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## **Evo Morales Visits Guatemala, Could Change Indigenous Political Future**

*by Mike Leffert*

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Bolivia's President Evo Morales briefly visited Guatemala Sept. 12, but not to hobnob with his homologue Oscar Berger; they met only in passing. Morales was in the country at the invitation of his wider constituency, the nation's and the hemisphere's indigenous who celebrated the seventh assembly of the Fondo Indigena Latinamericano (FIL).

He spent most of his 12 hours on the ground talking with indigenous and leftist leaders about what he called the "struggle for rights in which they are engaged." It was a combined spiritual and political visit. Morales told his hosts, "I bring the greeting of the indigenous peoples of Bolivia, who after several centuries of oppression now have the possibility of reasserting ourselves to put an end to the oppression and marginalization of our peoples."

Rodolfo Pocop of the Coordinacion y Convergencia Nacional Maya, Guatemala's principal indigenous organization, responded, "On this historic day, guided by Ajaw Oxlayuj Q'anil, spirit of the seed, spirit of the morning star, spirit of Venus, the Coordinacion y Convergencia Nacional Maya Waqib Kej, which brings together a union of Maya organizations, expresses its profound gratification and joy for the visit of the president of Bolivia, companero Evo Morales Ayma."

Morales was asked to kneel, and three Maya priests enveloped his head in candle smoke to "invoke energies" for the president and presented him with the Sut, a ritual garment. No such ceremony has taken place before at the Hotel Westin Camino Real.

### ***Focus and strength for indigenous movement***

Along with expressions of solidarity, Morales brought to Guatemala a much-needed political focus to the indigenous movement. Although a national majority, the indigenous people have been organized in ways that have prevented them from gaining significant political power in the country. They have been divided by language barriers there are 22 major languages and many more dialects and by conflicting interests.

Morales currently is the hemisphere's only indigenous national president and the only one ever with an indigenist perspective. His election in Bolivia is a major victory for the native peoples of the region and a boost to Guatemala, where political power has eluded this majority of the population. His visit represents a coming-full-circle in the quest for indigenous rights.

Morales recalled that he had visited Quetzaltenango in 1991, where he lived for a time with indigenous leaders who "taught me much about how to be human," and whom he now regards as his teachers because they inculcated in him the importance of making changes for his people.

Quetzaltenango in the western highlands is Guatemala's second-largest city and has a large indigenous population.

Guatemala was further strengthened among the hemisphere's indigenous organizations by the election of Leandro Yax as president of the 22-country organization. Yax is of Maya-K'iche ethnicity. He is the first Central American to be elected president in the FIL's 14 years of existence. This gives the Guatemalan organizations something they have lacked in the past.

In February, ex-mayor of Quetzaltenango Rigoberto Queme observed that the country's organizations had been wrapped up in social struggles and had 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 (see NotiCen, 2006-02-16). With Yax now at the head of the FIL, the opportunity for cross-fertilization with countries in which the leap has been made has increased."

Morales also helped push indigenous connections to political movements in Guatemala. He met with indigenous leaders and representatives of the recently formed Frente Social y Politico de Izquierdas (FSPI), and he encouraged an urgent alliance among the social movements, the various indigenous movements, and the political sectors of the left. This kind of alliance has met with resistance for years in Guatemala, not least because of experiences during the internal war.

Said Yax, "The visit of Morales was positive, he transmitted to us his knowledge and experiences, and he motivated us to improve our assertion of rights...." Among Guatemala's indigenous organizations, however, the question of political engagement at the electoral level can be said to be reopened but not settled. There is still reluctance to get involved in a process that has brought these populations nothing but grief in the past. "What is needed," said Yax, "is a reversal of the nation, from the Constitution, the juridical framework, to a change in mentality. We are entering into this climate."

Added to the reluctance is the lack of suitable candidates, even if there were to be a wholehearted attempt at electing an indigenous president. The one person who received mention at the FIL meeting who would even be recognizable to the wider electorate is Rigoberta Menchu, and she has declined to get involved for the 2007 elections and has given little more than a "maybe" for 2011.

As a result of governmental dismissiveness, indigenous organizations have approached authorities and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) on the basis of their ethnicity. They had distanced themselves from their natural ally, the campesino movement.

But now, said Santiago Bastos of the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO), the campesinos "have lately adopted more their Maya identity to have more legitimacy within the framework of indigenous rights, like the Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO)".

Queme said at the FIL meetings that he believes that, as these movements come closer together, they may be headed toward a situation more like what has happened in Bolivia, but they are not

there yet. "The coca leaf is the point of compulsion of the indigenous communities of Bolivia to defend their economic interests. All of a sudden in Guatemala it could be the mining (see NotiCen, 2006-08-17), but that has to happen in indigenous territory, there has to be a political struggle...," he said. "The problem is in the ideological fundamentalism, due to the fact that the political interests of the people are not necessarily the same as those of the left."

