

Charagua's Struggle for Indigenous Autonomy

In chapter 6, we saw how three local communities are negotiating the contemporary conjunctures in Bolivia, especially the discourse of economic liberation put forth by the Morales government, which privileges public works, development, and economic well-being. I argued that in some communities, this emphasis has made indigeneity a less salient site of political organizing than ethnic identity, which, as we have seen in previous chapters, was central to emancipatory politics at the beginning of the Morales administration. For these communities, decolonization signified either an empty promise from a cynical government or a means to class advancement. In this chapter, I take up a very different situation: the case of Charagua, where indigenous Guaraní activists have won an important political victory, establishing their city as the country's first—and only, so far—indigenous autonomous municipality. I show how the Guaranís of Charagua are strategically using the rights established in the new constitution to move towards their long-term goal of reconstituting a Guaraní nation. For the Guaranís, decolonization is both an important goal and discourse and set of juridical tools they utilize in their own struggle for local autonomy.

The victory in Charagua in 2015 was the first step in what is likely to be a long process of seeking autonomous status for indigenous lands—many more communities are preparing their initiatives. It was also a very significant accomplishment, bringing the Guaranís of Charagua one step closer to their goal of autonomy. In this chapter, I focus on how Guaraní leaders managed to overcome local tensions to win the election. This chapter traces their pragmatic politics as they negotiate in the spaces between national, departmental, and local sovereignties, carrying out what Francisco Pifarré has called “Guaraní diplomacy” (1989: 294; see also Albó

2012: 29). While still subsumed within the liberal nation-state, this new form of local government offers the first institutionalized vision of indigenous alternatives to liberalism. Here we see a first glimpse of what the “indigenous state” could mean at the local level. Here I push further on the notion of politics, arguing that contrary to Jacques Rancière’s theory, politics might not only result from disagreements or recounts, but also require the hard work of consensus building.

AUTONOMÍA GUARANÍ CHARAGUA IYAMBAE

Charagua is a small town in the high desert Chaco region of the department of Santa Cruz, a dry forest crossed by occasional rivers and streams. It is Bolivia’s largest municipality in terms of size—well over 28,000 square miles—and according to the 2012 census, has about 35,000 inhabitants. It is vast in size, but also in social complexity. Albó estimates that about 60 percent of the population are indigenous Guaranís (Albó 2012). The Guaranís are organized into four *capitanías*, or local federations, made of two different groups of Guaranís—the Avas of Charagua Norte and Parapetiguasu (Charagua Sur) and the Izozeños from the more remote Bajo and Alto Izozog zones. These groups live in small, dispersed communities throughout the large municipality, mostly farming corn and raising small herds of cattle and other livestock. Their organizations are part of the larger national Guaraní organization, the Asamblea del Pueblo Guaraní (APG; Assembly of the Guaraní People), founded in 1987, and centered in the city of Camiri, three hours’ drive south of Charagua. It was they who put forward the demand for autonomy. But this project was deeply contested by the other groups in the region. Throughout the zone, white-mestizo families have large landholdings, where they raise cattle for sale. These are the traditional elites, who since colonial times have exercised economic and political power over the Guaranís (Pifarré 1989; Postero 2007a; Albó 2012). Guaranís have worked on their haciendas and in some sectors were held in a form of slavery. The *hacendados* (large landholders) live in the town, called the *pueblo*, where they have run the municipality until recently. They have traditionally been allied with the conservative mestizo political Verdad y Democracia Social party of Santa Cruz, called the Verdes (Greens) (for the green and white colors of the party) and now officially called Demócratas. As in Santa Cruz, the Civic Committee, run by the elites and their families, has been a central site of local politics. The other important organizations are the Asociación de Ganaderos de Cordillera–Charagua (AGACOR; Cattle Ranchers Association), which advocates for the cattle owners’ interests, and the Junta Vecinal, or neighborhood association, which represents the urban residents and is run mostly by mestizo schoolteachers. As I describe below, these sectors have been vocal public opponents of the autonomy process.

There are two other major sectors. There is a large group of Mennonites who have established large *colonias*, or colonies, in the region. These German-speaking migrants live in closed communities where they work extensive holdings, farming wheat and raising cattle. Their dairies provide milk and cheese for the entire region. Although they make up about 20 percent of the region's population, they are not a factor in political calculations, because their religion requires them to stay out of political debates. They do not vote. Xavier Albó suggests that Guaraní therefore constitute 80 percent of the voting population (2012: 93.) In the past few decades, highland Andean migrants have moved to the zone, establishing an urban settlement a few kilometers outside town near the old train station. The residents of this sector, La Estación, are farmers, merchants, and *transportistas*. Most speak Quechua and are supporters of Morales and his MAS party. So although they make up a large majority of the population, the Guaraní activists pushing for indigenous autonomy were forced to negotiate with the rest of the people living in the municipality.

Over the six years of struggle to achieve autonomy—what Guaraní leaders call a *peregrinación*, or pilgrimage, given the endless trips and meetings with state and judicial officials—leaders have maintained a dogged commitment to gaining state recognition for their autonomous government, what their statute calls *Autonomía Guaraní Charagua Iyambae* (The Guaraní Indigenous Autonomy of Charagua Iyambe) (*iyambae* is a Guaraní term often translated as “freedom,” or “without owners or masters”). I have been observing their process since 2010, when they held an assembly to draft an autonomy statute, essentially a new constitution for their community. In 2010, I asked René Gómez, the president of the assembly, to explain the goals of their efforts. What did they mean by autonomy? Patiently, with smiling eyes, he explained.

We understand autonomy as being free [*ser libre*]. . . . Not that we aren't already. We, the Guaraní nation, have always been autonomous, free. But there are no laws or norms that say we are autonomous. So for us, autonomy consists of when one can govern oneself [*uno gobierna por si solo*], that is self-government [*autogobierno*], without political parties. . . . What we are doing here in Charagua with our assembly is the fruit of decolonization and its transversal themes of racism, discrimination, and dependence. . . . We are decolonizing because we are thinking from another world [or space: *en otro ambito*]. These are new forms of thinking, seeing things in another way, as we indigenous peoples have always done (personal communication, August 12, 2010).

