the sovereignty of the state that is giving recognition. As a result, the minority group who receives symbolic sovereignty is subordinated by its dependence on the state for recognition.

## The Border and identity in the plurinational state

The power of the plurinational state is based on the identification and demarcation of separate nations within a single country. In border studies, ‘the Border’ is imagined not simply as a geographical

demarcation, but a concept and a tool of identification, security, and sovereignty. The application of this field to plurinationalism reveals the ways in which identity, security, and sovereignty are expressed between the majority and Indigenous polities recognised in Bolivia. While Maldonado-Torres does not examine the Border in relation to plurinationalism, he argues that ‘borders are not natural lines of division but designs of sovereignty’ (206). Borders demarcate the boundaries of state power and can therefore be used to exercise and instantiate sovereignty through exclusionary practices. They sociologically signify an individual’s entrance into a space of control. Maldonado-Torres uses the concept of the Border as existing *within* the United States, ‘between different neighbourhoods, communities, and subjects’ (207). Therefore, borders are not restricted to the distinction between foreign and domestic persons, but also operate internally to identify and categorise those within the state. It is this image of the Border as existing within the state that I apply to plurinationalism.

As the Border is used to identify communities within the state, it must also be seen as a process undergone by individuals in the plurinational state. Anzaldúa described the individual’s process of crossing the Border:

we [the oppressed] have crossed over and become subjects in our own right. In becoming subjects, we look at them as Objects, and they still look at us as objects—as Others. (qtd. in Hernández 10)

Borders are therefore used in identity formation and perpetuation; consequently, the Border is increasingly regarded in border studies as a process rather than a physical object (Brady 37). As Anzaldúa noted, the Border is used in a process of Othering which manifests and marks the sovereignty of the state, identifying the majority and minority populations (Hernández 10). Through this process of Othering, the Border functions as a mechanism of sovereignty and control, contrasting the interests of the ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ populations.

In Bolivia, plurinationalism operates through this sense of the Border as cutting through the population, Othering Indigenous minorities. Bolivia’s colonial history has influenced this perception of internal division, in which and by which systems of domination are created and propagated. Moreover, in Bolivia the Border also works as an agent of colonialism, due to the history of the relationship between the Indigenous population and Spanish colonisers. Within this context, the distinctions between the modern Border and its role in colonial history are better encapsulated through the colonial concept of ‘the Frontier’ (Evans et al. 3). In colonial North America, ‘the Frontier’ represented the interaction and struggle between tradition and modernity—and between civilisation and the uncivilised—and as such is the space of ideological conflict. In contemporary Bolivian politics, this is perpetuated through the internal border of the plurinational state, where Indigenous self-determination continues in:

the more or less violent opposition of colonial and neocolonial states who invoke their own sovereignty to justify treating native bodies, territories, and rights as sacrificable for the sake of modernity, development, and nationhood, often deploying the myth of liberal equality against native claims. (Gustafson 989–990)

The conflict occurs at the Frontier/Border, where Indigenous movements use state institutions themselves to earn more autonomy (Lavinás Picq, ‘Indigenous International Relations’ 124). As the space of continuing colonial conflict in the plurinational state, the concept of the Frontier describes the constructions of identity that work to emphasise the Otherness of Indigenous peoples. By demarcating the difference between Indigenous and majority populations, the implementation of plurinationalism situates these groups in conflict on opposing sides of the Frontier of identity.

## Policy and politics

To demonstrate the dynamics of dominance, I now turn to the disparity between policy and politics in Bolivia. While Bolivian policy advocates for equality of groups within the state, the nation’s politics reveal a different reality. The Bolivian Constitution demonstrates the policy of recognising the plurinationality of Bolivia. There are two significant sections of the Bolivian Constitution’s Preamble that demonstrate ideals of the Morales Government, which implemented the new Bolivian Constitution that renamed Bolivia as a plurinational state. The first describes a picture of Bolivia as:

A State based on respect and equality for all, on principles of sovereignty, dignity, interdependence, solidarity, harmony, and equity ... based on respect for the economic, social, juridical, political and cultural pluralism of the inhabitants of this land. (*Bolivia's Constitution*, Preamble)

In this, plurinationalism fosters a system of mutual sovereignty in which the pluralism of lifestyles within the state are recognised and celebrated; in this, the Constitution presents the Plurinational State of Bolivia as united *through* pluralism. The second important section of the Bolivian Constitution states that the country's goals include 'advancing towards a democratic, peace-loving and peaceful Bolivia, committed to the full development and free determination of the peoples' (*Bolivia's Constitution*, Preamble). I take these goals as the plurinational policies of the Morales Government, distinguishing policy as overarching intentions, rather than the conglomeration of specific laws and legislation that manifests policy.

