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Morales Inaugurated as President of Bolivia

by LADB Staff

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Bolivia handed presidential power to Evo Morales on Jan. 22. The nation's first president of indigenous descent announced "a new millennium" for indigenous peoples of the world. He installed a Cabinet of radical leaders and indigenous figures while his party took the presidency of both houses of Congress. Eduardo Rodriguez stepped down from his 6-month term as transitional president to return to his former position as head of the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ).

Morales, a 46-year-old former llama shepherd, coca cultivator, and union leader who never finished high school, won the election in December with just under 54% of the vote, a majority larger than any candidate has received in decades (see NotiSur, 2006-01-06). His Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) also gained near-control of Congress, with a majority in the lower house and a near-majority in the Senate.

Before his inauguration, the president-elect made a worldwide whirlwind tour, trying to get support from Spain, China, Argentina, Brazil, Iran and several other countries. His tour started with a visit to his closest regional allies, Cuba and Venezuela (see NotiCen, 2006-01-12).

Literary journalist Eduardo Galeano commented that the election of Morales was the "entry into the rainbow." "I return to Bolivia without having gone, because it is a country I carry inside," said the Uruguayan writer on his way to the inauguration ceremony. Morales' ascent to power, he said, "is a door that opens toward the best we can hope for in our lands mutilated by a racist tradition. It is a door that opens to the plentitude of the rainbow." The world press, however, did not appear prepared to accept Morales' colors.

As the leader traveled the world appearing with neither a necktie nor a dark suit to match his global counterparts, press commentators sniped at his sweaters and leather jacket. His trademark alpaca wool pullover, called a chompa in Bolivia, drew the most comments, its maroon, blue, and white stripes inspiring Spanish newspapers to query whether someone could not find him a dark suit.

"I am not accustomed to protocol," Morales told a Chinese official, according to Bolivia's daily La Razon. "Most Bolivians don't wear a tie, and I'm part of this majority," said Morales, who wore the same striped chompa to meet presidents and royalty on his preinaugural world tour. "It would bother me, it's so tight around your neck I would feel like I was being hung."

"If what he represents is opposition to 600 years of exploitation, why should he wear a suit and tie?" asked Eduardo Gamarra, a Bolivia expert at Florida International University.

While commentators like the rightist news outlet ABC of Madrid attacked his dress, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature Brazilian writer Jose Saramago said the criticisms demonstrated the "stupid arrogance of the civilized peoples."

Inauguration features indigenous, casual dress

In the ancient temple of a lost civilization far from the capital, Morales asked Andean gods for help and guidance Jan. 21 on the eve of his inauguration as Bolivia's first Indian president. Tens of thousands converged on the archaeological remains of the Tiawanacu civilization that flourished around 5,000 BC near the shores of Lake Titicaca, 65 km outside La Paz. Morales walked onto the Akapana pyramid, put on a red tunic with gold and black detail, and accepted from the priests a baton that symbolized his Indian leadership. Morales then walked alone and barefoot into the Kalasasaya temple before emerging to greet the crowd.

Residents of the city of Tiawanacu prepared a cake, made from the local grain quinoa, large enough to feed 40,000 people. The decoration featured Morales' face and the sacred Andean peak Illimani. Back in La Paz, where dozens of presidents and dignitaries witnessed the inauguration, the highway leading from the airport swarmed with workers hanging Bolivian flags, filling potholes, covering graffiti, and repainting lanes. Some 10,000 volunteers joined a downtown cleanup.

During the official inauguration, Morales followed a more modern tradition. He was saluted with full military honors outside the Congress and draped with the bejeweled medals worn by all presidents. But the former coca-growers' union leader added his own touch. Along with 8,000 police guarding the streets were crowds of miners volunteering additional protection to Morales in a gesture of solidarity.

One of the most important attendees at the ceremony was President Ricardo Lagos of Chile, a country that has traditionally been an enemy of Bolivia since it took away Bolivia's access to the Pacific Ocean in 1879. Chilean and Bolivian leaders are hoping their incoming governments will be able to negotiate a settlement to the issue (see NotiSur, 2006-01-20). MAS presents program of "nationalization," reform The MAS platform contains proposals familiar to social movements that have made demands of prior presidents, but it is questionable whether the new government will be able to meet them. The government intends to "nationalize" hydrocarbon resources, although Morales assured governments and corporations that he would not confiscate or expropriate transnational companies' property.

The government has guaranteed that it will hold an Asamblea Constituyente to reform the Constitution by July 2. The government will start a process of coordinating the autonomy project for departments, allowing regional governments greater independence from the central government. The MAS brags that it has a plan for productive development, with guarantees for investments and support for business, above all small and microbusinesses.

The political bloc also intends to pass a law for productive lands, imagining the creation of financial organisms to support agricultural production throughout the country. It also plans to investigate corruption with new laws like the Ley de Investigacion de Fortunas. The new government intends to pass a law of state austerity, cutting wasteful and unnecessary government spending.