Don René is saying what I heard over and over during my visits to Charagua: that the Guaraní believe that they are already autonomous and have always been so. Their goal with the assembly and in invoking the autonomy law was to make this fact visible and functional in the world of liberal laws and norms. Don René

hoped the process of decolonization begun by the Constituent Assembly and the new constitution would provide an opportunity for them to articulate their understanding of sovereignty with that of the rest of the people in the country. "Every pueblo has its culture," he said, "its form of living, its *ñandereko* [our way of being]." Here he used a complex term that has multiple meanings. *Ñandereko* is sometimes translated as "the harmonious life" (Bolivia 2009). However, Bartolomeu Meliá, the most important historian of the Guaraní, makes clear that it refers, not only to the Guaraní way of being, its culture and customs, but also to the place and medium that make that way of being possible: the interrelated cultural, economic, social, religious, and political spaces linking land, beings, and people (Meliá in Medina 2002: 100–101).

Don René's statement here is echoed in the Catalán anthropologist Pere Morrell i Torra's suggestion that for the Guaraní, autonomy is a set of intersecting meanings (2013: 11). First, it is an already existing set of social practices that have emerged over hundreds of years. Drawing on historical archives, especially the work of the historian Isabelle Combès (2005), Morrell i Torra describes the ways in which differing sectors of Guaranís in the Cordillera region have long maintained autonomy from one another. Each community has made its own decisions, except during times of war. Here we see an iteration of Pierre Clastres's notion of the "society against the state," since throughout their history, the Guaranís have privileged the independence of local communities over a centralized leadership (see Clastres 1989). Even in the past twenty years, as these autonomous communities formed the Asamblea del Pueblo Guaraní federation to push for territorial rights, in practice, each *capitanía*, or local organization, has maintained its decision-making power. This is what Don René means when he says "We, the Guaraní nation, have always been autonomous, free."

Second, autonomy is a political discourse used by the Guaraní leadership to create a united Guaraní nation. Unity itself is a relatively new goal, given the long history of tensions between Avas and Izozeños, who have long been at odds with each other, and have employed very different strategies in relation to the dominant politicians (see Morrell i Torra 2013: 51). As Albó makes clear, the Izozeños have more often allied with the Cruzeño elite (2012). Yet since the multicultural era and the formation of the APG, the Guaranís have been working together consistently towards the control of their territory and towards the formation of an indigenous-led government. Albó's comprehensive history of the Guaranís' efforts demonstrates a careful and determined strategy of using every possible political opening to do so. He shows how the APG worked with various NGOs to create development projects for their communities. Then, during the 1990s, they took advantage of the many multicultural reforms aimed at including indigenous groups. Most important was the APG's claim to millions of hectares under the 1997 Agrarian Reform law, or Ley INRA. By 2011, they had successfully gained title to over 800,000

hectares, plus two large protected areas, one of which was named a national park (Albó 2012: 98). This new limited form of territorial titling allowed local communities to negotiate with the transnational oil companies that were pumping oil and gas from under their lands. The funds they obtained from this went directly to the individual capitanías, to be used for local development (84–85). Albó also documents the ways in which the Guaraní took up the Law of Popular Participation, which channeled state funds to municipalities. Beginning in 1995, the Guaraní began participating in municipal politics, putting up their leaders for city council and mayor. Tracing their progress election by election, Albó argues that this strategy consolidated the Guaraní as mature political actors able to articulate their demands for autonomy. Don René knows this *en carne propia*, in his own flesh, since he served several terms on Charagua's city council in the 1990s.

Finally, Morrell i Torra suggests, indigenous autonomy is a status of juridical recognition by the state. This is what René meant when he explained that “there are no laws or norms that say we are autonomous.” Thus, even though the status of indigenous autonomy was not all they hoped it would be when the Constituent Assembly met in 2006, the Guaraní saw state recognition as another step towards the larger project. As we saw in chapter 2, at Bolivia's Constituent Assembly in 2006–8, indigenous activists and their allies proposed new forms of self-government that would return both territorial control and traditional forms of governance to indigenous communities as part of their centuries-old demands for self-determination. The Guaraní of Charagua participated in these debates. Don Avilio Vaca from Charagua Norte was a delegate to the Assembly and served on the Commission on Autonomies. Yet the form of indigenous autonomy in the final constitution is a substantially watered down version of what activists had proposed. Instead of the far-reaching self-determination indigenous activists had longed for since the Spanish conquest, and for which they fought in insurrections up until the nineteenth century, the current version of indigenous autonomy in Bolivia is not significantly discernable from a local administrative entity within a liberal centralized state. There are some meaningful changes, as I show below, but this form of governance continues to be embedded in a strong centralized state model.

Thus, instead of a radical challenge to liberalism, Bolivia's indigenous autonomy may be closer to what Audra Simpson calls “nested sovereignties.” Given the continuing monopoly of military and institutional power held by settler states, she suggests “like indigenous bodies, indigenous sovereignties and indigenous political orders prevail within and apart from settler governance” (Simpson 2015: 11). “Sovereignty may exist within sovereignty. One does not entirely negate the other, but they necessarily stand in terrific tension and pose serious jurisdictional and normative challenges to each other” (10). Simpson shows how the Mohawks negotiate these tensions, often “refusing” the offer of citizenship from the United States and Canada, the settler states that claim jurisdiction over them, bearing their own

passports across national borders they find illegitimate. The Guaraní I describe here also find themselves in a complex set of nested sovereignties crossing national, departmental (state), and local levels. Yet they do not operate through refusal. Instead, they have used the resources of the plurinational constitution and alliances with multiple political factions to press forward towards self-determination.

