



## Radical Democracy in the Andes

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## Radical Democracy in the Andes

By Donna Lee Van Cott. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xv + 261 pp. US\$ 85.00. ISBN 978-0-521-73417-2.

The sad death of Donna Lee Van Cott took away one of the most astute and balanced commentators on indigenous people and politics in the Andes. In a series of books published over a decade and a half, she explored the relationships between indigenous peoples and democracy, the emergence of ethnic parties, and the effects of ethnic mobilization and organization on processes of constitutional change. In this book, she further elaborates her interest in and analysis of the relationships between indigenous peoples and democracy, albeit shifting her focus somewhat. While the sensitivity to country-level dynamics that characterized her earlier books is still present in *Radical Democracy in the Andes*, this book is above all a study of 10 rural municipalities in Bolivia and Ecuador that have been governed by indigenous mayors linked to political parties that are closely related to indigenous and campesino movements. Van Cott asks how these municipal governments have performed and, in particular, how well they have delivered deeper forms of democracy compared with those who preceded them. Then, having explored and documented different dimensions of this performance, she seeks to explain the patterns that she encounters.

For Andeanists, the 10 municipalities studied by Van Cott are split more or less evenly between iconic and less familiar experiences. The iconic cases include Cotacachi, Guamote, and Otavalo in Ecuador and Jesus de Machaca and Achacachi in Bolivia. The less familiar experiences come from Colta and Guaranda in Ecuador and 3 municipalities in the Bolivian Chapare. These latter ex-

amples are of particular interest because, even though the Chapare was the heart of Bolivia's cocaine economy and of the coca producers' movement that underlay the emergence of Evo Morales' Movement to Socialism (MAS), it is still an understudied region.

Van Cott handles her material in many interesting ways, but here I will note just 3. The first relates to her assessment of the radical democratic experience in the hands of indigenous authorities. She notes that the presence of these authorities has done little or nothing to change the economic and material conditions of the territories that they govern, which in most cases have remained chronically poor. Conversely, to a greater or lesser extent, these new local governments *have* changed the practice of politics and governance in ways that have become more inclusive. Even if material conditions have not improved, such political changes are, she argues, valued very highly by local populations. These political dimensions of change should therefore define the main criteria against which these indigenous governments are evaluated. While the pattern of political democratization coupled with continuing economic stagnation in the Andes has been noted before, it is interesting to see the argument sustained across 10 quite distinct municipalities.

Second, she argues that, notwithstanding the national phenomena that have attracted so much interest in Bolivia—namely, the Law of Popular Participation (LPP) in the 1990s and the emergence of MAS in the 2000s—the Ecuadorian cases show far more creativity and success in achieving more radical forms of democracy. In large measure, she attributes this to the difference between the 2 national contexts. The fact that Ecuador's legislation allowed for fiscal transfers to local government, but did not specify in great detail how local government had to be organized to spend these

resources, allowed significant room for innovation and flexibility; the mayors were sufficiently gifted that they took advantage of this space. Conversely, in Bolivia, the LPP was much more prescriptive, reducing the scope for autonomous innovation. Furthermore, the social movements present in the Bolivian municipalities, especially in the Chapare, exercised so much power that mayors had far less scope to innovate.

The third and related theme to emerge from the Bolivian material derives from Van Cott's analysis of how MAS performed in local authorities prior to its election to national government. Indeed, her analysis identifies patterns in MAS behavior at a municipal level that have subsequently become apparent at a national level and that raise worrying questions about how far (or at least, *the ways in which*) MAS will democratize Bolivian politics. Notwithstanding the "improvements in democratic quality" that were achieved by municipalities administered by MAS in the Chapare, she notes 5 problems (p 196–198) that caution against overenthusiastic interpretations of these experiences: "native indigenous groups ... are routinely excluded" (p 196–197) in municipal governance; "MAS militants commonly resort to authoritarian means to assert their domination" (p 197); the cocalero federations are so strong that the local state does not have the autonomy it needs to govern for the broader collectivity of interests in the municipality; the strength of the federations meant that their urgent, short-term demands precluded long-term investment planning; and "the record of Chapare municipalities with respect to gender equity is abysmal" (p 198). In light of recent tensions in the relationships between MAS and lowland indigenous organizations over hydrocarbon development, these insights were prescient.

If this is some of the democratic value subtracted (p 226) when indig-

enous movements and parties assume control of municipal government, plenty of value also is added. Indeed, even if Van Cott insists that her analysis is one that cautions against romanticizing indigenous political parties, her position is ultimately a sympathetic one. In this spirit, she concludes that these parties, when in local government, have added value to local democracy in 5 domains: expanded opportunities to participate in public decision-making; increased accountability and transparency; increased equality, autonomy, and self-government; and the establishment of authority for local government. She notes important achievements in each of these areas, though to varying degrees and with varying mixes across the cases.

She then uses this diversity to trace more general patterns and identify factors that enhance the possibility of achieving deepened radical democracy. She identifies 3 such factors. One relates to national conditions: the already mentioned existence of an institutional context that allows for flexibility and with

which indigenous movements and parties identify because it has been at least partly driven by their demands. A second relates to mayoral qualities, even if, as she notes, the analytical value of explaining success in terms of leadership is limited because it cannot easily be replicated. The third factor is the existence of an organic party with civil society support by which she means a political party that has structure and form, but which also enjoys a base and allies in civil society that give it legitimacy and help it operate—in particular, in the realm of development and service provision. The existence of this type of political party is also important because it can support mayors in delivering change, can help diffuse innovations, and, importantly, can be a vehicle for the production of future leaders (as long as the party has mechanisms and conscious strategies for nurturing these leaders).

The range of innovations that have been hatched by indigenous municipal governments, along with this comparative analytical framework, is what makes this book rele-

vant to readers working in contexts beyond the Andes and beyond Latin America. At the end of the book, Van Cott outlines several generic lessons for such readers, all of which are interesting but one of which seems especially important. As she notes, people working on (and in) development have typically paid little attention to political parties. Yet this study suggests that the nature of parties and the quality of their relationships with local and national society are critically important in determining the ability of elected officials to use public office and public resources in ways that might enhance the quality of democracy, people's experience of that democracy, and the quality of the development that it can deliver.

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