



# BOLIVIA INFORMATION FORUM

## Bolivia Information Forum Bulletin No. 11, December 2008

### CONTENTS

Page

#### **1. September reconsidered..... 2**

The political fallout from September's violence, and dialogue and negotiations on the new constitution, gas rents and autonomy.

#### **2. Land and politics in eastern Bolivia..... 4**

Land and land reform in the *media luna*, an article following the workshop: "The Politics of Land Reform in Bolivia", held at the Institute for the Study of the Americas.

#### **3. Economy: from 2008 to 2009..... 6**

Economic indicators from this year and the economic outlook for 2009.

#### **4. Letter from Tarija: to the Brink and Back Again..... 7**

Denise Humphreys Bebbington reports on September's violence and protests in Tarija.

#### **5. "I'm Bolivia's first indigenous woman judge"..... 9**

Judge Amalia Morales Rondo talks to Andres Schipani about overcoming discrimination and *machismo* in the legal profession in Bolivia.

The BIF Bulletin is published by:  
Bolivia Information Forum, Unit 3 Canonbury Yard,  
190a New North Road, London N1 7BJ  
[enquiries@boliviainfoforum.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@boliviainfoforum.org.uk)  
[www.boliviainfoforum.org.uk](http://www.boliviainfoforum.org.uk)



# September reconsidered

Two months on, the real purpose of the September offensive by the prefects and civic committees of the *media luna* (the departments of Pando, Beni, Santa Cruz and Tarija) is still far from clear. Was it a determined attempt at secession from the rest of the nation on the part of these departments? Was it a show of strength and violence designed to browbeat the Morales government -- boosted by the two-thirds majority achieved by the president in the August recall referendum -- into accepting the autonomy statutes? Or was it simply a coup attempt backed by civic leaders of these departments that fell flat on its face?

During August and September, it became practically impossible for national state officials to work in the *media luna*. Important meetings, such as the one in Tarija for signing a hydrocarbons agreement with the presidents of Venezuela and Argentina, had to be postponed due to protests. The violence in September saw 51 state offices destroyed, communications and government (and other) media threatened or destroyed, and airports and international frontiers closed. The export of gas to Brazil had to be suspended for a couple of days following sabotage of the gas pipeline in Vuelta Grande (near Villamontes).

In response, the government played a waiting game, seeking to avoid escalation of the violence leading to people being killed. With orders not to respond to provocation, this meant that in several instances both police and military police (mainly of highland indigenous background) received a serious drubbing. Highland indigenous people, caught up in the violence, became easy targets for mob violence.

Behind the scenes, however, the government mobilised 14 army regiments in different parts of Santa Cruz to guarantee gas supplies and also to be on stand by at some distance from the city. Whilst a more widely reaching 'state of siege' was on the cards, it was only following the killings in Pando that the government implemented any sort of military clampdown.

## Opposition offensive thwarted

Five factors at least stand out in explaining the failure of the opposition offensive:

- The violence perpetrated undermined any legitimacy that the civic and prefectural leaders may have had. Juan Carlos Urenda, one of the ideologues of the Santa Cruz civic movement, who recently stood down from his post as advisor to the prefect, said that violence had been detrimental to the cause of greater autonomy.
- The gunning down of some 20 indigenous peasants in the northern jungle department of Pando, carried out -- according to the various commissions investigating what happened -- by people employed by the regional government (prefecture) of Pando. The prefect, Leopoldo Fernández, is currently under arrest on charges of genocide.
- The mass mobilisation of peasant and indigenous groups on roads leading into Santa Cruz. These repelled the well-equipped thugs from the *Unión Juvenil Cruceñista* (UJC) in key areas such as the urban district of Plan 3000 and at Tiquipaya on a road leading into Santa Cruz from the south-west.
- International support for the Morales government expressed in the strongly worded statement by the presidents of the UNASUR group of South American nations. This was later backed up by the European Union and the Organization of American States, in spite of the declaration of the US ambassador *persona non grata*. The government has insisted on several occasions that he was actively involved in abetting the secessionist prefects.
- The Armed Forces, notwithstanding possible approaches by opposition members, stood by the democratically elected government.