THE PILGRIMAGE TOWARDS AUTONOMY

The path to autonomy was long and complex. The Bolivian constitution establishes the rights of indigenous people to self-government under what are called *autonomías indígenas originarias campesinas* (AIOCs), or “indigenous originary peasant autonomies” (Bolivia 2009: Arts. 2 and 289–96).¹ The constitution clearly lays out the exclusive and shared *competencias*, or areas of jurisdiction, at each level of government, defining the limited areas where local governments can act, always within the framework of a coherent national government. In 2009, Morales began the process of autonomy with Decree Law 231, which set up a complex system of requirements for local communities seeking conversion to this status. There are three possibilities: the conversion of already existing municipalities; the conversion of indigenously held *territorios indígenas originarios campesinos* (TIOCs), or “indigenous originary peasant territories”; or the creation of new regional autonomies composed of two or more converted municipalities (see Tockman and Cameron 2014 for a more comprehensive description of the process.) The government then put out a formal call for municipalities to apply for the status (see also Tockman et al. 2015). Then, in 2010, Congress passed an enabling law, the *Ley Marco de Autonomía y Descentralización* (LMAD; Framework Law on Autonomy and Decentralization), which formalized all the requirements for creation and operation of the autonomies. The second path, that of the TIOCs, only opened in 2012, when the Tribunal Supremo Electoral approved Resolution 0075/2012 (Reglamento de Supervisión del Acceso a las Autonomías Indígena Originario Campesinas). That trajectory, which will arise not from a referendum but by a consultation based in norms and procedures, is under way in about ten indigenous territories (see Tockman 2014: 248–49).

The first step of this complex process was to apply to hold a public referendum to begin the conversion process. As Jason Tockman and John Cameron (2014) report, the bureaucratic requirements were onerous. Those who wanted to begin the AIOC process had to collect the signatures of 10 percent of the municipality’s voting population, provide evidence of precolonial occupation of the municipality, and secure from the municipal council ratification by two-thirds of the council’s members of an ordinance supporting conversion. Besides that, the deadlines were tight, and only twelve communities managed to file these in time (53). Since the state did not provide funding or administrative help, the communities had to rely

on technical help from local NGOs. The first round of referenda was held in 2009, and only eleven were successful in their bids. Charagua was one of only two low-land communities to pass this step, with 55.7 percent voting yes (Albó 2012: 125). The second step was to convene a representative autonomy assembly to elaborate formal “autonomy statutes.” This was a time-consuming process, in which the differing sectors and interests debated whether and how autonomy might serve the community’s interests. In several cases, the tensions proved insurmountable. For instance, the highland community of Jesús de Machaca, originally presumed to be the most likely to gain autonomy, was not able to come to consensus and did not press forward (Cameron 2013). Tockman reports that cleavages there between sectors centered on disputes about forms of representation, with those aligned with the MAS arguing for a more liberal electoral competition, and those aligning with the local *ayllu* organization arguing for a system requiring service in the traditional rotational distribution of *cargos*, or responsibilities (2014: 129ff.).

In Charagua, the Guaraní held an assembly to draft the autonomy statute, bringing elected delegates from various sectors to the table. In an assembly lasting several months overseen by the central government’s Ministry of Autonomies, the delegates drafted a statute establishing a new form of municipal government based on Guaraní norms and procedures. Once written, these statutes were submitted to Bolivia’s Plurinational Constitutional Tribunal (TCP) to ensure they complied with constitutional requirements. Charagua’s statute was presented to the high court in Sucre in October 2012, and in December 2013, the TCP issued its ruling of constitutionality. This ruling was provisional, pending several required revisions, the most significant of which was the ruling that the statute’s investment of broad oversight powers in the *ñemboatí guasu*, the highest deliberative assembly, was unconstitutional. As Tockman points out, this intervention in the statute’s internal distribution of faculties “seems to be aimed at enforcing a particular view of the balance of powers—one that favours the independence of the executive” (Tockman 2014: 182). After the assembly revised the statute on these and several other issues, the final statute was approved in June 2014. The final step was a second referendum. If a majority of the public in the municipalities approved, the process of conversion could commence (53). In September 2015, two communities, Totora Marka in the highlands, and Charagua, in the lowlands, had passed all these requirements and put their new statutes to the test in referenda. Only Charagua won, with a slim but significant margin of 53 percent (Portugal 2015; Colque 2015).

Thus, Charagua’s new statute is a historic document, one that moves the country forward in terms of what local autonomy might look like in practice. It is the result of a long deliberative process of local democracy. The proponents of the conversion process organized the assembly in 2010 with help from local NGO Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado (CIPCA; Center for Investigation

and Promotion of the Peasantry) and with oversight from the national Ministry of Autonomies. The ministers did come to town several times at key moments to encourage participation, and did provide some minimal help printing posters and copies of the statutes. Nevertheless, the Guaraní relied instead on CIPCA, which had grants from private and public Spanish foundations (Morell i Tora 2013: 84).

The Guaraní designed an assembly with delegates from all the sectors of Charagua's population. The Guaraní delegates attended regularly, although the length of the assembly made it hard for everyone, since they had to leave their jobs or their farms for weeks at a time. Yet there was very little attendance by the white-mestizo sectors. In 2011 and 2012, I interviewed *vecinos* from the pueblo and found they had opted not to be part of the process. These elite made clear their fears. They did not participate in the assembly because they felt it was illegal or useless since they were the minority, but they raged against the process as having been imposed from the outside. One Verde city councilor told me the autonomy process was a MAS government project "intended to knock us over" (*tumbarnos*), meaning to overturn elite power in the region. The people of the pueblo also openly expressed a deep racism when they spoke of a possible future under indigenous autonomy. One cattle rancher called the idea of indigenous autonomy "retrograde, it takes us back to ancestral times" using ancient customs. "Imagine, our grandchildren living in an indigenous municipality. . . . This is a dark and uncertain future, because I know them. They have lots of land, but they do not know how to produce." Relying on classic tropes of the corrupt, lazy, or backward Indian, these white-mestizo leaders could not imagine ceding or even sharing power with their indigenous neighbors. The Charagua cattle ranchers had been part of the departmental autonomy struggles described in chapter 5, so they saw indigenous autonomy struggle as a part of the MAS agenda they had been fighting for years.

