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Bolivia

Will Evo Morales Change Bolivia?

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The results of the December 18 elections in Bolivia were surprising to everyone, including to Evo Morales himself, the leader of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) party. Morales won 54% of the vote, almost double the 29% for the nearest contender, right-wing Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga. A record 85% of eligible voters cast ballots, despite reports of widespread disqualification of mostly indigenous peasant supporters of Morales for technicalities. Since the return of electoral democracy to Bolivia in 1982, no presidential candidate has come close to achieving an absolute majority (over 50%). This makes Morales' victory all the more remarkable.

It is also notable that Morales is the first indigenous president in South American history. MAS won a majority in the lower house, a near majority in the Senate, and three of nine governorships. There are, therefore, no institutional obstacles to blame if MAS fails to carry through the hopes of the exploited and oppressed popular classes and indigenous nations who voted it into office.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/evomroalesgas2003.jpg>]

Evo Morales leads march demanding gas nationalisation, 2003

The electoral results in Bolivia were greeted with widespread euphoria across both the NGO (non-governmental organization) Left and large sections of the radical Left internationally. Important socialist intellectuals in other parts of Latin America, such as Atilio Borón in Argentina and Heinz Dieterich in Mexico, see anti-capitalist, revolutionary potential in Morales's victory.

People with a more sceptical view of the new Bolivian government, such as the long-time socialist researcher on Latin America [James Petras](#) or journalists LuÃ-s A. Gómez and Jean Friedsky of Narconews, are frequently dismissed as ultra-leftists, sectarians, dogmatists, etc.

Although it is too early to pronounce confidently on the character of the new Bolivian government, the recent history of the MAS and its relationship to the wave of popular insurrection that began in 2000 and peaked in October 2003 and May-June 2005 supports the view of the sceptics. The optimistic view is based on a superficial understanding of the Bolivian situation.

The MAS and Popular-Indigenous Struggle

Bolivia entered a revolutionary cycle of near-constant popular insurrection in 2000, starting with the "Water War" of 2000 in the city of Cochabamba and its surrounding countryside. That popular revolt against the privatization of water also signified popular condemnation of the entire period of neoliberalism (1985-2000), with its rampant privatization, growing inequity, and ongoing poverty.

The Water War was followed by three weeks of mobilization and road blockades by the Aymara peasantry in the altiplano (high plateau region) in September-October 2000. The heights of the revolutionary cycle, however, came during the October 2003 Gas War that forced neoliberal president Gonzalo (Goni) Sánchez de Lozada to flee the country, and in May-June 2005 when Goni's successor Carlos Mesa was forced to resign due to his refusal to break with the neoliberal economic model.

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What do we know of the MAS during this period? The MAS grew out of the coca-growing, indigenous peasant resistance in the Chapare region of the country. During the late 1980s and 1990s the cocaleros (coca growers) were the most important force on the indigenous-Left.

They combined the revolutionary Marxist traditions of ex-miners forced to move to the Chapare region due to the privatization of the tin mines with traditions of indigenous peasant resistance. Facing brutal repression under the US-led "War on Drugs," the cocaleros developed an anti-imperialist and anti-neoliberal ideology directed primarily against the US.

For the first few years of its life, in the late 1990s, the MAS maintained organic ties with the cocaleros' peasant unions. Evo Morales, of mixed Aymara-Quechua descent, was among the most important union leaders and would emerge as the front man of the MAS.

The MAS initially focused on extra-parliamentary activism and base-level democracy, but especially since the 2002 elections has moved away from mass struggle and towards electoral politics.

In the 2002 elections, Evo Morales came second to Sánchez de Lozada in the presidential race by less than 2%. This unexpectedly good result, following on the heels of inflammatory pre-election threats against Bolivians by the US ambassador, gave the party a sense that they could win electorally. The MAS began to shift away from street mobilizations and towards courting the "middle class."

