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Bolivian President Evo Morales Wins Resounding Re-Election Bid

by LADB Staff

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The overwhelming re-election victory of President Evo Morales, which ensures his continued leadership of the Bolivian government until January 2015, is a watershed moment in the South American country. Uruguayan Sen. Constanza Moreira, also a political analyst, said, "The most profound process of change since the Cuban Revolution is taking place in Latin America." Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera, an academic who has become Morales' principal associate and ideological ally, is even more explicit. In a Dec. 5 interview with the Argentine daily Clarin, he explained the role the state plays and must continue playing. "In a society where the national business class is very weak, someone has to assume the building of modernity, integration, and well-being. And that someone is the state," said Garcia Linera.

"Neoliberals believed that foreign investment was going to play that role, and they were wrong. Today we have a state with a productive role in oil, energy, finance, mining, and agroindustry, a state that regulates and balances. During the last four years, there was a noisy political revolution in Bolivia and an almost silent but much more rapid and overwhelming economic revolution." Morales, an Aymara Indian, has been confirmed with increasing numbers in four consecutive elections two presidential, a recall referendum, and a consultation to reform the Constitution (see NotiSur, 2006-01-06, 2006-08-04, 2007-12-14, 2008-08-15).

In the Dec. 6 election, he received almost twice the number of votes as all opposition candidates combined, and his supporters won more than two-thirds of the seats in both houses of the legislature, giving him a mandate for any political, economic, or institutional reform. For the first time, he was able to drive a strong wedge and break the hegemony of the ultra-right in four departments that are strongholds of the opposition with secessionist aspirations and to win approval for the autonomy statutes in 12 indigenous communities and in five other departments that have not yet opted for autonomy. And, what is fundamental, he obtained unimaginable political backing allowing him to begin his new term with the freedom to strengthen his socialist program.

Second term will bring new challenges

After overcoming the test of being the first indigenous president in 184 years of Bolivian independence thanks to a program of social inclusion and economic nationalism, Morales now faces a difficult task. In his upcoming term that begins Jan. 22, 2010, he will have to give final form to the new plurinational state with departmental and indigenous autonomies that came out of the Constitution approved in January 2009 (see NotiSur, 2009-02-13).

For that, he first needs Congress to approve a package of regulations. Among them are the framework autonomies law and the statute allowing the configuration of a new Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), which must be ratified in general elections, a new electoral authority, and a Tribunal Constitucional (TC), which will be the ultimate judicial authority. Besides expanding the agrarian

reform that has already given property titles to campesinos for nearly 40 million ha of land, Morales must fulfill the ambitious campaign promises that voters supported on Dec. 6.

That platform includes nationalizing mineral reserves still in private hands, creating agricultural insurance for campesinos (two-thirds of a population of just over 10 million people), industrializing the substantial lithium reserves (Salar de Uyuni, the world's largest salt lake, contains 50% of known lithium reserves), establishing universal health insurance, constructing hydroelectric plants and a national highway system, purchasing and putting into orbit the first telecommunications satellite, connecting all schools to the Internet, and providing each public-school teacher (135,000) with a laptop computer.

Morales' majority ensures governability, but he will spend the coming years harassed by the right, which maintains its economic power almost intact, especially in the eastern secessionist departments, home to the large landowners who hold the best agricultural lands, devoted principally to soy production.

Former Army Capt. Manfred Reyes Villa is already saying that "the Indian will have to deal with our legislators."

"The Indian" is the very pejorative racist term used by the right to refer to Morales. The right and the far-right failed to agree on a unified candidate and ended up with seven presidential slates four headed by indigenous people disenchanted with Morales whom the opposition turned into candidates in the hope of taking votes away from the president.

Of the seven opposition slates, Reyes Villa fared the best his supporters will hold 45 of the 166 legislative seats. Reyes Villa was a collaborator of the dictatorship of Gen. Hugo Banzer (1971-1978) and is under investigation on various corruption and human rights charges. Spanish analyst Carlos Iaquinandí Castro warned of the risks inherent in an opposition without much attachment to democratic values. "It would be misleading," he wrote on Dec. 8 in *Serpal*, "to suppose that this is the point at which Morales has arrived.

On the contrary, it is the point of departure at which the risks are multiplied from the collection of residue from the old [opposition] system that continues controlling economic and media power and is the front for multinationals accustomed to buying governments and legislators." Iaquinandí added that sectors of the right and far-right "always pushed back at the possibility of losing their privileges and their political, economic, and social control. Now they know that this is not a momentary event but a historic shift. They are the most dangerous when they are mortally wounded. They have been capable of resorting to violence when it was not necessary; now they could consider it the only way to avoid their definitive displacement."

Five weeks before the election, on Oct. 30, Gov. Ruben Costas of the eastern department of Santa Cruz, a leader of the secessionists, admitted that a group of businesspeople known as the Grupo La Torre financed during the entire year terrorist cells that had been led by Bolivian-Hungarian Eduardo Rozsa Flores. The mercenary from the 1991 Balkan wars, contracted by Costas, was gunned down in April 2009 in a shootout with police (see *NotiSur*, 2009-05-08).

Relations with US on the front burner

In his second term, Morales will also assume the challenge of normalizing diplomatic relations with the US, interrupted since September 2008, when Morales accused US Ambassador Philip Goldberg of interfering in Bolivia's internal affairs (see NotiSur, 2008-09-19). Among other charges, Goldberg was accused of financing terrorist groups in Santa Cruz.

Morales knows that for many reasons, but basically economic reasons, good relations with the US would ultimately benefit Bolivia. In early November, Morales said that a dialogue was well underway between diplomats from both countries, and he even ventured to say that by the end of the month new ambassadors might be named. After those efforts failed, Morales downplayed their importance. When he announced plans for the lithium reserves, he said, "Bolivia can develop without the presence of the empire, a presence that always harms the development of our countries because it uses us, subordinates us, and tries to put us at the service of capitalism."

Of course, when he said this, the president was already sure of the interest shown by various multinationals ready to invest capital and technology in lithium exploitation. They include Japanese firms Sumitomo and Mitsubishi, Korean LG, French Bollore, and Chinese and Brazilian firms. Neither Garcia Linera nor Morales have held back criticisms of the US and the administration of President Barack Obama.

"They want to return to the 1980s counterinsurgency strategy," said the vice president. "In those years, Honduras was the Pentagon's base for containing Central American revolutions. And there, as in Colombia, geostrategic interests are at play today that in a few months will end with the installation of new US military bases in Honduras."

When asked his opinion of Obama, Garcia Linera was scathing. "We are very disappointed. Obama is not a prisoner of the establishment but rather he has accommodated himself to the schemes of the business and military powers. I believe that he has no intention of changing this hardened and militarized defense of US decline, a decline that is not imminent," he said.

Morales was not to be outdone. When he said that he will seek approval of a law allowing investigation of suspicious fortunes like that of Reyes Villa, blocked by the opposition since last year, he said it would be shown that when the monies were not the fruit of corruption, they were the fruit of drug trafficking. "If Reyes Villa has so many assets in the US in the name of his siblings or his nieces and nephews, well, why is that not being investigated? Where did he get the money to have so many apartments in the US? Isn't that of interest to the US? Why isn't the State Department helping in the investigation?" asked the president, who ended with an accusatory question for the Obama administration. "Could it be that we will finally have to admit that in the US the government protects criminals and the corrupt?"

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