Although this statement is presented as a vision of Bolivian plurinationalism, it is difficult to distinguish it from the liberal multiculturalism it attempts to move beyond (Tockman and Cameron 50). Multiculturalism differs from plurinationalism in several ways. The first is that multiculturalism is predominantly social, recognising that the state is not homogenous in terms of culture, religion, or race. Plurinationalism instead strives to recognise the right of these different groups to political autonomy, particularly Indigenous groups. Therefore, although an administration may pursue multicultural policies, these are founded on the right of diversity to exist rather than self-governance. The Bolivian Constitution demonstrates more characteristics of multiculturalism than plurinationalism because it legitimises the existence of multiple peoples within the state rather than the redistribution of power and sovereignty. The Bolivian Constitution presents a version of plurinationalism that is stripped of its capacity to effectively apportion governance among the peoples it attempts to acknowledge. This vision can therefore be regarded as a reiteration of liberal multiculturalism, which itself fails to ensure equality of rights and power within a state.

In Bolivia, Indigenous groups are identified as marginal (Othered), which reproduces them as minorities under the state (Cusicanqui 99). This status is the manifestation of a power dynamic in which the Indigenous people of Bolivia are subject to the overarching sovereignty of the state. Bolivian policy has restricted Indigenous peoples within the 'Communal Lands of Origin'—*tierras comunitarias de origen*—lands recognised and tenured as Indigenous under the 1996 INRA (National Agrarian Reform Service) Law. By dedicating only non-urban areas to Indigenous ownership, these populations are further identified as un-modern, rural minorities (Cusicanqui 99). This spatialisation of Indigenous identity legitimises state authority. Rice argues that Indigenous autonomy does not threaten 'national sovereignty or territorial integrity', because self-governance is only granted to Indigenous groups on the basis of rural lands (60). Although Rice is ultimately advocating for plurinationalism, she has thus distinguished an important aspect of Bolivian Indigenous policy. Furthermore, Rice acknowledges that the Constitution does not change relationships of power between the Bolivian Government and the Indigenous population (61); the existing systems of domination are not altered because state sovereignty remains unchallenged. Although Bolivian policy promotes equality as the basis of plurinationalism, this policy ultimately works to reinforce state sovereignty through characterising Bolivia's Indigenous population as a minority.

The concept of hybridity provides a possible solution to this power struggle by undermining the binary between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations of Bolivia. Hybridity acknowledges not just the coexistence of different identities within a society, but different identities within individuals. It rejects the dichotomy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and represents a new identity that is formed from the incorporation of both. Cusicanqui perceives hybridity as a deeply Indigenous and potentially decolonising force; hybridity, therefore, bridges the gap of identity present in the plurinational state (Cusicanqui). It has been suggested that the 'gap between the discourse of plurinationalism and quotidian practice' has indicated that Bolivia may be enacting a transformation beyond the liberal state (Tockman and Cameron 47). However, these tensions are most evident in the political practices of the Bolivian Government. In Bolivia, these competing ideologies are categorised by the separate 'nations' that the plurinational state endeavours to recognise. However, in attempting to represent the plurality of values within the system, the state becomes the apparatus through which conflicts are resolved. As the mediator between conflicting rights, the state's conclusions about

Indigenous rights exist ‘on the blurry boundary between politics and policing’ (Postero, ‘Race and Racism’ 117). Consequently, the theoretical disparity between policy and politics in Bolivia is critical to understanding the everyday practices of plurinationalism.

## Political realities of practical sovereignty

The Morales Government has pursued projects that demonstrate the ‘disjunctures between policy and practice’ (Hindery 179). I use Postero’s critique of the Bolivian Government’s 2011 plan to build a highway through Indigenous Communal Lands of Origin, a conflict founded upon sovereignty and power. The highway was plotted through Indigenous lands and became emblematic of the Bolivian Government’s lingering colonial project and the nature of rights in the plurinational state (Postero, ‘El Pueblo Boliviano’ 401). The highway was designed to connect Bolivia in totality, thus representing a resource of sovereignty (Postero, ‘El Pueblo Boliviano’ 417). While the highway was framed as promoting trade with Brazil, providing infrastructure for Bolivians, and linking the country, it was ultimately a matter of the state overruling Indigenous sovereignty in the Amazonian Communal Lands of Origin (Postero, ‘El Pueblo Boliviano’ 418). As protests and conflict continued, the Morales administration reversed its stance on the highway several times. By February 2019, the government halted work on the highway indefinitely, although this decision was met with scepticism by affected Indigenous communities (*La Prensa*). The continued pursuit of the highway—despite resistance by Indigenous communities—meant that ‘the case of TIPNIS [Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Secure: the Isiboro Sécure National Park and Indigenous Territory] seemed to embody growing dissatisfaction with the administration of the Plurinational State’ (Delgado 146). Therefore, as a key example of the conflicts inherent in plurinationalism, I now turn to analyse the sovereignties and counter-sovereignties at work in this case study of Bolivian politics.

