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Evo Morales Easily Re-elected President Of Bolivia

by Andrés Gaudín

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President Evo Morales, who came to power in 2006 after winning nearly 54% of the vote, has been awarded a third term, this time with approximately 61% of the votes cast. His leadership and legitimacy were boosted further still by a very high level of voter participation in the Bolivian elections, which took place Oct. 12. Turnout stood at more than 90%.

Morales and his running mate Vice President Álvaro García Linera finished first in seven of the country’s eight departments. They also received widespread backing from voters living abroad, winning in 69 cities—spread across 33 countries—where members of the Bolivian diaspora participated in large numbers, in some cases for the first time. "We’re bringing democracy to life," the notably proud re-elected president said.

Morales was pleased, as well, to note that 52% of the people elected to the legislature are women and that the single top vote-getter among deputy candidates, Juana Quispe, is also a woman. Like Morales, Quispe is an indigenous person, though of Quechua rather than Aymara ethnicity. She won a remarkable 94% of the votes cast in the central department of Cochabamba.

The Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) has since ratified Morales’ victory. Other results, however, are still considered preliminary for geographic reasons and because the system for recounting votes proved to be faulty. The final numbers are expected to be made public in early November.

Strong and steady

Data issued by various UN agencies, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the US establishment press—sources that can hardly be accused of having a pro-Morales bias—offer insight into why, after running the government for nine years, Morales and his Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) have not suffered the natural erosion of support that normally comes with a long stay in power. Instead, the opposite seems to be true, as evidenced by the overwhelming re-election of the first indigenous president in a country where 62.2% of its 11 million inhabitants are of indigenous descent. Morales beat his closet rival, businessman Samuel Doria Medina (24% of the vote), by more than 36 percentage points.

The day after the election, the German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA) pointed out how even the conservative Wall Street Journal, in its coverage of the contest, credited the government in La Paz for managing the economy well. The DPA article quoted political analyst Carlos Toranzo as saying that the US daily begrudgingly "praised the [Morales administration’s] social assistance programs, which serve as a protective shield for Bolivian seniors, mothers, and children."

Several weeks earlier, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) noted in its annual Human Development Report (HDR) that, among all South American countries, Bolivia and Brazil have had the most success reducing poverty. The report, titled "Reducing Vulnerabilities and Building Resilience" and released on Sept. 8, presents Bolivia as a success story and notes that, between 2000 and 2012, it registered the highest level of poverty reduction (32%) in all of Latin America.
Shortly afterward, on Sept. 16, the Associated Press (AP) news agency shared details of a food insecurity report drafted by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the World Food Programme (WFP). The three UN agencies hailed Bolivia as an "exceptional case" where incomes of the poorest 40% of the population rose three times the national average and malnutrition fell from 38%, at the end of the last century, to 19.5% in the period between 2012-2014.

The IMF took the opportunity recently to sing Bolivia's praises as well. In its latest quarterly global economic report, released Oct. 9—the same day a pre-election campaign ban went into effect and Morales participated in a tribute ceremony for the fallen revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara, killed exactly 47 years earlier on Bolivian soil—the IMF projected that Bolivia would have Latin America's highest rate of economic growth this year (5.2%) and the second-highest rate (5%) next year. Only Peru, with a forecasted GDP growth rate of 5.1%, is expected to fare better in 2015.

Unlike other countries in the region, Bolivia is enjoying not only strong, but steady economic growth. The economy expanded 5.17% in 2011, 5.18% in 2012 and 6.78% last year, according to the IMF, whose numbers coincide for the most part with data released just days earlier by the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

**All eyes on 2025**

Observers agree that Bolivia's solid economic numbers are the result primarily of the development of its nationalized energy sector (oil, gas, and electricity) and to global price hikes for commodities, which, besides spurring GDP growth, have also helped boost the country's reserves, enhance the value of the currency, and create a greater fiscal surplus.

The news has been so positive that Vice President García Linera went so far as to say that, by 2025, the Bolivian economy will be on par with that of Chile, a country that has been held up for years as the South American model to follow. "In 2005," he said, "the neighboring country had 13 times as much wealth [hard currency reserves] as Bolivia. In 2013 the difference was eight times. At this rate, by 2025, there won't be a difference. There will be a one-to-one relationship."

The year García Linera chose for the comparison was hardly a random choice. Aug. 6, 2025, will mark the 200th anniversary of Bolivia’s independence, an event that MAS is already planning to celebrate with no shortage of pomp and circumstance. All the talk about 2025 has led some analysts to question whether Morales is considering a constitutional reform allowing yet another term in office.

In 2006, when Morales first came to office (NotiSur, Feb. 3, 2006), the state managed approximately 15% of the economy. He set about changing that by implementing a nationalization policy focused on hydrocarbons, telecommunications, mining, electricity, aeronautics, and cement production (NotiSur, May 12, 2006). The results have been dramatic. Eight years later, the state now controls 35% of the country’s production activity.

Despite the losses it incurred, the private sector, initially critical of Morales and MAS, has begun changing its tune. In the eastern department of Santa Cruz, which has always been governed by the right, Morales captured 50% of the vote and ended up winning over many in the business community. Not long ago some of those same business leaders financed a xenophobic movement that called for "killing the Indian" (in reference to the president) and wanted Santa Cruz, Bolivia’s wealthiest department, to separate from the rest of the country.
"Far from nullifying Santa Cruz’s development model, the government has bolstered it," García Linera said during a campaign speech. "And we plan to expand the agricultural sector [the department’s strongest] from 2.4 million hectares to 7.5 million so that, by 2025, it will be able to export more than US$6 billion [in products]."

The message appears to have resonated "We don’t care who’s in power provided they make the country work," Daniel Sánchez, president of the Confederación de Empresarios Privados de Bolivia (CEPB), told DPA. "That’s why we’ve distanced ourselves from that part of the business community that is focused on organizing plots and strikes against the Morales government."

Sharing the wealth

Another key element to consider when trying to explain not only the stellar economic numbers but also Morales’ resounding election numbers is the government’s policy of wealth redistribution. Nearly one-third of the population (more than 3 million people) now receives state assistance through programs such as Renta Dignidad, a state pension system for the elderly; the Bono Juana Azurduy, a bonus given to young, impoverished, and single mothers; and the Bono Juancito Pinto, established as an incentive for children in rural communities and poor urban areas to attend school.

Juana Azurduy was a Bolivian-Argentine heroine from the era of the independence wars in the early 19th century. Juancito Pinto was a child who died in combat, at the age of just 13, while fighting against Chile in the War of the Pacific (1979-1883).

Morales has also distinguished himself from the rest of Bolivia’s political leaders by accomplishing—or at least trying to accomplish—the things he promises. His track record in that regard is something the population holds in high esteem. Bolivians believe that "Evo will do what he says he’ll do," as one La Paz voter told the Italian news agency ANSA.

The president’s latest promise is to create a "powerful Bolivia" by going from industrializing raw materials to promoting a knowledge economy "to achieve scientific and technological know-how," making the country an energy center of the continent, and expanding wealth redistribution. "Our goal is to go from having a raw-materials-based economy to an industrialized economy, and our great responsibility is to generate a knowledge economy," he explained. Morales’ message, the Oct. 12 results would seem to suggest, was well received.

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