The opposition thus failed to gain popular support for their endeavour, in spite of backing for the cause of autonomy and the victories of opposition prefects in the recall referendum. The scale of violence witnessed disgraced the opposition and its tactics. It was this that obliged the prefect of Tarija, Mario Cossío, and then the more recalcitrant prefects of Santa Cruz and Beni, to come to the negotiating table. At the same time, several friendly governments encouraged the government to have another go at making dialogue work.

## Negotiations

The government met with the opposition at the end of September in Cochabamba in the presence of international observers (see Box 1). The

meeting eventually resulted in agreements in two key areas: Firstly, it established how the issue of departmental autonomy would be enshrined in the new constitution, and secondly it produced a formula for dividing the rents arising from oil and gas production. The agreements on autonomy made it clear that the national government (and not regional governments as proposed in the autonomy statutes) would have responsibility for natural resources (oil and gas, minerals, forests, etc.), land distribution, security and international relations, amongst other attributes.

Despite these advances, the prefects of the *media luna* were unwilling to sign a written agreement. The process of dialogue then moved to Congress. There, for several weeks, representatives of different political parties in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate negotiated changes to the text of the draft constitution approved by the Constituent Assembly in Oruro at the end of last year. Key issues discussed included:

- The nature of the Bolivian state. The MAS would not cede on the question of the plurinational nature of the state, which highlights recognition of the 36 different groupings of indigenous peoples, though it was prepared to include the concept of the Bolivian Republic and the Bolivian Nation in the text. The underlying concept of indigenous and community political participation has been upheld.
- Social control mechanisms will be adopted to make government accountable to the people, whilst planning and execution of government proposals will remain a government responsibility.
- The new constitution will allow a sitting president to stand for immediate re-election. There

was much discussion on whether the current government of Evo Morales should count (or not) towards this two-term presidency. The agreement reached was that Morales could stand as a candidate in the next elections (scheduled for December 2009 if the revised text is upheld in the referendum in January), but not for the following one (in 2014).

- A compromise deal was reached on the question of land tenure. The referendum on January 25 will include a specific question on the maximum size of farms allowed, asking people whether these should be of 5,000 or 10,000 hectares (One hectare = 2.47 acres). This will now apply to the size of plots in the future, with none exceeding the size agreed. However, it would not apply to existing larger tracts of land which owners can prove that they hold legally and where that land is fulfilling a social and economic use (see next article **Land and politics in eastern Bolivia** for further analysis of the land issue).
- The new parliament, or Plurinational Legislative Assembly, will consist (as in the past) of two houses, the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Changes include proportional representation voting for the Senate and the election of substitutes (without pay), to take over from incumbents only in case of illness etc. The fourth branch of state power, recognised in the constitution, will be the Electoral Court.

Bolivians will return to the polls on January 25 to decide on the new Constitution. The opposition parties in Congress gave their agreement to the text as amended, and many of them said they will campaign for a 'yes' vote. The lowland prefects, on the other hand, say they will urge people to vote 'no' in spite of the agreements reached in Cochabamba over autonomies.

### Box 1: International Mediation

**British Ambassador Nigel Baker was party to the negotiations, both in Cochabamba and later in La Paz. In an interview with BIF Bulletin, he reflects on the experience of international mediation.**

Whilst there have been at least five attempts at dialogue, this was the first time the international community was involved. Observers accompanied the discussions which took place between the prefects and government in Cochabamba, and later those held in Congress. Those participating were the OAS, the UN, the EU and the UN-ASUR grouping of South American countries. Also in attendance were members of the Bolivian Catholic, Methodist and Evangelical churches. In the case of the European Union it was agreed that the 'troika' would represent it, that is the current president (French Ambassador), the Head of Delegation and the next president (UK, acting for the Czech Republic).