Morales promptly fulfilled one of his campaign promises by halving his salary as president to the equivalent of about US\$18,000 a year. The salary cut for the president and other top government officials was a first step in that process. The MAS says it has a plan for effective citizen security, seeking to change current policy through emphasis on crime prevention and citizen participation. It also wants to modify previously passed educational-reform laws.

Finally, the party says it has several measures ready to increase "social sovereignty," bringing social organizations closer to the governmental decision-making process. Several business-group leaders within Bolivia have expressed optimism for Morales' presidency, but other companies like Spanish bank Santander Central Hispano say they have definitively abandoned Bolivia to concentrate on more profitable Ibero-American markets like Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela.

Banco Santa Cruz SA bought 96% of Santander's shares late in 2005. Although the favorite candidate of business, former President Jorge Quiroga (2001-2002), failed at the polls, the depth of Morales' win encouraged presidents of the Chamber of Commerce Luis Duran and Chamber of Exporters Jorge Rada. Both felt that the MAS hegemony at the polls and in the Congress signaled the potential for a period of greater governability than Bolivia has seen for several years. The new executive also removed the top commanders of Bolivia's armed forces because of the issue of missiles that had been sent to the US for decommissioning.

At a ceremony turning power over to the new generals, there were boos and shouts, with military figures objecting that the command the president was handing power to lacked experience. The protest ostensibly led Morales to hold a photo opportunity in military barracks. That evening, photographers snapped pictures as Morales ate his dinner with a group of troops, receiving food from the military buffet. At the event, he recalled his time of compulsory military service when, he said, all there was to eat was potato starch gruel.

Morales will attempt to shore up the economy during his administration by seeking deals with foreign governments, particularly Venezuela and Cuba, but also with European and Asian countries. In a visit to China, Morales managed to pick up promises from Chinese President Hu Jintao that large Chinese companies would invest in Bolivia. China ranked sixth in recipients of Bolivian imports in 2004. Morales has softened his rhetoric against the US since his election victory and said he even had a positive meeting with US Ambassador David Greenlee.

"He told us it's time to flip the page to have good relations," Morales told the Associated Press on Jan. 20. "He said we have to keep fighting drug trafficking, and we'll keep supporting that work." In Washington, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack expressed hope that cooperation on fighting narcotics trafficking and other issues will continue. Based on what direction Morales takes, "we'll make an assessment of what kind of relationship the United States and Bolivia will have," he said.

Radical and indigenous figures named to Cabinet

Morales appointed a Marxist energy minister Jan. 23 and a Cabinet of Indians, intellectuals, and union leaders, backing his promise to give a socialist shape to this poor South American country.

Before swearing in the 16-member Cabinet, Morales reminded them of Bolivians' high expectations. "I want to ask you personally," Morales said, "to see that this government has zero corruption, zero bureaucracy....The people are tired of this and it's got to end."

The appointment of Andres Soliz Rada as minister of hydrocarbons could signal a tough fight between the Morales administration and the multinational gas and oil companies operating in Bolivia. A lawyer and former member of Congress who fiercely defended Bolivia's natural resources as a newspaper reporter, Soliz Rada will be in charge of renegotiating energy contracts so that Bolivia's state petroleum company has majority control and gets a significantly higher share of the profits.

The new post of minister of water will be held by Abel Mamani, a radical civic leader in the slum city of El Alto who helped bring down two previous presidents with violent street protests that forced a French Suez Corp. subsidiary to cancel its contract to provide privatized water at steeply higher rates.

For the first time in Bolivia's 180-year history, most of the ministers are native peoples including a little-known Aymaran, David Choquehuanca, named as foreign minister. Morales also chose a mining-union chief to lead the mining ministry and appointed three women Cabinet members. Some of the ministers are little known even inside Bolivia such as Alicia Munoz, the new interior minister, in charge of intelligence, police, and the anti-drug fight.

"There's a clear intention to maintain a certain balance between efficiency and legitimacy," said Jimena Costa, professor of political science. "Ceding certain ministries to social leaders is necessary to maintain governability and not have people out on the street immediately making demands."

In his inaugural speech, Morales blamed free-market economic prescriptions for failing to ease chronic poverty and said foreigners had looted Bolivia's national resources since the Spanish conquest. But he also pledged to respect property rights and quickly got down to business, announcing potential agreements with Japan to sell brown sugar and quinoa and potential debt relief from Japan and France. He also signed accords with Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez to provide 5,000 scholarships for rural Bolivian students, help get identity cards to rural residents, sell Bolivia 200,000 barrels of diesel, and buy 200,000 tons of Bolivian soybeans a year. Morales thanked Chavez and left-leaning Presidents Ricardo Lagos of Chile, Nestor Kirchner of Argentina, and Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil for coming to the ceremony, calling them his "elder brothers."

While he said he is counting on international support, from everyone from the US to Cuba, Morales also vowed that his MAS party would steer clear of outside influences. While saying he plans to rule "with all and for all," Morales stressed he would not seek revenge for the past. "We have a great opportunity to change Bolivia," he said. "There are great expectations in Bolivia and around the world." There are, however, ongoing efforts to have former President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (1993-1997, 2001-2003) extradited from the US to face charges for protestor deaths that occurred during the lead-up to Lozada's resignation.

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