In 2011, I attended the Autonomy assembly, which took place in the Arakuaar-enda Cultural Center at the edge of town. Besides the large assembly room where the main meetings were held, it had a few other classrooms, a big kitchen and dining room, and dormitories with rows of bunk beds. I had been there before in 1998 with my friends from Zona Cruz for a regional meeting of Guaraní organizations, but the assembly this time had a very different and decidedly historic feel to it. Section by section, the delegates put forward their ideas, drawn from commission meetings and discussions with local base communities. Long debates in Guaraní and Spanish followed, as the delegates considered the structure of the new form of government they wanted to create. The technical team from CIPCA sat in the back with their laptops, recording and systematizing the material. The long hot days in the hall were broken up by shared lunches and coffee breaks, where discussions continued.

Over the process, the delegates designed a new system of local governance, based on Guaraní values and notions of autonomy. Because I had followed the

negotiations at the Constituent Assembly, and seen how this new legal status was so embedded within the liberal structure of the nation-state, I wondered how this new system could actually accomplish any real change. In my discussions with delegates then, and in the visits that followed in 2012 and 2015, I asked everyone I met: How would this new system of governance change things? What would autonomy mean in the light of the constitutional constraints? They returned to several themes again and again. First, Guaraní told me that they wanted a system that prevented political parties from monopolizing power. At first I did not understand the depth of this concern. I assumed it was an expression of the kind that I had heard all over Bolivia, a distrust of the corrupting power of the traditional political class, which was dominated by whites and mestizos. Yes, it was that, people said, but it was also the result of their own experiences in Charagua over the past twenty years. Although they had been able to get Guaraní elected to the city council and even as mayor, often those leaders had been co-opted by the political parties, “betraying” the Guaraní project. This had caused enormous discord within the communities, and they wanted to avoid that. “Tenemos que ser unidos, hermanos” (We have to be unified, brothers and sisters), they said frequently to each other and to me. Second, they wanted to find a way of getting resources directly, without the mediation of the mayor’s office, political parties, or the departmental government. As I describe in the following section, the current funding process requires indigenous groups to present proposals to the governor and to the mayor for any development projects they might be trying to implement. Not only was this a tiresome and uncertain process, it put them in the position of supplicants begging for resources. As they made clear, the resources flowing from the national government to the departments are the result of extractivist projects carried out on indigenous territories. “These are our resources,” said one delegate, “we should control them and decide what kind of development we need.” The capitánías have experience with administering development projects, since they have been receiving payments directly from some of the petroleum companies for some time, so this is not a surprising demand.

The statute the delegates designed went through several revisions: first with a constitutional lawyer hired to make sure their ideas would conform to the constitution,² and then in response to the Constitutional Tribunal’s requirements. The final statute organizes municipal government in a radically decentralized manner. Each of the six sectors (the four Guaraní capitánías, the pueblo, and the Estación) will be an autonomous entity, with the right to elect its own representatives according to their traditional *usos y costumbres*. For the capitánías, this will mean by consensus at public assemblies. For the other two, this could be by secret vote according to liberal notions of democracy, or however they decide to do it. Each zone will send representatives to collective decision-making bodies—at the communal,

zonal, and municipal levels—as well as to a legislative body. There is an executive body, but rather than a mayor and council, it is a body made up of representatives from each zone. Is this new system actually different or is this another example of indigeneity as emancipatory politics ceding to indigeneity as symbolic window dressing for a continuation of liberalism?

I agree with Morrell i Torra that while this statute is in fact “very distant from the discourse of ancestrality that prevails in the usual theoretical approaches to indigenous autonomy” (2013: 96), it could bring about some important transformations in the relations of power, forms of territorial control, and sociocultural dynamics in Charagua. He points to three specific changes. First, he signals the way the statute decentralizes or disperses power from a political institution to a collective body (98). This follows the indigenous model Pierre Clastres described as “societies against the state,” in which no one leader held the power of violence over others. Instead, society as a whole was the site of political power, and leaders acted as mediators to promote harmony rather than to exercise command over others. Individual people and communities maintained autonomy, only giving power to leaders in emergencies, like times of war (see Clastres 1989). The Charagua autonomy statute continued this logic by separating power from a mayor and dispersing it throughout a series of collective decision-making bodies in which positions are rotated across time and communities. (It is worth noting again, however, that this effort to disperse power was diminished by the TCP’s 2013 rulings; see Tockman 2014: 182–83). In 2015, Mayor Belarmino Solano explained it to me this way: “Before the mayor was above everyone and important, now we want the leaders to be in contact with everyone, to come down to society. This is a way to decolonize, with open doors.”

Second, Morrell i Torra suggests that, like the Bolivian constitution, the Charagua statute has inserted within it indigenous values, like *iyambae* (freedom, or “without owners”) and *yaiko kavi pave* (a Guaraní notion often translated as *vivir bien*, but also meaning *vida plena*, a full life) (Morrell i Torra 2013: 113). Following Boaventura de Souza Santos’s thinking on the “experimental state,” Morrell i Torra argues that this is an “intercultural translation,” a form of hybridity in which indigenous logics are inserted into the liberal text as a non-Western and decolonizing resource (ibid., 107, citing Santos 2010: 65). He is careful not to romanticize this, noting this is not a form of utopian post-development. Instead, he reminds us how important development and dependence on gas rents are for the Guaranís (114–15). Finally, he suggests that the statute goes beyond multiculturalism by including all the other sectors and allowing each group the right to organize and represent themselves. This was an important selling point in all the public events I attended, as non-Guaraní expressed their fears of having to conform to Guaraní customs. The statute incorporates others but does not subordinate them (131).

