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Bolivia’s President Evo Morales Announces Re-election Plans

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As Bolivian President Evo Morales begins the last year of his second term, his re-election as president of the Plurinational State of Bolivia appears assured (NotiSur, April 16, 2010). If elected next October, he could continue in office until 2020.

On Jan. 22—just after delivering the obligatory annual report of his eighth year in office—the Bolivian leader mixed with crowds and climbed a street platform to launch his next presidential campaign. His annual report to the legislature had focused on his administration’s accomplishments—successes that explain his popular support.

Both sympathetic and unfriendly political scientists and analysts—in Bolivia social tensions have reached an extreme in which there is no room for middle-of-the-road or undefined positions—believe that, based on current economic indicators and inclusive social policies that have brought the majority indigenous population into economic and educational systems, there’s no possibility that the right could oust the current government in an election (NotiSur, Aug. 15, 2008).

Right-wing opposition weak and divided

During the past eight years, Morales’ ruling Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) has garnered broad support in six elections—three with more than 50% of the vote and the other three with more than 60% (NotiSur, April 16, 2010). Morales received 53.73% of the vote in 2005; he and his Vice President Álvaro García Linera were re-elected with a 64.22% mandate in 2009 (NotiSur, Jan. 6, 2006, and Dec 18, 2009).

The Morales-García Linera team has one additional advantage—the opposition’s own inefficiency (NotiSur, Sept. 4, 2009, Oct. 16, 2009, and Dec. 7, 2012). In eight years, right-wing factions have not been able to build their leadership or agree on a common platform. In fact, the opposition has splintered into small groups. Anticipating the upcoming Oct. 5 elections, it began looking for a candidate last year. However, the opposition’s conversations failed as individuals sought their own agendas. Today there are at least three candidates, each claiming to be the opposition’s best option.

Perhaps the right-wing opposition’s greatest accomplishment in 2012-2013 was creating a split with the two main social movements supporting Morales: the indigenous native population (the president belongs to the organizations representing Aymara people) and the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB), the powerful union central that has played a key role in the country’s history (NotiSur, March 2, 2012). Attempts to bribe leaders open to receiving gifts made it occasionally appear the president had lost support from those two bases. That loss of support, however, was transitory—just a few temporary flashes.

Last March, for example, the COB created a political party—the Partido de los Trabajadores (PT)—specifically to pull votes away from MAS. That adventure was short lived and the PT was deactivated in November, eight months later. At the COB’s last congress, union members faithful to
the president ousted the small Trotskyite group that had created the PT, ending a divisive escapade inspired by a cell of the Partido Obrero (PO) of Argentina.

"It’s difficult, if not impossible, to confront and discredit a government that has made so few mistakes and can show a host of accomplishments that perhaps no other South American government has achieved, including Venezuela's Revolución Bolivariana," Eduardo Paz Rada, a journalist sympathetic to MAS, wrote in the November issue of América XXI, a regional magazine.

**Positive economic indicators recognized**

Paz Rada referred to a series of indicators that, weeks later, Morales would enumerate before the Asamblea Legislativa Plurinacional during his annual Informe. On the eve of the celebration of the beginning of Morales’ ninth year, the German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) had also synthesized these achievements. Economic growth grew from 4.5% in 2006 to 6.5% in 2013 with per capita income doubling from US$1,100 to US$2,450 while unemployment dropped from 5.2% to 3.2%. Inflation was under control at 7.5%; exports grew from US$4.1 billion to US$12.5 billion. Company profits jumped from US$3.96 billion in 2012 to US$4.1 billion in 2013. The Ministerio de Hacienda reported the number of companies established in Bolivia climbed from 19,788 in 2005 to 109,624 today. The Banco Central de Bolivia’s international reserves went from US$3 billion to US$14 billion.

In December, the government gave 400,000 public employees a pleasant surprise of a second aguinaldo—"an effective form of income redistribution," said Minister of Economy and Public Finance Luis Arce. The aguinaldos, or end-of-the-year bonuses, totaled US$55 million, a significant amount for a small economy.