As levels of confidence grew, the role of observers changed at times from "mute witnesses" to facilitators. This included trying to help diffuse potentially difficult moments, such as the mass mobilisation around Santa Cruz, or helping to persuade Mario Cossío, the prefect of Tarija, to stay in the discussions when people were being arrested in Tarija.

In Congress, a small group of key negotiators worked to find points of common ground. Through them others were constantly being brought in to discuss possibilities and decisions. On the government side Vice-president Alvaro García Linera was involved in defining the official position, whilst President Morales was in contact more with social movements, getting their opinion, and trying to bring them on board particularly on the question of autonomy. Tuto Quiroga, the head of the opposition Podemos party, was also in the background, trying to get agreement of a wider group of opposition members to the changes suggested. It was always unlikely that the Santa Cruz contingent in Congress would agree. In the end, and along with some others, they could not be won over.

Towards the end of the negotiations, when the big march of social movements from the Altiplano and other parts of the country was closing in on La Paz, with Evo Morales at its head, the negotiators came under a lot of pressure. It was obvious that the leaders of the march were asked to slow down, so agreement could be reached. García Linera finally appeared on the steps of Congress, with all the major players involved, to announce that consensus had been reached.

Baker talks of the “huge boost to democracy to have an agreed text”. He sees the achievements of the process of dialogue as “lowering the temperature” in the country, helping to head off a deepening of the levels of violence. Also important, he says, was the way this moved negotiations into the institutional area, with Congress playing a key role. International observers helped to ensure that people did not leave the table. They were also able to persuade people to continue discussions until they came to an agreement.

# Land and politics in eastern Bolivia<sup>1</sup>

**The threat of land reform in eastern Bolivia has been a key issue behind the campaign for autonomy in Santa Cruz and elsewhere. Large landowners, one of the main forces behind the *Comité Pro Santa Cruz*, are not prepared to accept policies that they see as undermining their economic power. The recent agreement on the constitution defers but does not resolve the problem.**

The land reform of 1953 took effect in the highlands and Andean valleys but had virtually no effect in Santa Cruz and other lowland departments. Rather, in the years that followed the 1952 revolution, the MNR governments saw large-scale agribusiness as a key to economic diversification away from mining. Under the military governments after 1964, and especially during that of General Hugo Banzer, huge estates came into being in the lowlands, often as a reward for political loyalty.

Consequently, Bolivia came to have one of the most unequal land-holding regimes in Latin America. Nowhere is this clearer than in the eastern

lowlands, where just a few families own hundreds of thousands of hectares, while small peasant producers and indigenous communities struggle to survive on the land. The boom in soya cultivation in recent years has further exacerbated land inequality and incursions on indigenous land. Meanwhile there are a growing number of landless peasants who have little option but to work as wage labourers on landed estates..

The first mass marches and mobilisations of the social movements in the eastern lowlands, particularly the CIDOB indigenous organisation and the *Movimiento Sin Tierra* (landless movement), highlighted the demand for access to land and the strengthening of land rights. This was taken up as one of the central policy planks on which the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) was elected in 2005.

## **Towards land reform**

Once in office, the MAS government moved quickly to formulate its land reform agenda. In May 2006, President Evo Morales announced

Bolivia's second 'Agrarian Revolution'. Modifications were subsequently made to the existing land reform law which now allows the state to redistribute land that is not serving an 'economic and social function'.

This land reform policy was given further impetus in the new constitution, drafted by the Constituent Assembly in Sucre and Oruro in 2006 and 2007. However, no agreement was reached between MAS Assembly members and those of the opposition, and the issue was to be submitted to a referendum. The referendum would decide whether the upward limit on landholding should be 5,000 or 10,000 hectares. The Assembly agreed also to ratify the previous requirement that land must serve an 'economic and social function'.