Maya fears of the left notwithstanding, there seems to be no alternative to some kind of coalition. Queme sees the government as having put on a "show" of indigenous participation, while in reality it has given them no voice. "I believe it is not viable to go with a Maya party, this must be a plural party, where Mayas and Ladinos participate," he said. "The problem is that the present Maya representatives in the government [Menchu is one] paint Guatemala as multicultural, but they don't change their policies. These are intermediary leaders who don't put the status quo at risk. This discussion has been going on for years."

President Berger took exception to the characterization. "We have complied like no one before in the history of the country. This government has taken very important steps to recognize these rights....I don't understand how, being the majority, they haven't won elections," he said.

To the answers to that question provided by Yax and Queme, Morales added another possibility. "I believe the genocide of hunger and poverty still exists in many places." Morales also hinted at why it might be in the interest of the ruling minority to keep a lid on indigenous progress. "I'm convinced," he said, "that the indigenous peoples are the absolute owners of this noble land and of the natural resources. Regrettably, in different regions of America, many natural resources have been auctioned off, privatized."

### *Indigenous and Western culture: fundamental differences*

With these words, Morales puts his finger on what may be the ultimate cause of division and failure to find common ground that goes beyond the distrust built during the war. Daniel Matul of the Liga Maya points to fundamental differences between Western cultural views of power and the Mayan cosmic vision. Western culture influences the totality of society, he says, whereas "the posture of the Maya movement is an alternative to the market model that exists at present."

He said that a reform of the state is needed that recognizes the power of the indigenous communities but that the political party system is structured to exclude them. "What the Maya movement proposes is a new model of civilization, a vision of power where the energy is placed at the service of life, and at the service of society." For Matul, it is not a question of putting up a candidate or creating a party but rather, "What we have to do is propose a new political pact." For Yax, it is a matter of governing by virtue of a better set of values than those currently held by market-oriented politicians interested in investment, property, and wealth. "If values of honesty, honor, service, respect for life and nature, solidarity, inclusion, consensus, consultation, shame before others, existed, every social organization could be successful."

An attempt at convergence with the FSPI might be the crucible in which the compatibility of the two visions is tested. The leftist organization came into being on Sept. 10 with a meeting of about 200

people, including indigenous leaders and representatives of women's groups, environmentalists, professionals, academics, unions, and others. They agreed on a political-social alliance with medium and short-term objectives in electoral politics and beyond. They decided on broad inclusiveness to counter the left's political weakness in the conservative environment of Guatemalan politics.

Dominga Vasquez, former indigenous mayor of Solola, saw indigenous participation as a long-term process. She spoke both as an indigenous person and as a woman. "Immediately, it would not be possible to attend to the diversity of needs," she said. She questioned the level of actual acceptance and reconciliation between the indigenous and the campesinos with the left. The campesinos have the same question.

Daniel Pascual, director of the Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC), noted that not all of the campesino sector identifies with the left because of what amounts to a lack of political education. "The left is not just in the parties but in everything that is identified with the structural situation and the search for structural solutions." He said the campesino sector has not yet taken the decision to join the FSPI either.

Here too there is longstanding distrust to be overcome. "In the II Encuentro Continental 500 años de Resistencia Indígena, Negra, y Popular, held in 1991 in Quetzaltenango, the confrontation, ideological rupture, and methodological differences between the popular leadership and the indigenous of Latin America was evident. The [leftists] argued that the struggle against class oppression would automatically overcome the other exclusions. The indigenous groups appealed to their right to speak for themselves and demanded the left recognize its racism," recalled Irmalicia Velasquez Nimatuj, an indigenous anthropologist. Velasquez Nimatuj was encouraged by Morales' intervention, however, and acknowledged the left had matured, "because they accepted that there was a meeting among and between indigenous."

This act shows that, after 15 years, a new leadership has emerged and that the people have moved forward, but have also learned." As the groups edge closer within this nascent movement, there are major impediments among the leftist political parties. The Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG), for instance, and the Alianza Nueva Nación (ANN) refuse to ally over the issue of former military figures in the ANN ranks who might have been involved in repressive actions during the war. Meanwhile, other parties and movements fear their major issues would be diluted in a coalition.

Some NGOs considering joining the new organization fear the loss of international funding if they lose their independent identities. The birth pangs of the FSPI are intense at this early stage. Tanya Palencia, a founder, acknowledged the uncertainties and lack of confidence but saw no other choice for the groups. "Without taking power, the social movement is going nowhere," she warned.

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