The leading sectors of the popular-indigenous mobilizations of September-October 2003 radicalized and brought into the streets hundreds of thousands of people despite MAS attempts to contain and soften their demands. The party's vision was to win the scheduled 2007 elections and they would not let a revolution get in their way! Evo Morales supported the constitutional exit from the crisis in 2003, allowing Goni's vice-president Carlos Mesa to come to power. Morales and the MAS were instrumental in supporting Mesa's neoliberal government well into 2005.

During May-June 2005 the MAS did participate in a way they hadn't in October 2003, leading a march from Caracollo to La Paz to demand a Constituent Assembly. Nonetheless, the party emphasized the need for a constitutional exit to the revolutionary situation and the supremacy of electoral politics.

At a massive rally in the central plaza of La Paz during the height of the May-June insurrection, I listened to a whole series of leaders of popular organizations calling for the nationalization of natural gas. Meanwhile, huge sections of the crowd chanted "Nationalization! Nationalization!" Morales was the only speaker to call instead for 50% taxes for transnational gas corporations exploiting natural gas resources in Bolivia.

In the early stages of the electoral campaign, before Álvaro García-Linera became the party's vice-presidential candidate, the MAS attempted to form a broad alliance with the Movement without Fear municipal party, led by neoliberal La Paz mayor Juan del Granado.

James Petras is absolutely correct when he writes of October and May-June: "Morales succeeded in taking the peoples' struggle out of the street and dismantling the nascent popular councils and channelling them into established bourgeois institutions. In both crises, Evo favored a neo-liberal replacement in opposition to the peoples' demands for a new popularly controlled national assembly."

The First Indigenous President

Much has been made of the fact that Evo Morales is the first indigenous president in South American history. To understand the significance of this, let's look at the very different but nonetheless instructive national liberation struggles of southern Africa.

In his book [The Next Liberation Struggle \(2005\)](#), John Saul points out that the first series of national liberation struggles in southern Africa, from 1960 to 1990, were fought against European colonial occupation and white minority rule, and for Black majority rule. Winning Black majority rule is to be celebrated, but Saul's book correctly calls for a new struggle in southern Africa, or "the next liberation struggle": a revolutionary transition to socialism, because Black majority rule has not meant an end to capitalist exploitation in southern Africa.

Similarly, in Bolivia gains by indigenous peoples in Congress in 2002 and Morales' victory in December 2005 are important steps towards bringing an end to white-mestizo (mixed race) minority control of the state in a country where the majority of the population is indigenous people. This is a democratic gain.

At the same time, however, the MAS has taken steps against the "next liberation struggle" for socialist transformation, just as the African National Congress did in South Africa after the defeat of apartheid.

Across Latin America, one of the central paradoxes of the 1990s has been the emergence of neoliberal multiculturalism. In reaction to massive indigenous mobilizations, states began to react to contain the radical potential of these movements through official "recognition" of cultural diversity, indigenous languages, and so on. At the same time, while the cultures of indigenous peoples are being "recognized" by neoliberal states, the living conditions of indigenous peoples are deteriorating!

In a recent interview with an Uruguayan radio station Petras pointed out that for a president to say "I'm indigenous, or I come from humble origins" does not guarantee anything. We need only look at the deplorable examples of VÃ-ctor Hugo CÃardenas who served as Bolivia's vice-president from 1993-1997, President Toledo in Peru (who claims indigenous descent and wore a poncho in his first presidential electoral race) or GutiÃrrez in Ecuador. All three were indigenous - or indigenous-backed - leaders who did not break with neoliberalism and did not forge the path toward the next liberation struggle.

The New Administration and Social Movements

Since their victory, the MAS leadership has been playing to their different bases of support. Morales quickly made visits to Cuba and Venezuela, suggesting a united fight against "neoliberalism and imperialism." At the same time, however, Morales and GarcÃ-a Linera were quick to visit the most reactionary sections of the Bolivian capitalist class in Santa Cruz, in particular the far right Civic Committee of Santa Cruz. This meeting was to reassure these capitalists that their interests would be protected under the new administration.