### Resistance in the *media luna*

The increased virulence of the opposition in Santa Cruz and elsewhere in the *media luna* departments has been driven, at least in part, by a

reaction against the land reform policies of the MAS government. While opposition leaders have garnered popular support by appealing to the notion of a strong lowland 'camba' identity and by raising the flag of regional 'autonomy', the influence of the civic committees has been decisive. The unelected *Comité Pro Santa Cruz*, for example, represents the interests of business groups in Santa Cruz, including the powerful *Cámara Agropecuario del Oriente* (CAO), the political voice of land-owners and agri-business. The *Comité*, whose president is Branko Marinkovic, has long been the most powerful political institution in Santa Cruz, with links to far-right vigilante organisations.

A key feature of the autonomy statutes proposed by the opposition in December 2007 was the decentralisation of competencies to the departmental level, including control over land titling and land reform. Given the political weight of the landowners at the local level, decentralisation would guarantee the security of their holdings.

### Box 2: Land owners in Santa Cruz

Name of land-owner	No. of properties provided by CNRA	Area provided by CNRA in Ha.	Date of provision by CNRA	No. of current properties (verified)	Area measured by INRA in Ha.	Area titled by INRA in Ha.
Saavedra Bruno Tardio family	7	16,129	1983-1992	18	73,089	17,487
Monasterio Nieme family	4	13,533	1972-1990	17	78,340	50,370
Justiniano Ruiz family	2	43,580	1969			
Roig Pacheco family	2	43,166	1973-1974			
Rapp Martinez and others	6	52,147	1966-1975	3	12,878	1,726
Jorge Antelo Urdirinea	6	57,108	1961-1973			
Keller Ramos family	2	37,141	1968-1970			
Candia Mejía family	4	27,427	1964-1978			
Castro Villazón family	3	26,015	1973-1980			
Luis Ovando Candia	2	15,864	1966-1977			
Danilo Roberto Fracaro	1	19,920	2002	6	12,807	
Agropecuaria OB S.R.L.	6	28,172	1974-1991	9	19,173	
Elena Sánchez Peña	1	49,950	1973	6	4,042	2,480
Family Larsen Nielsen Zurita	2	48,839	1975	5	12,655	4,435
Guillermo Bauer Elsner	1	33,095	1967	1	6,860	
<b>Total</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>512,086</b>		<b>65</b>	<b>219,844</b>	<b>76,498</b>

Source: presentation by Roxana Liendo. CNRA - Consejo Nacional de Reforma Agraria; INRA - Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria



Until recently, land titling – known in Bolivia as *saneamiento* — has been effectively sabotaged by the influence that the civic committees and landowners wield at the local level.

Among the offices occupied and ransacked by opposition groups this September were the government land reform agencies and NGOs working on land issues. Large amounts of documentation were destroyed, including legal documentation detailing land-titles and ownership. This will make it harder to pursue land titling in the future.

### Concessions

The compromise arrangement reached between the government and opposition over the constitution involves concessions on the land issue:

- The opposition bloc in Congress agreed that, rather than being incorporated into departmental autonomies, land regulation and reform would be in the hands of the central government.
- The government agreed that the limits on land ownership, to be decided in the constitutional referendum next January, would not be retroactive.

Some within the MAS see this non-retroactivity as a capitulation to the right wing, and a betrayal of their aims. However, while the government will not be able to redistribute land that is legally held prior to the date when the constitution comes into force, much of the land used by large land owners is held without proper legal title and has been used for speculative purposes. It can therefore still revert to the state and be redistributed under the new legal framework. By the same token, some *cruceños* also feel betrayed, believing that their aspirations to autonomy on land issues have been sold down the river.

### Future violence

The political struggle over land is far from over and tensions are likely to rise again in the not too distant future. Landowners are prepared to defend themselves by force if necessary, and attempts to seize land may result in violence. Meanwhile, the social movements will push the government to act, possibly seizing land which they deem to be held illegally.

<sup>1</sup>*With special thanks to George Gray Molina, Roxana Liendo, Willem Assies and Ximena Soruco, participants in the BIF/Institute for the Study of the Americas workshop: [The Politics of Land Reform in Bolivia: Lessons from Santa Cruz](#), whose ideas greatly contributed to this article.*

# Economy: From 2008 to 2009...

**Performance in 2008.** Figures produced by the Bolivian Central Bank (BCB) on November 23, show how the balance of payments continued to improve through the first nine months of the year.