FROM ASPIRATION TO RECOGNITION

While the delegates to the Charagua Assembly were busy formulating a new way to govern their local communities, politics as usual was continuing around them in the nation, department, and the municipality. That is, at the same time they were planning a future of autonomy, they were also living and working in the old system where political parties and discourses were holding sway. To move from their aspirations as expressed in the statute, they had to work in the existing system to assure their rights and get the referendum passed to make the conversion to AIOC a reality.

During the six years they worked on the autonomy process, the political landscape changed radically. When the Guaraní leaders began the autonomy assembly in 2010, the mayor and the majority of the city council members were Verdes (Greens), aligned with the conservative Right. They represented the views of the whites-mestizos of the city center, who were firmly opposed to autonomy. They saw it as a clear threat to their traditional control over the mayor's office and the funding from the state that flowed to the city. As I mentioned above, they also saw autonomy as part of the larger MAS project to overturn traditional elite power. This was not an accurate assessment: in Charagua, AIOC conversion was not a MAS project at all. As Albó points out, most MAS supporters in Charagua were Aymara and Quechua immigrants from the highlands who were opposed the Guaraní-led process (2012). For the Guaranís of Charagua, however, this was not just a MAS project; it was a centuries-long project of territorial self-determination. They were, however, able to use the dominant MAS discourse of decolonization and indigenous rights to legitimize their struggle. In 2010, the narrative of indigenous rights, *vivir bien*, and preservation of Mother Earth was on everyone's tongues, especially the president's, and the Guaranís of Charagua took advantage of it to push their local demands into the national agenda, moving their project through the national level courts.

But by 2011, the president's commitment to indigenous rights began to be called into question. The controversy over the TIPNIS highway, described in chapter 5, made it clear that Morales was willing to sacrifice indigenous lands to extractivist development projects. The transformation from decolonization to development described in chapter 6 had begun. The APG supported the first march for TIPNIS, and many Guaranís from Charagua participated. The way Morales dealt with the marchers, and particularly the violent repression in Chaparina still counts for many as the biggest betrayal of their political lives. The *capitán grande* of Charagua Norte told me that he remembers seeing the Chaparina battle on TV. Still, four years later, his eyes filled with tears at the memory. "I was a MAS member since the beginning," he said bitterly. He pulled his tattered membership card from his wallet. "See? But that destroyed my faith in Evo. No . . . " The MAS's takeover of

CIDOB, its creation of parallel organizations—all this made the MAS an unsavory ally after TIPNIS. But with the autonomy process slowed down and not certain to win, the Guaraní decided to keep pushing that long-term strategy but with a variety of tactics: they would work with the Greens (the *Demócratas*) and the Blues (the MAS) at the same time at very different levels of government.

First at the departmental level, they took advantage of the new electoral scheme that guaranteed each of the five indigenous groups in the department of Santa Cruz one *asambleista*, or representative to the department legislature. These *asambleistas* were elected according to *usos y costumbres*, or traditional customs, that is, not as part of any political party. This allowed them the ability to form pacts with other parties. Under the current fiscal structure of Bolivia, gas rents and royalties are collected by the central government and distributed to departments, universities, and the Fondo Indígena, the development fund for indigenous peoples. The department then distributes these funds to municipalities. So to get money flowing to their municipality, and to get the governor and legislature to approve projects, the indigenous *asambleistas* had to work with the Verdes in power. The MAS, of course, saw this, as a betrayal. How could indigenous people work with the *camba* elites instead of the indigenous MAS party? But Ruth Yarigua, the current Guaraní *asambleista*, and former *capitana grande* of Charagua Norte, explained that her loyalty is to her people. Their dream for centuries has been to “occupy these spaces of power, at all levels, without regard for political colors. . . . This is just what autonomy in Charagua will also provide: the liberty to decide for ourselves, without conforming ourselves to any political party” (personal communication, July 27, 2015). She and her fellow *asambleistas* put forward development projects to be approved for the annual operating budgets and convince their fellow legislators to approve them.

More important, though, the five indigenous *asambleistas* collaborated with *Demócrata asambleistas* to pass a departmental autonomy statute. (Departments have a similar constitutional requirement to pass their autonomy statutes.) Their goal was to make sure that indigenous rights, especially autonomy, were inserted in the department statute. This was critical for the long-term strategy of autonomy, but it positioned them right in between the MAS and the Verdes. It is clear that Rubén Costas, the powerful governor of Santa Cruz, does not support indigenous autonomy, because it takes away some of his territorial and fiscal power. On the other hand, by taking a public position allying with local indigenous peoples, Costas offers a slap in the face to Morales. Ruth Yarigua explained that in meetings with their bases, the representatives came up with over eighty points they wanted modified in the draft statute. They invited the MAS delegates to collaborate with them, but the latter refused. The Verdes, on the other hand, were eager to work with them to include their amendments. The resulting legislative session to approve and amend the statute was an amazing event. The hall was filled with the

elite of Santa Cruz, there to witness the historic moment for which their movement had struggled so long. As the president of the assembly called for approval of each article, it was the Verde representatives—mostly rich, white members of the traditional political class—who proposed amendments recognizing indigenous peoples' languages, territories, and rights to autonomy. When the votes were called, all the seventeen representatives on the Verdes' side of the hall raised their hands in assent, along with all five of the indigenous representatives on their side. The dramatic physical act of actually choosing sides reinforced the political decisions being made here. This happened for many hours as hundreds of articles were approved one by one. On each vote, the president registered the twenty-two votes in favor, more than enough to create the two-thirds majority of the twenty-seven total votes. The MAS delegates abstained on each vote.

