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Bolivia

Historic Victory of the MAS and Morales

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On Sunday December 18th, in a historic victory, Evo Morales, candidate of the left-wing MAS, became the first indigenous president in Bolivia's 180-year history. "We ourselves were surprised by the scale of our victory. I am moved, and I thank all the social movements, all those who have fought to recover our natural resources, those who have fought for our rights, those who have fought to change the course of history in Bolivia".

These were the first words, on Sunday evening, of the new Bolivian president, Evo Morales. Someone who in the course of his life has been a lama breeder, a trumpet player and a coca grower, became, on this 18th of December, the first indigenous person to accede to the office of President of the Republic in the whole of Latin America.

The calm that reigned in the streets of La Paz and El Alto was somewhat deceptive. Because on this Sunday the 18th of December, it really is a historic evening that the Bolivian people are living through.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/morales31.jpg>]

The unexpected landslide in favour of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) enabled its leader, Evo Morales, to obtain a score of 51 per cent.

This unprecedented result also puts an end to twenty years of "pact democracy": the election of presidents on an indirect second round in Congress, and the obligation to obtain there an absolute majority, had systematically favoured governmental alliances between neo-liberal parties in the course of the short history of Bolivian democracy.

With a result like that, the MAS is thus sure of being able to govern alone. But that doesn't mean that governing will be an easy thing to do. The Right is in a rout, but for all that it is not definitively beaten.

Certainly, the distance between Morales and his presidential rivals is enormous, and the defeat that it represents for them could very well mean their withdrawal from political life. Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga, the candidate of the alliance of the liberal Right Democratic and Social Power (PODEMOS), received 31 per cent of the vote, a result that is only a reflection of the polarization that Quiroga fomented throughout the campaign.

The centre-right candidate Samuel Doria Medina, of National Unity (UN), seen as a potential winner in August, won in fact only 8 per cent of the vote. For Quiroga and for Doria Medina, the defeat of the Right is above all their defeat, and their credibility is seriously damaged.

The only good news in the camp of the "neo-liberals" is the surprising "survival" of the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR), which was however identified as mainly responsible for the massacres that took place during the first "gas war" in October 2003.

With a candidate who was virtually a political unknown, the son of Japanese immigrants Michiaki Nagatani, the MNR won 7 per cent of the vote thanks in particular to a significant mobilization of its historic bastions, such as the department of Beni.

However, these results only appear to be a total defeat, inasmuch as the Right could still have the possibility of "blocking" initiatives of the future Masista government. In reality the MAS only has a relative majority in the Chamber

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of Deputies. [1] The MNR, with one senator, gives the majority to the neo-liberal and conservative camp.

Finally, the prefectural elections, which also took place this Sunday, only seem to have given two or maybe three departmental governments to the MAS (Oruro, Potosi and Chuquisac), the others falling into the hands of the Right. That means that the room for manoeuvre of the future government could be very limited at the regional level, as witness the victory in Santa Cruz of a radical supporter of regional autonomy, Ruben Costas.

"Now, Evo must respect his promises". That is how a militant of the MAS put it in El Alto on Sunday evening. A lot of pressure is coming from the "base" of the party itself, and the newly elected parliamentarians, like Maria Esther Udaeta, stressed the importance of "maintaining a permanent dialogue with all the social movements", whether or not they are members of the MAS.

Expectations are high, in particular concerning the nationalization of hydrocarbons and the election of a Constituent Assembly in August 2006, and it is very likely that the first days of the government will be marked by the adoption of symbolic measures. Thus, for Julio Colque, a former union activist in the mines, "the goal is to put an end to the neo-liberal model and economic globalization.

To do that, we have to do away with decree 21060 [a decree promulgated in 1985, which made it possible to privatize state enterprises] which is nothing but a Trojan horse for it". For Evo Morales himself, who was speaking from Cochabamba this Sunday, the struggle is not only economic. "The election of an indigenous person to the head of the Republic will only be of use if it makes it possible to put an end to the colonial state in which we live, and for this new state to be a point of support in the struggle against all forms of racism".

The election of Evo Morales represents an important turning point not only for Bolivia, but for the whole of the Latin American continent. According to Morales, "we are in the third millennium, the millennium of the peoples, and no longer of the Empire. Our victory is also the victory of peoples in struggle".

For Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, "the Bolivians have written anew page of their history (...) making it possible to envisage the end of poverty and to enter on the road of development". There is no doubt that the arrival of Morales at the head of the Bolivian state potentially represents a strong reinforcement for Chavez's project of the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA), which for the moment only formally involves Venezuela and Cuba.

On the other hand, many questions remain concerning the attitude that the United States will adopt towards the future MAS government. For the moment, although the United States embassy has up to now maintained a cautious attitude, the declarations of the former functionary of the State Department Otto Reich reveal the hostility that the Bush administration maintains towards the cocalero leader, whom the United States have often seen as nothing but a "narco-terrorist" because he wants to depenalise coca.

On Sunday evening, Reich in fact said that he hoped that "[what Morales] said during the campaign, he won't put into practice, because that would be very bad for Bolivia. (...) Bolivia cannot live without the rest of the world. (...) The United States puts conditions on its aid.

Now, we are the main donors of aid to Bolivia, and if the government of this country is hostile to individual freedoms, to human rights and to civil rights, the United States will not be able to continue doing that". Quite obviously, the first days of this future government, which comes from the popular and indigenous movements of Bolivia, are likely to be eventful.

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[1] In the Senate, the distortion introduced by territorial representation has even enabled PODEMOS to face up to Morales's party, with 13 senators each. While waiting for the official results to be proclaimed, there is some uncertainty as to the exact number of seats won by each party. The French daily Le Monde of December 20th, gives the MAS exactly half of the seats in the Assembly (65 out of 130) but only 12 of the 27 senators.