Considering the private sector’s positive results, the second aguinaldo payment also went to the rest of the country’s 1.89 million workers. It may be given in the future if the economy grows more than 4.5% per year. Between 2006 and the present, Bolivia has earmarked more than US$8 billion to protect and aid the most vulnerable sectors of society through social programs for senior citizens, school children, and pregnant women.

**Optimistic Morales predicts a 74% mandate**

The president explained all these accomplishments were possible "because we Bolivians are now in charge of the resources that we generate." He referred to his targeted policy of nationalizations that began in May 2006. Oil companies were the first to be nationalized, telecommunications, mining, electricity, airports, and cement production followed (NotiSur, May 12, 2006, Nov. 17, 2006, March 30, 2007, May 18, 2007, May 18, 2012, and April 19, 2013). The Bolivian government now controls 35% of the economy, having taken back ownership allowed by previous privatization policies that in the 1990s had given ownership to multinationals like the United Kingdom’s British Petroleum, Argentina’s Brindas, and Spanish firms such as Repsol, Red Eléctrica, and Iberdrola.

The three declared opposition candidates who will have to compete against that positive reality are Samuel Doria Medina, a cement magnate (NotiSur, Dec. 7, 2012); Rubén Costas, ultraright governor of the eastern department of Santa Cruz (NotiSur, Feb. 1, 2008, and May 8, 2009); and Juan del Granado, mayor of the city of La Paz, the nation’s capital (NotiSur, April 16, 2010).

Based on political polls, Morales is enthusiastic about the scheduled election. "First we won with 54%, then with 64%; now we’re shooting for 74%."
Despite continued growth of the president’s positive image, Paz Rada said "this aspiration [is] irrational."

Nevertheless, it is clear that the Morales-García Linera team is far ahead of the opposition candidates, which together account for barely 25% of the votes. The rightist opposition seems to have more supporters outside the country than within Bolivia.

A case in point is The Wall Street Journal Oct. 28 weekly column by Mary Anastasia O’Grady calling Bolivia a rogue state and a safe haven for terrorists. The headline asks whether Bolivia will be the next Afghanistan and claims Morales is creating "a repressive narco-state."

Communications Minister Amanda Dávila reacted to the piece saying, "In the headquarters of this country's poor opposition are many irrational people."

The most recent contribution from abroad occurred when Peruvian-Spanish novelist Mario Vargas Llosa arrived in wealthy Santa Cruz to help Costas launch his presidential campaign. His visit occurred at the same time that Morales was speaking to the legislature in La Paz. Morales recalled Vargas Llosa's old family ties with Bolivia, the writer having married two Bolivian women. The first, Julia Urquidi, had been the wife of one of his uncles and was the heroine of his celebrated La Tia Juliay el Escribidor, and later with one of Julia’s nieces, Patricia Llosa, his current wife and mother of his three daughters.

Vargas Llosa, who last year supported Henrique Capriles of Venezuela, spoke in defense of neoliberal economic ideas (NotiSur, June 6, 1989). His talk—titled "Liberty, as a base for progress and the future," also delivered months earlier in Argentina, Ecuador, and Uruguay—was sponsored by the Fundación Nueva Democracia, an affiliate of the Movimiento Demócrata Social (MDS), a group now backing Costas.

The MDS belongs to the Unión de Partidos Latinoamericanos, a regional affiliate of the International Democrat Union, founded in 1983 by Margaret Thatcher, Jacques Chirac, Helmut Kohl, and George H.W. Bush. Some 22 other ultraright parties from the region are also on the board of the Unión de Partidos Latinoamericanos with the MDA, including El Salvador’s Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA), Chile’s Renovación Nacional (RN) and Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI)—both parties that supported former President Sebastián Piñera (2008-2012), Brazil's Democratas (DEM), Paraguay's ruling Partido Colorado (PC), and Argentina’s Propuesta Republicana (PRO), the mayor of Buenos Aires’ party.

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