The next day, the legislators presented the approved statute to Governor Costas in an even more spectacular event. In the governor's office on the main plaza, the hall was filled with representatives of the press, legislators, and the public. Finally, Governor Costas came down the stairs accompanied by the leaders of the five indigenous groups and their representatives. Costas said he was sorry to make us all wait but he had to meet with these important indigenous leaders to assure them that Santa Cruz's autonomy "was not just for some, but for all." He said the indigenous peoples are *iyambae*, using the Guaraní word for freedom that has been claimed by the departmental autonomy movement (Lowrey 2006). "They have no fear, no owners, so they are part of this process of autonomy." Then, he acknowledged that without the five indigenous votes, the Verdes could not have passed the new statute. "Thank you!" he roared, bringing the crowd to their feet. "We will continue to coordinate with you, to help meet your demands [*reivindicaciones*], you who have been here even before the republic was formed." He turned to the crowd. "Now we are working on basic services, with women and youth, to create a better society. I told our indigenous brothers, don't worry: now there will be development for all! Let us prepare to keep moving forward!"

Outside the hall, people were congratulating each other, but the Guaraní *asambleista* Ruth Yarigua looked worried. "Well, now we have to insist that they fulfill their promises [*que cumplan*]. Many times they say good things, but they never fulfill them." In fact, few weeks later, she acknowledged their alliance was risky. "He gave us his commitment, but we know that if we are not on top of him, he won't do anything." She also admitted she had been criticized by people in Charagua for having allied with the Verdes. Had she been bribed? some asked. Was this another example of *egoismo*, where the temptations of power had overwhelmed her responsibility to her community? On Costas's side, we can also see a pragmatic sense of compromise. Including indigenous autonomy in the statute may go against the department's own strategic interests, since it may lead to a loss of control over government funds. But it already exists in the national constitution;

so acknowledging it does not risk much. In exchange, the Verdes were able to pass their statute, a milestone in their struggle for departmental autonomy.

STRATEGIES AT HOME

While there were both risks and benefits to working with the Verdes at the departmental level, at home in Charagua, things were different. To get the autonomy statute passed in town, Guaranís chose another path: an alliance with the MAS. Belarmino Solano, a schoolteacher, key advocate for autonomy, and then mayor of Charagua, explained their tactical decision. In 2010, he said, the APG had wanted to make alliances with other parties, especially the MAS, but the Guaranís were divided among themselves, some with the Verdes, some with other particular interests. “And this was a crucial moment for autonomy! We always had indigenous autonomy as Plan A, but this had been delayed, so we went for Plan B, making an alliance with the MAS and the APG.” They began with the 2014 national level elections, putting forward a Guaraní candidate, Abilio Vaca, as a MAS congressman in the national legislature. Their campaign was successful. Both Morales and Vaca won. Then, in the March 2015 municipal elections, they tried the same tactic, all the while knowing the alliance might prove transitory.

This was also a positive alliance for the MAS. Having seen the lowland indigenous groups migrate towards the Verdes at the departmental level, it was a way to exert influence in Charagua, and to have a hand in the autonomy project. As Belarmino made clear, the national elections had shown that the APG could bring out the vote: “They can see we have the power of convoking people here. With the win for Vaca and Evo, they can see that we are part of the *proceso de cambio* that our brother Evo began. We are indigenous people like him, we are brothers. . . . We didn’t want to lose this space and the means to move together towards equality.”

So the APG/MAS candidates campaigned with the blue banner of the MAS, and handily won the mayor’s position and four city councilors, now holding the majority. This was a savvy tactic for a number of reasons, above all because the highland residents of the Estación, who were very leery of the autonomy statute, are strongly MAS voters. By wearing the colors of Evo’s party, the Guaranís hoped to convince their Quechua migrant neighbors they were on the same path. Rosa Mamani, one of the leaders of the women’s Bartolina Sisa association, told me that this alliance would make the town better. I met her at a rally for the referendum, where she and a few other women from the market were waving a flag for their association. Speaking shyly in Quechua-inflected Spanish, Rosa told me that previous mayors had ignored highland demands, like the one her group is pushing for: a new municipal marketplace to sell their products. But when Belarmino came to see their association during his campaign, he was listening. He promised to help them in their demands, and they gave him their support. While she was still not

convinced about the autonomy statute, she was opening up to it. Perhaps, she said, she would just vote blank and not oppose it now.

This strategy did not impress everyone, however. The junta vecinal and the civic committee, made up of white-mestizos who lived in the pueblo, still had strong objections to the statute. One afternoon, I went to talk to them as they finished their meeting, held in the schoolhouse. We met in an empty classroom, with the sounds of children playing noisy games in the schoolyard, and talked for hours about their fears. The president of the civic committee, María Antonia Arancibia, whom I had talked to on each of my visits, was the most vehement. Her family has raised cattle in the region for generations. She argued that the statute was an invention that had nothing to do with the real issues of social relations in the town. "This whole thing is just made up," she told me, "it is copied from the Andeans, and from Evo Morales." CIPCA had written it. "Moreover," and here they all agreed, nodding their heads bitterly, "this new statute excludes us. We don't even appear in the prologue. We too are ancestral here. We, too, care for the fauna and the space, but in the statute's prologue, only Guaraní appear. We also live here!!!" The leader of the junta, a schoolteacher named Jorge, said, "Look, we aren't against autonomy, just not with this statute. It doesn't recognize us as mestizos. We don't appear." A second teacher, Lilly, a young woman with a worried look, said "we are not against the conversion, after all, they are our ancestors. It is that they brought us the statute all finished, without letting us intervene." I had heard this position (that they had not been invited to the assembly) over the years, yet, it does not square with the facts. In 2011, I had interviewed María Antonia, and then she told me that they had been invited, but they refused to be involved. At that point, the whites-mestizos could not imagine this process would go forward, and didn't want to have anything to do with it. Now, in 2015, their worst fears were being realized. Lilly continued, "we all know what is going to happen. The community leaders are going to benefit from this, and they won't share the money with the town or even their own communities. They will completely ignore us from the pueblo." Jorge added, "No, it will create a Guaraní upper caste, and we will end up supporting it." In contrast to the first time I interviewed her in 2011, when she refused to even think about autonomy, this time, María Antonia had read the statute carefully. Pointing to various clauses, she argued that the statute would allow the AIOC to establish new tax measures. "Who has the money to pay taxes? We, of the pueblo, will be taxed and we will lose our lands." They all remained unmoved by the repeated declarations that the statute would allow each sector to govern themselves. "The statute requires that all representatives [to the decision-making bodies] speak Guaraní!! That excludes us all."

