

1-6-2006

## Morales Becomes First Indigenous President

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

---

### Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Morales Becomes First Indigenous President." (2006). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/13445>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu).

## Morales Becomes First Indigenous President

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Peru

Published: 2006-01-06

Bolivian presidential elections on Dec. 18, 2005, ended with an overwhelming victory for former coca grower Evo Morales of the Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS). In a field of eight candidates, Morales took nearly 54% of the vote, meaning he will be sworn in as president on Jan. 22, 2006, the first indigenous president in the majority indigenous country. The large majority for Morales proved pre-election polls to be widely inaccurate. They had anticipated he would gain a plurality of between 30% and 40%.

### *Biggest mandate for a Bolivian president in decades*

In the Dec. 23 figures released by the Corte Nacional Electoral (CNE), Morales received 53.73% of the vote, demolishing his nearest competitor, former President Jorge Quiroga Ramirez (2001-2002) of Poder Democratico Social (Podemos), who finished with 28.59%. Businessman Samuel Doria Medina of Unidad Nacional (UN) took 7.80% of the vote, and Michiaki Nagatani of the Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario (MNR), the party of former President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (2002-2003), received 6.46%. When those figures were released, the CNE had finished tallying 84.35% of the votes from 99.81% of the country's 21,072 electoral stations, or mesas.

The CNE said the figures were practically definitive at that point. Of 3,670,971 registered voters, the CNE had counted 3,096,801 votes, meaning voter participation was 84.52%. There were 3.98% blank ballots and 3.36% were annulled. The body said irregularities occurred at eight stations and one did not function, so the election would be repeated on Jan. 1 in the affected areas. Under Bolivian electoral law, if a candidate finishes without a more than 50% majority, the decision goes to the Congress, where the two houses pick between the leading candidates. Morales' majority win made the congressional decision, which is frequently contentious and has led to unrest among many sectors, unnecessary.

Since the 1985 return to democracy, the Congress twice decided against the first-place candidate. When it became evident that Morales was winning by a large margin, Quiroga and other candidates conceded, even before it was clear whether MAS had won an outright majority. In the Congress, the MAS gained a majority in the Chamber of Deputies and a near majority in the Senate. Morales' vice president will be Alvaro Garcia Linera, a mathematician, sociologist, and ex-guerrilla fighter with the Tupac Katari movement.

The overwhelming victory for Morales proved wrong the many polls that projected Morales would gain less than 40% of the vote. Many polls released throughout the campaign showed that Morales held a slight lead over Quiroga, with respondents favoring the MAS candidate by percentages in the low to mid-thirties. Nothing in the international or domestic press predicted the 25-point gap that would ultimately separate Morales from Quiroga.

A Dec. 15 Ipsos-Captura poll, three days before the vote, showed 34% of voters favoring Morales and 29% favoring Quiroga. The poll surveyed 4,800 people Dec. 7-11, and its margin of error was allegedly 2.4%. Morales led an Equipos-Mori poll with 36%, followed by Quiroga with 28%. Doria Medina took 9%, and 6% were undecided. The poll surveyed 2,700 people on unspecified dates, and its margin of error was supposedly 2%. One poll even showed that Morales was the most disfavored candidate, with a supposed majority of Bolivians opposing the presidency of the Quechua-Aymara-descended politician.

## *"A nightmare for the US"*

Shortly before ending his campaign, Morales said that he would be "a nightmare for the US." The possibility of a Morales presidency has long haunted the US State Department, with the US Embassy issuing statements against his candidacy in 2002. In that campaign, the attacks on Morales had the opposite of the intended effect, and the MAS candidate shot up in the polls. The US followed the contrary tactic during this campaign, refusing to comment on the race for president in the hope that a pro-US, pro-free-trade, and pro-drug-war candidate like Quiroga would benefit from its silence.

Two major points that attracted voters to Morales' camp were the promise that he would not cooperate with US coca-eradication efforts and his intention to nationalize the country's large natural-gas reserves. As a senator, Morales supported a more stringent tax regime on private gas companies operating in Bolivia, rather than outright nationalization (see NotiSur, 2005-05-27).

Major grassroots mobilizations took place on behalf of the nationalization movement, but the June 2005 downfall of President Carlos Mesa (2003-2005) effectively put major changes in national hydrocarbons policy on hold (see NotiSur, 2005-06-17). Morales and Washington will have strained ties at best, but the Bolivian leader is spending his transitional period seeking support from Latin American and European governments. Some of his first visits were to see Cuban President Fidel Castro and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, followed by a visit to Spain where he met with President Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero.

Relations between Spain and Bolivia took a minor stumble when right-wing radio pranksters in Spain called Morales shortly after his victory, with one of the DJs impersonating President Zapatero. During the call, they promised to double foreign aid to Bolivia, South America's most poverty-stricken country. Spanish governmental authorities demanded an apology from the Catholic Church-owned station and station owners later gave one. Morales will likely face strong pressure from radical union leaders who will demand significant constitutional and economic reforms from his government. They may not, however, be able to mobilize the kind of pressure that previous presidents had to face from the union and indigenous sectors, since Morales' extremely organized and, reputedly, highly disciplined MAS will presumably not be supporting protests and blockades against him.

One prominent leader who already stands in firm opposition to Morales is Aymaran nationalist Felipe Quispe of the Movimiento Indigena Pachakuti (MIP). He ran against Morales, portraying

himself as the true candidate of nationalization of natural resources, and came in fifth, with about 2.1% of the vote.

Christian Parenti, correspondent for The Nation magazine, reports that ethnic factionalism plays a significant role in national Bolivian politics. Parenti says the perception that MAS is a Quechua-dominated organization may foment division between left-wing nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the ruling party. A more powerful opponent to Morales, however, may be the autonomy-seeking organizations of the wealthier eastern departments where much of the country's gas resources are located. Carlos Mesa faced extreme pressure from departments like Santa Cruz, Beni, and Tarija (see NotiSur, 2004-11-12), and political leaders there are likely planning how best to hinder the advancement of MAS initiatives.

### *Bolivians vote for regional prefects for first time*

In a historic first, Bolivians also voted on the nine prefects, or regional governors, in each of their respective departments. President Mesa, under pressure from eastern departments seeking greater autonomy from the central government in La Paz, allowed departments to take control of naming of their prefects. Previously, the president had appointed departmental prefects. MAS and Podemos each won three prefects.

Podemos candidates won in La Paz, Beni, and Pando, while MAS candidates took Chuquisaca, Oruro, and Potosi. Samuel Doria Medina's UN took Cochabamba, while Tarija went to former congressional leader Mario Cossio of the Encuentro Regional: Camino al Cambio (ER-CC) party.

Cossio, former head of the Chamber of Deputies, stepped aside to allow Eduardo Rodriguez to take the transitional presidency last summer (see NotiSur, 2005-06-17). Santa Cruz will be governed by Ruben Dario Costas Aguilera of the Autonomia Para Bolivia (APB) party.

-- End --