**Exports** (FOB) totalled US\$4.69 billion, up over 50% on the same period of 2007, boosted principally by high prices for minerals and hydrocarbons. Mineral exports were up 70%, hydrocarbons 51.8% and non-traditional exports 22.7%.

**Imports** (CIF) totalled US\$3.61 billion, up 47.8%

**Trade surplus**, the difference between exports and imports, came to US\$1.08 billion. This was 58% higher than in the first nine months of 2007.

**Current account surplus**, the main indicator of solvency, was US\$1.57 billion, up 51.5%. This is

the equivalent of 9.2% of GDP.

**Balance of payments surplus** totalled US\$2.43 billion.

At the same time, BCB figures show that:

**Remittances** were up 8.1% on the first three quarters of 2007 at US\$794 million. Of these, 40% were from Spain, 21.7% from the United States, and 16.1% from Argentina.

**Foreign investment** was worth US\$370 million, up from US\$175 million in 2007.

**Net international reserves** (of the BCB) stood at US\$7.6 billion on November 12, down from US\$7.8 billion at the end of September, but up from US\$5.3 billion at the end of 2007.

**Inflation** was running at an annual rate of 13.3% at the end of October, down from 17.3% at the end of July. This reflects lower inflation given the importing of food.

**Future performance.** As Bolivia heads towards 2009, the main determinants of economic performance look to be negative.

**Export prices.** The international prices for Bolivia's main exports have declined substantially, for minerals, hydrocarbons and for key agricultural exports like soya. Export earnings in 2009 promise to be substantially lower than in 2008. This will reduce the size of the trade and current account surpluses.

**Remittances.** The recession taking place in the United States and Spain will reduce the remittances repatriated from Bolivians living abroad. Casual employment in these economies, particularly in sectors like construction, will be hard hit.

**Foreign investment.** Those companies thinking of investing in Bolivia may have second thoughts. Mining and oil/gas companies are suffering from lower incomes and reduced share valuations.

**Non-traditional exports.** The decision of the Bush administration to suspend Bolivia's trade preferences under the ATPDEA scheme (in retaliation for the expulsion of the US ambassador and the DEA) will make it harder for exporters of manufactured goods – particularly textiles and clothing – to remain competitive in the US. With recession hitting Europe, it will not be easy to re-direct production to that market.

In these circumstances, it is likely that growth rates in Bolivia – expected to be around 5% in 2008 -- will decline substantially, although inflationary pressures should diminish. Effects on employment, particularly in the mining sector, are already being felt.

# Letter from Tarija: to the Brink and Back Again

By Denise Humphreys Bebbington

In early September the ordinarily quiet provincial city of Tarija exploded into social protest. This was not a complete surprise. For weeks regional political elites had whipped *tarijeños* into a fury over regional autonomy and the defence of Tarija's income from gas royalties and taxes.

An indefinite strike was already underway in the Chaco, home to most of Bolivia's hydrocarbons production, with the towns of Yacuiba (in the department of Tarija) and Camiri (in Santa Cruz) the centres of civic disobedience. Newspapers, the television and internet bloggers were abuzz with speculation about where Bolivia's worsening political crisis might lead. Arguing that the strike was having little effect – other than increasing suffering and deprivation for local residents – Chaco political leaders sent an angry ultimatum to townspeople in Tarija and Santa Cruz to close their offices and businesses and join the blockades -- or face a cut-off of natural gas supplies.

Faced by this, Tarija's Civic Committee voted to join a strike they declared to be total, unconditional and indefinite. However urban *tarijeños* had limited experience in organizing and partici-

pating in massive strikes. Even during the social upheavals of the *Guerra del Gas* in 2003 Tarija was barely affected. This time Tarija became an epicentre of civic rebellion.