The Guaraní had heard these objections since they began their push for autonomy, and were not deterred. Instead, they used their political control of the mayor's office to push towards approval of the autonomy statute in the September 2015

referendum. This was evident at a summit meeting co-organized by the mayor's office, the Ministry of Autonomies, and the Electoral Tribunal in July 2015. What was called the "Cumbre de Autonomía Indígena Charagua Iyambae" (Summit on Indigenous Autonomy of Charagua *Iyambe*) brought together protagonists for indigenous autonomy from municipalities all over the Chaco region with officials from various government ministries, cities, and funding institutions. The summit was a powerful way to raise issues and provoke discussion among Charagua's many sectors. It was held over three days in the same cultural center where the assembly had drafted the autonomy statute. The Ministry of Autonomies and the Ministry of Health pooled money to be able to make the event happen, and there were commissions on health, agrarian development, indigenous justice, and education. The Ministry of Autonomies' staff came from La Paz, and they grumbled openly about how little support the central government was giving to this project. They represented one wing of the MAS state—the leftist indigenista advocates we learned about in chapter 1. These were young anthropologists and social scientists dedicated to social change, who were holding on to the one space within the government apparatus where they thought they could make a difference. They said it was only a matter of time before their work would be stymied by the more conservative Hacienda (Treasury) or the State Departments. Until then, they worked creatively to find money for printing, per diems for leaders, and publicity.

The meetings demonstrated the social complexity of the region. My Guaraní friends from Santa Cruz had arrived, to support the process and to learn about how they might use this experience to move their own demands forward. Sitting next to their aunts and uncles from small villages in Charagua, they caught up with family gossip and compared political strategies. I had encouraged María Antonia and the junta vicinal members to attend, to participate. She and Jorge, the schoolteacher, pushed into the crowded room, listening with frowns on their faces. There were representatives from communities all over the Chaco region, several of them in process of petitioning for conversions of their municipalities. At the inauguration, Mayor Belarmino introduced the ministers of autonomies and defense, who had arrived from La Paz, along with indigenous and union leaders who came from across the region to support the process. Melva Hurtado, the leader of the MAS-affiliated CIDOB, came with her entourage. Local NGO and Church people mixed with ministry staff. Representatives from the four capitánías arrived on trucks sent out to fetch them from the outlying villages. Children ran around and babies cried, while this amazing mix of people and interests debated the complex and intersecting needs of the region: infrastructure, health programs, better education, and most important, control over profits from the hydrocarbon industry. In the commission on autonomy, which I attended, the young capitán of Charagua Norte gave an impassioned speech about how the statute would include all sectors of the Charagua community, and how this united community would

benefit from development projects and more direct flow of funds to the town. At a break, María Antonia continued her disapproval, saying she was not moved. Jorge, on the other hand, was impressed with the commissions and the many important projects in the works that he was hearing about. He seemed much more open to working together. “I’m surprised,” he said.

The final afternoon of the summit, the participants delivered the results of their deliberations to the ministers in a public display in the town’s open-air coliseum built recently with funds from the *Bolivia Cambia, Evo Cumple* (Bolivia Changes, Evo Fulfills) program. A huge poster with government logos declared “Guaraní Autonomy will benefit all the population, without excluding or discriminating against anyone.” Many of the town’s residents trickled in, curious to see what the Guaraní mayor could extract from the two MAS ministers. In a classic Bolivian spectacle format, the program included speeches by honored guests, a MAS senator, local Guaraní leaders, and the local priest. All affirmed that the Charagua autonomy process was historic and would serve as an example across the country and even internationally. After a dance number, where Guaraní girls invited the two ministers to dance—a photo op for the journalists, to be sure—the mayor made his tactical move, linking autonomy with getting new development projects. Don Belarmino addressed the ministers, saying how glad they were here to see that Charagua was part of the government’s *proceso de cambio*. “Before, our authorities could never get any projects from the government, but now we are working with Evo. You ministers are the spokespeople now, to say that Charagua is with Evo, and that we will get projects.” He delivered the proposals from the autonomy summit, and using the language of the MAS, he declared, “We are going to continue the process of change right here. You can’t be plurinational without indigenous autonomy. Here we will practice interculturality everyday, defending democracy and promoting development for all. This is autonomy!” Then he began bringing out bulging binders, with the projects his staff had prepared for presentation to the ministers. Handing each one to the minister, he called out the projects, including the completion of the paved highway to the town (huge applause from everyone); construction of a new coliseum in the rural Izozog zone, a new school building, a bus terminal (applause from the *transportistas*), and a municipal market (high-pitched shouts from the highland market women, waving their banner). Entrusted with taking the enormous stack of projects back to La Paz, the ministers were covered with Guaraní textiles and sent on their way.

FIRST STEPS TOWARDS AN INDIGENOUS STATE?

The pragmatic politics of the Guaranís of Charagua succeeded. Only a few weeks after the autonomy summit, a majority of the residents of the city voted yes in the 2015 referendum. The Guaraní leaders are now in the process of implementing the

new statute, converting the municipality into an indigenous autonomous AIOC. What that will mean remains to be seen over the next years, as it gets put into practice. It will undoubtedly be hotly contested. The first steps have shown just what is at stake. The margin was slim, declining slightly from the 55.7 percent they won in the first referendum to 53.3 percent. The autonomy project declined most in the city centers: from 38 percent in 2009 to 33.6 percent in 2015. This includes the Estación, so the Quechua market vendor Rosa Mamani perhaps wasn't so convinced in the long run. It also declined slightly in Bajo and Alto Izozog, where it had received 53 percent in 2009, but the *Sí* vote managed to capture 51 percent of that critical electorate (Bolivia 2016). That means that although the Guaranís won, they are implementing this new structure of governance with a host of people who are opposed to it and determined to make it fail. In September 2016, the town held elections for the various new assemblies, putting the AIOC status into force, and constituting the country's first indigenous governed municipality. The fact that each sector chose its own way of electing their representatives—some by secret vote, and some in assemblies—led some to see this as the first example of an “intercultural public institution” (Villagomez Guzmán 2016). There were all kinds of disputes and accusations, however, mainly from the people of the pueblo. In a shocking move, the *comite civico* threatened CIPCA, the NGO that had assisted in the autonomy process, calling for it to be expelled from town. The UN High Commission on Human Rights in Bolivia had to intervene, protecting its rights (*El Deber* 2016). Yet, the Charagua AIOC has the legal and institutional support of the constitution and the Constitutional Tribunal, even if the MAS's political support is grudgingly given.

