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Mike Leffert

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Little Prospect Of An Indigenous President In Guatemala

by Mike Leffert

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The election of Evo Morales in Bolivia has led to speculation that an indigenous leader could be elected president in Guatemala as well. Morales has spoken of the possibility of a resurgence of indigenous leadership in the Americas and an end to "500 years of resistance." But, in Guatemala, the betting is that no such thing can happen in the near term.

By some counts, the country is more than 40% indigenous. By other counts, where mixed-race, ladino groups are included, the native population reaches almost 60%. But from there, the two countries diverge. In Guatemala, indigenous people vote in percentages similar to ladinos, but they are not represented in the Congress in proportion to their numbers. Put another way, they vote, but have little access to power, both nationally and locally. Of 158 deputies in the Congress, only 12 are indigenous. Of 332 mayoralties throughout the country, 111 have an indigenous mayor.

Even in departments where the indigenous have an overwhelming majority, proportional representation lags. Quiche, Totonicapan, Alta Verapaz, Chimaltenango, and Solola together have 28 seats in the Congress, but only eight legislators are of native ethnicity. At the extreme, Totonicapan, has a population that is 98.3% indigenous, but only two of its four legislators are ethnic. These figures are from a 2005 study by the Instituto de Gerencia Politica of the Universidad Rafael Landivar, Elecciones, Participacion Politica y Pueblo Maya.

This skewed representation has held fairly constant since wartime. Long before the internal war ended in 1996, indigenous representation in the Congress was nearly the same as it is now. In 1985, eight of the 100 deputies were indigenous. In 1990 representation fell to 5.2% (six of 116), rose to 7.5% in 1995, and to 11.5% (13 of 113) in 2000. These numbers suggest scant probability of an indigenous presidency, even though, said the Landivar study, 66.3% of respondents to a nationwide survey answered yes to the question, "Do you believe that in Guatemala the people [would] vote for an indigenous president in the next elections?"

Why they will not lead nationally

In interviews on the subject in the nation's largest newspaper, Prensa Libre, indigenous leaders and intellectuals cite a number of reasons why they doubt an indigenous presidency will happen in the near future. Anthropologist Irma Velasquez Limatuj questions the relevance of the Morales victory in Bolivia to Guatemala. She said the impressive victory of the Aymara/Quechua politician is important for Latin America, but that does not mean the phenomenon is reproducible in all countries where indigenous people are represented and where they have engaged in historic struggles. "The people don't see themselves represented in the parties, so there's little participation. The racial hierarchy upon which the country has been constructed implies that economic and political power is in the hands of a minority. As long as this doesn't change, there will be no broad participation of the indigenous."

Political scientist Alvaro Pop highlighted great differences between Bolivia and Guatemala. "In Bolivia," he said, "there are debates about the great mineral resources they have in that country." Pop noted that Morales won not only because of the ethnic vote but also because of a solid political structure of campesinos and strong support from other social sectors.

Otilia Lux de Coti, indigenous minister of culture and sports from 2000 to 2004, member of the UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues, and Permanent Representative of Guatemala to the UN Executive Council, had a host of reasons why indigenous people have little chance at national power. "The indigenous have few possibilities of development, either economically or politically. The political system of Guatemala is neoliberal, and there is no real democracy in that sense." Rural indigenous are courted every four years for their votes, but are forgotten otherwise, she said. Political parties have individual parochial interests, and there are no Evo Moraleses in Guatemala. "An indigenous person must demonstrate to the country first, and to the whole world, that human rights, especially those of the indigenous peoples, must be respected." Furthermore, she said, the indigenous movement in Guatemala is not looking to national leadership at this time. "The indigenous movement has to do with the recovery of values, of Maya identity, and political and cultural rights. Our agenda does not identify with the political parties."

The views of Lux and of Velasquez Limatuj appear to be born out by a poll taken by Prensa Libre and the firm Vox Latina. Fully 90% of rural and indigenous people do not believe in anything politicians have to say. Rigoberto Queme, ex-mayor of Quetzaltenango, said there is no leader who can unify these populations. "There has to be a renewal of leadership," he said. "At this moment there is fragmentation and the objectives of the organizations are not political." Queme said the existing system of harvesting votes in return for gifts every few years has made for a weak society. "Everything in politics is give-away, pay, or give something in exchange for a vote. The parties take advantage of poverty and so it is hard for the people to acquire a civic conscience."

Queme said that the indigenous organizations have been wrapped up in social struggles and have not made the transition to the political. "None of the organizations has made this leap. They have remained [focused] on social demands about poverty and marginalization but have not aspired to electoral posts," he said. Of those who have participated in government, Queme said, "They are personal efforts that have been co-opted by the political parties (see NotiCen, 2004-02-19)." Indigenous people do participate politically at the local level, and, for Alvaro Pop, "There is strength in local power. I believe there is a lot of indigenous participation at the local level. This has increased, even though it is not reflected in the statistics, but when one asks a mayor his background, he tells us he is indigenous. An example of that is the mayor of Aguaton, whose name is Pablo Escobar. His last name doesn't sound like it, but he is indigenous."

In high places, but without power

The Oscar Berger government, meanwhile, has made efforts to include indigenous people in high profile, but not necessarily powerful, places within the administration. Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu was named good-will ambassador. Manuel Salazar Tesahuic was made minister of culture and sports. Victor Montejo became director of the Secretaria de la Paz. The lack of clout did not go unnoticed.

Norma Sactic Suque, director of the Mayan women's political association Moloj, said last year of the nominations, "Sadly, we have declined as far as participation in this government is concerned. Take, for example, the head of the Secretaria General de la Mujer, for which there was no Maya candidate." Sactic sees something positive in that indigenous people have found a place in the government, but she also sees risks. "Menchu has entered the government with her own agenda, but there is the danger that the government intends to impose its agenda, and she is linked to the government. We have the fear of losing our Mayan brothers and sisters in the governmental system. Nevertheless, if they can't transform the state, they will resign." She made the statement in March 2004. The state has not been transformed, and Menchu has not resigned.

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