Prefect Mario Cossío implored *tarijeños* to demonstrate their regional pride and protect Tarija's revenues from being 'raided' by central government. This struck a chord with many; after all commented one observer, a supporter of Morales, "the central government has a long history of ignoring the regions."

Borrowing freely from the discourses and repertoires of social movement organizations and leaders allied with the MAS, Cossío and the Civic Committee staged a complete shut down of the city. Reynaldo Bayard, president of the Civic Committee and an outspoken opponent of Morales and MAS, promised stiff resistance to central authority:

"We won't give in. The government must return oil and gas revenues (IDH) to the regions and accept our proposal for autonomy. Nor will we allow the imposition of a racist and communist Constitution."

Cossío promised all recently graduated high school students that they would be able to obtain their secondary school diplomas free of charge, courtesy of the regional government. In return, public university students and members of the Tarija Youth Committee (CJT) announced their backing for the strike. This gave the Civic Committee the people it needed to expand the strike, to occupy public buildings and to reinforce blockades of the region's major highways. Previously, this had been done by regional government employees. Six public buildings were seized by students and CJT vigilantes.

University staff and faculty also took part, standing guard outside the occupied buildings in their words, "to ensure no harm came to the students inside, or to public property." Clashes between strikers and soldiers assigned to guard public buildings were violent but mercifully brief. Easily outnumbered, soldiers offered little resistance and allowed the students to occupy the buildings. Elsewhere, members of the CJT and the Civic Committee threatened businesses that failed to close for the strike.

The protests then took a decidedly more violent turn. After taking control of the customs office, adjacent to the airport, and setting fire to cars and items stored in the building, protestors turned their attention to the city's main market, the Mercado Campesino. It was rumoured that groups linked to MAS were organizing there to march on the main plaza. More than 80 people were injured in violent clashes - including one young protestor, a construction worker, who lost his hand when he attempted to pick up a stick of dynamite. Students and CJT members pitted themselves against peasants, market vendors and residents.

And then, just as quickly as the situation turned violent, the confrontations and inflammatory rhetoric subsided. The morning after the clash at the Mercado Campesino, Tarija's news programmes, once full of vitriol - with news presenters spicing up a report of events with their personal outrage - called upon residents to remain calm. The previous days' dismissive, disrespectful invective against President Morales and Vice President García Linera gave way to grave tones of concern that Tarija, indeed Bolivia, was headed towards civil war.

In the Chaco, protestors had attempted to shut off a valve of the GASRYG (Transierra) pipeline causing an explosion and fire, interrupting gas supplies to Brazil. Further north, another group of protestors occupied the Vuelta Grande plant effectively paralyzing operations there. Images from Santa Cruz of vandals attacking public buildings, carrying off the spoils, and of people of An-

dean origin being victimised, together with the news of armed confrontations in Pando, traumatized the country. In Tarija, triumphalist rhetoric gave way to appeals for peace, dialogue and mutual understanding.

Perhaps the calls for peace and the return to order were hastened by the realization that the protest, outside of the four departments of the Media Luna, had little internal or external support.

Morales' emotional appeal to his rural supporters to defend their democracy, and the mobilisation of thousands of marchers in Santa Cruz (but not Tarija), alarmed the opposition. The expulsion of U.S. Ambassador Philip Goldberg together with pronouncements of solidarity by the governments of Brazil and Argentina and later UNASUR's refusal to allow representatives of the *media luna* to attend their meeting in Santiago, made it clear that efforts to create a de facto parallel government would not succeed.

The Morales government's measured response to the crisis also helped. Criticized by political observers and citizens alike, this turned out to be key to retaining the support of those sectors directly affected by the strike along with others who had grown wary of the Civic Committee's tactics. The fact that Morales had not fought back and repressed the regional protests ultimately worked in his favour.