Compared to the cases described in chapter 6, the Charagua autonomy project gives us a very different view of what decolonization and a focus on indigeneity can mean at the local level. On the one hand, Belarmino's performance at the summit demonstrates how powerful the developmentalist discourse put forward by the Morales government has become and how local actors—both indigenous and non-indigenous—must utilize that discourse to win the support of their constituencies. Of course, local governments have always depended on public works (see Postero 2007a), but this takes a particular tone these days. Here, Belarmino tied indigenous autonomy to economic development in the same way that Morales does in his new discourse of economic liberation. Morales links “liberation” to successful management of international hydrocarbon markets; here, Belarmino linked “autonomy” to successfully channeling the profits from that resource exploitation to his community in the form of development projects. The Santa Cruz governor, Rubén Costas, demonstrated similar pragmatism when he sealed his alliance with indigenous leaders with a developmental promise. This is not merely mimicry, or instrumental pandering. Local politics is part of these national-level transformations. Morales argues that the national extractivist development project

is liberating and decolonizing because it is under the control of a sovereign plurinational state rather than foreign transnational corporations, and the Guaranis of Charagua similarly push for an autonomy funded by oil and gas rents, but controlled by them.

The Charagua case study shows something else as well: the complex negotiations Guaraní actors carry out in the *spaces between* nested sovereignties. The Guaraní politicians—Belarmino Solano in Charagua, and Ruth Yarigua in the capital—are trying to make visible their own indigenous notion of autonomy in the interstices of liberal politics, while all the while taking advantage of the ambiguities to make both political and material gains. When Governor Costas used the Guaraní word *iyambae*—“freedom,” or “without owners”—and insisted that the indigenous “brothers” were part of departmental autonomy, he was referring to a very different understanding of autonomy. His notion implied regional administrative power in a liberal/neoliberal state system. For many Guaranís, however, autonomy is something entirely different, linked to the Guaraní way of being in the world or a set of historical organizing practices. Yet the Guaranís did not contest Costas’s use of this word, but rather forged an alliance on the basis of it.

Similarly, in Charagua, Belarmino articulated his local autonomy demands in terms understandable in relation to the national MAS discourse: decolonization, plurinationalism, interculturality, and most of all development. Again, these terms mean radically different things to the various actors who use them, but it is this ambiguity, this ability to project various meanings onto them, that makes them such useful tools. These ambiguities also make possible consensus within the Guaraní communities, where there are also significant debates over visions for the future. For some, autonomy is most important because it will bring in more development, in the form of economic resources and educational opportunities for their children. In this sense, the Guaranís accept what Simpson (2014) would call the “gift” of redistribution from state, reinforcing the nation’s sovereignty. For others, however, autonomy is closer to that articulated by Don René Gómez above: a recognition of their reciprocal relationships with each other and their land, and a call to live their own Guaraní way of life. This vision promotes a form of equality, where sovereign actors speak nation to nation. For others, these goals overlap. The Guaraní leaders’ political negotiations have managed to create spaces for all these visions as they come together and swerve apart in the “partial connectedness” that is indigenous life in settler societies (de la Cadena 2015).

When I asked my indigenous collaborators in Charagua how they managed the dizzying dance between political parties and ambiguous meanings, they shook their heads, trying to make me understand. One said, “We have always lived this way, in this space. This is how we work.” They are used to holding in tension conflicting meanings, the sort of cohabitation Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui calls *chi’xi*. This Aymara concept illuminates the fact that something can be simultaneously

white and not white and black and not black. She explains it this way: "It is the color that is the product of juxtaposition, in small points or spots, of opposing or contrasting colors: the white and the black, the red and the green, etc. It is the mottled gray that results from the imperceptible mixture of white and black, they may be confused in perception without ever mixing completely. The notion of *ch'ixi* . . . obeys the Aymara idea of something that is and is not at the same time, that is to say, the logic of the third included" (Rivera Cusicanqui 2010a: 69). This is very different from hybridity; instead, it is a matter of experiencing both strands at the same time. Historians have shown that since colonial times, indigenous groups have managed this multiplicity, living and working between partially connected worlds of rural collective communities on the one hand, and mines and markets, on the other (see Harris 1995). The Guaraní, especially, have always been good at this, forging temporary alliances with different groups to ensure their survival but not disappearing in the process. Pifarré has argued that their central strategy over time was to "make pacts without selling themselves to the *karais* [whites]" (1989: 295–97, cited in Albó 2012: 30). This "Guaraní diplomacy" (294) has given them a practical historical understanding of how to negotiate nested sovereignties.

In this most recent iteration of Guaraní diplomacy, the leaders of Charagua have accomplished something they proudly declare to be *inédito*, or unprecedented. Despite the fact that the Morales government's discourse and practices have moved away from indigenous rights, these local politicians have doggedly pushed the "indigenous state" to acknowledge their rights to create one at the local level in Charagua. Granted, it is not as radical as it could be, but these new institutions, when enacted, will incorporate collective decision-making practices into the liberal state structure in a new way. As a pilot case, it will be carefully watched and, if successful, emulated. Here, at least, indigeneity and indigenous practices are useful as the basis for emancipatory politics. It remains to be seen whether they will continue to be so.