Brysk and Bennett analyse the ways in which the various ‘nations’ within Bolivia are ordered through government projects such as the proposed highway. They argue that the government has emphasised ‘development of the country’s domestic markets, internal production, and industrialisation’ (Brysk and Bennett 121). This is evident in the highway proposal, which was economically rationalised by the Morales Government, though the highway and the economic modernity it symbolises ‘clashes with Indigenous ways of life’ (Brysk and Bennett 121). While Indigenous responses to the highway were divided, Indigenous peoples affected by the plan organised effectively to protest, primarily through organised marches. The efficacy of these protests was clearly demonstrated by the Bolivian Government’s response to the Eighth March: the armed forces responded with aggression while the marchers rested in Chaparina, using tear gas and violence to suppress the protest (Callas 81; Delgado 146). Not only was this use of repressive violence indicative of the manner in which Indigenous autonomy threatened state authority, but the local response to the violence further indicates the power struggle inherent in this conflict. In a speech following ‘the Chaparina incident’, Indigenous leader Fernando Vargas called for improved dialogue between the many ‘nations’ of the plurinational state (Vargas). The unilateral action of the state undermines the pluralistic ideals of the Constitution; these ideals have ‘been violated by various extractive projects pursued by the administration of President Evo Morales’ (Hindery 165). In this, ‘the Morales government finds itself caught up in a whirlwind of seemingly contradictory initiatives symptomatic of twenty-first century Indigenous rights struggles in Latin America’ (Brysk and Bennett 125). While attempting to promote both Indigenous rights and national economic projects, the state’s choice—and ability—to preference the latter over the former makes evident the political values of the Plurinational State of Bolivia.

A key way to interpret the Bolivian Government’s highway proposal is through a colonial critique using the linked concepts of the Border and the Frontier. Postero notes that the critique of the highway as colonialist was the framework with which protestors approached the issue, charging that ‘the road amounted to internal colonialism, and that just like earlier governments, Morales was sacrificing Indigenous peoples to capitalist extractive development’ (‘Race and Racism’ 116–117). This conception of internal colonisation echoes the internal Border of identification at work in the plurinational state, especially through the notion of the Frontier as a colonial process of domination. A critical component of the highway controversy is that it was planned to cut through collectively titled

Indigenous lands. Territory is integral to establishing sovereignty and self-determination in regard to Indigenous rights. In Bolivia, the process of establishment of specifically Indigenous lands actually subsumes these Indigenous ‘rights’ under the state (Postero, ‘El Pueblo Boliviano’ 418). This containment of Indigenous land and resources within the state likewise exercises the sovereignty of the state over any Indigenous rights to self-autonomy. This is demonstrated in the case of the proposed highway, where the state ultimately had the authority to proceed with state-building infrastructure in the name of modernity, in direct contradiction to the protests of the Indigenous groups ostensibly recognised as having ‘political plurality’ (*Bolivia’s Constitution*, Preamble). The logic that the state has the authority and right to override Indigenous autonomy ‘operates discursively, deploying virtue as a strategic device to oppose and subsequently endorse the declaration’ (Moreton-Robinson 176). The state acts as a mediator in a way that undermines Indigenous sovereignty, justifying its actions through moral justification that effectively infantilises the autonomy of Indigenous groups. Privileging ‘modernity’ over the interests of purportedly autonomous Indigenous groups illustrates that in Bolivia the maintenance of sovereignty is taken as an ultimate virtue in the state’s colonial paradigm.

## Conclusion

While the Bolivian state has attempted to realise UNDRIP through plurinationalism, this plurinationalism has functioned to create a disjuncture between Bolivia’s policy and politics. The Declaration includes a call for the right to self-autonomy of Indigenous groups; however, this has proven a significant challenge to state sovereignty. The plurinational system attempts to consolidate multiple polities and political realities within its authority, yet plurinationalism inherently fails to resolve questions of sovereignty, because it requires multiple—and often competing—sovereignties to be recognised within the state. As a result, the sovereignty of Indigenous groups is predominantly symbolic, proving to be only a reiteration of the empty discourse of liberal multiculturalism. Furthermore, the plurinational state functions on the construction of an internal Border of identification, which Others Indigenous groups and presents them as minorities. This subjugates them under the (neo)colonial authority of the state, re-creating the Border and the Frontier of ideological struggle. Therefore, through viewing plurinationalism as a system of domination and ideological struggle, the disparity between policy and politics in Bolivia becomes clear. While the Bolivian Constitution—a proxy for Bolivian plurinational policy—advocates for equality through the recognition of difference, scholars have noted contradictions and tensions in this document. The Morales Government’s 2011 plan to construct a highway through Amazonian Indigenous lands is taken as a manifestation of the state’s politics. This highway demonstrates an inherent unease about the sovereignty of Indigenous groups, highlighting the government’s modern, liberal, and economic priorities. Contrasting this with the Bolivian Constitution exposes the contradictions between policy and politics in Bolivia. Ultimately, while plurinationalism holds up high ideals of equality and the redistribution of power, it has become a system of domination and control in which the Indigenous Other remains subjugated under the authority of the ever-present, ever-powerful state.

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