Two months or more on, and after countless meetings and weeks of negotiations, the opposition in Tarija is today in disarray. The enormous autonomy banners that had been draped over the historic buildings in the city's main plaza are gone. The Civic Committee has ceased to function and Bayard and other members are under arrest. Having not reacted with force during the heat of the conflict, the government has been able to rein in, neutralize or detain people who played significant parts in the protest. In October, it tracked down and detained three individuals in Villamontes involved in the sabotage of the GAS-RYG pipeline. The government insists that those responsible must be brought to justice.

With the prefect of Pando in jail, and the remaining three prefects of the *media luna* effectively silenced, Evo Morales seems to have won another round in the protracted tussle between the centre and the regions, between the MAS and the opposition parties, over who governs Bolivia and its natural resource rents.

*As we went to press, there were signs of renewed protests in Tarija and Santa Cruz against the arrest of Bayard and three leaders of the Union Juvenil Cruneñista accused of assaulting the former police chief in Santa Cruz, Wilge Obleas.*



# “I’m Bolivia’s first indigenous woman judge”

Andres Schipani interviews Amalia Morales Rondo for the FT Weekend Magazine

**WHAT DROVE ME TO STUDY LAW WAS DISCRIMINATION AND HUMILIATION**, because my society was not used to seeing a *pollera*, a traditionally dressed indigenous woman, at university. The only indigenous women in the corridors at law school were janitors.

I was the first indigenous law student ever to attend law school in Bolivia.

But that was not the first time I had felt such discrimination. I’d also suffered at school. I think that was what most motivated me never to give in. Back then, in 1984, the fight was not easy. As soon as I put my foot, wearing its traditional *chollita* shoe, in the university classroom, lecturers and some of my classmates stared at me in a very suspicious way.

Still, even if there were no indigenous women studying, there was some sort of diversity at university. I made good friends with working-class people who gave me the strength to keep going.

I said to myself that I had to keep going till the end, to finish, to be able one day to defend myself and others in my situation with the tools of the law. That was too bitter a drink for many to swallow: a dark-skinned woman wearing a traditional indigenous costume. Too much. I felt spurned so many times. Sometimes on a Friday night I’d try to go with my friends to a dance club and the doormen would literally shut the doors in my face when they saw me queuing.

Once I’d graduated I worked in several court houses here in La Paz. I spent 11 years working as the Secretary of the Court of La Paz. People who knew me knew I was competent, but every time I opened a new door with a folder in my hand people would stare at me, and not very nicely. People used to yell at me, demanding to see the Secretary – they thought I was a nobody. You should have seen some of their faces after I told them: “You want the Secretary, well, you’re talking to her.”

The first time I entered a courthouse, everybody thought I was the janitor because I was wearing my traditional outfit. In courthouses, in the judiciary, no one had ever seen an indigenous woman who was not a servant. It’s hard even for non-indigenous women to break into that world, as this is also a very macho society.

But time passed and people started to get to know me well, and some even started to encourage me to be a judge. They did not know that had been my dream since high school. So then, more than ever, and now with qualifications, I felt I had to break the mould and fight until I got there.

But again, it was not easy. I’d been trying and applying since 2000, everywhere, all over the Bolivian highlands, and nothing had come of it. I had never been affiliated with any political party and I think that was also a problem.

Last year, when I sat the competitive exam for the job, I was very discouraged as there were about 40 candidates, all of them men with ties – 40 people for only four places. And I was there by myself, with my flouncy skirt, with no political affiliation and no contacts. But I did it anyway, the best I could. I succeeded and I took up my post in the La Paz region earlier this year.

It is true that with the country’s first indigenous president, Evo Morales, more women like me are carving a path for themselves. But my case is special. I fought on my own, I owe nothing to anybody.

I became the first-ever indigenous female judge, yes, and I took possession of my post wearing my shawl, my bowler hat and my thick skirt. I cannot describe that feeling. I have to admit it is still hard to believe.

Now there are a few skirt-wearing law students waiting to pass through the same door I did. People know that the possibility exists, that indigenous women are useful not just for carrying potatoes in their ponchos.

*First published in the Financial Times Magazine, 18/19 October 2008*