Early visits were also made to Brazil and Spain. Not coincidentally, the Brazilian state-owned multinational Petrobras and the Spanish oil and gas giant Repsol are the biggest investors in Bolivia's natural gas industry. As the Spanish newspaper *El PaÃ-s* reported recently, "Bolivian President-elect Evo Morales softened his tone... over plans to nationalize his country's gas industry as he met with Spanish officials and business leaders in Madrid."

The newspaper reports that according to Spanish Industry Minister JosÃ Montilla, Morales has adopted a "prudent" line with regard to the nationalization of natural gas resources. The minister stated bluntly: "There will be certain

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changes to the rules of the game... but I told him that companies need a stable and trustworthy environment in which to invest and I think he is conscious of that.”

This corresponds with the fact that while occasionally using the word “nationalization,” the MAS leadership has been nothing but ambiguous as to what they mean by nationalization.

Vice-president Garc a Linera has famously denounced a transition to socialism in Bolivia as impossible for at least 50 to 100 years. Instead, he argues for “Andean-Amazonian capitalism,” which through greater state intervention will supposedly be supportive of indigenous peoples. We should remember that the ANC’s Black capitalism has been anything but good for South Africa’s Black working class.

If the MAS radicalizes during its first months in office, it will not be a consequence of the benevolent leadership of Morales or Garc a Linera. If radicalization transpires, which is certainly not impossible, it will come from pressure from below, from the same sort of mass self-organization that we witnessed in Cochabamba in 2000, and throughout the country in October 2003 and May-June 2005.

The chances of success for mass struggle will probably be better in the first year of the MAS administration, before the Right has time to regroup and rebuild counterrevolutionary forces.

There are some signs of optimism in the social movements. Two popular meetings were held in El Alto in early December, just before the elections. The first was the Congress of the National Front for the Defence of Water and Basic Services and Life.

Neighbourhood councils from Oruro and Santa Cruz, FEJUVE-El Alto, and the La Coordinadora (the principal social movement organization in the Cochabamba Water War of 2000) held a rather successful meeting calling for a social-political front outside of the MAS to foster the self-organization of the masses on the Cochabamba model regardless of what party is in government. This movement may prove to have some capacity to mobilize against the MAS government if it does not meet popular expectations.

Oscar Olivera of La Coordinadora recently told Green Left Weekly, “we are also conscious of the fact that it does not depend on the capacity of manoeuvring, nor does it depend on the political capacity of the government, whoever it might be, to take us to our objective.

It depends fundamentally on continuing to develop and better the capacity of unity, of organisation, of proposals and of mobilisations of the social movements in front of the next government. I believe that is fundamental, and I reiterate that the elections are simply a space for the accumulation of forces.”

The second meeting was organized by the Bolivian Workers Central (COB), the Regional Workers Central of El Alto (COR-El Alto), and the central miners’ union (FSTMB). While this meeting produced much fiery rhetoric, attendance was low.

The organizations that took part in these meetings seem to be remaining independent from the MAS government. Most recently, Olivera was apparently offered a place in government by Garc a Linera. He has shown no interest. It is also unlikely that the mostly Aymara peasantry of the altiplano - a key force in October 2003 and May-June 2005 - will succumb to cooptation through petty handouts from the MAS. They are likely to play a key role in mobilizations that take on the MAS if the party does not fulfill basic expectations.

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At the same time, the warnings of LuÃ-s G3mez and Jean Friedsky, writing just prior to the elections, need to be taken seriously: "The possibility of an Evo presidency makes many nervous, including us. Our fear is not that Evo's broad bases will revolt should he not satisfy expectations, but that they won't.

In recent years, Evo's primary constituency (the cocaleros) and the more radical sectors (the Aymara of El Alto and the surrounding highland provinces) have risen up simultaneously when their interests overlap. But what happens if one group's allegiance to an elected official overrides their desire to protest?"

We can only hope that mobilization from below continues, beginning the next liberation struggle.