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Bolivian President Starts Third Term by Touting Past Accomplishments

by Andrés Gaudín

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After his election last October by more than 61% of Bolivian voters, Evo Morales began his third consecutive presidential term—his last allowed under the Constitution—"with two fixed ideas," according to his Jan. 22 speech before Congress (NotiSur Feb. 3, 2006, Dec. 18, 2009, and Oct. 24, 2014). For one, he set a goal to lower the poverty index to less than 8% before his last term ends in 2020; for the other, to hold a referendum to reform the judiciary this year. For both goals, he has accumulated a rich experience that allows him to think about how to move ahead on both these paths.

Last September, the UN Development Programme (UNDP) cited Bolivia as a global example in the fight against poverty, which since Morales took power has dropped by 32.2%, taking it to its current 15% (NotiSur, Jan. 22, 1991, and May 21, 1992).

In 2009, also through a referendum, Bolivia amended its Constitution (NotiSur, Feb. 13, 2009). That established a new judicial system to "democratize justice, making it more egalitarian." Morales says that this reform failed and that therefore "we will complain to the public so that it is the people who define a profound revolution in the judiciary, and if the Constitution must be changed again, we will also propose that."

Morales describes illicit enrichment by lawyers, judges

Days before the Jan. 5 inauguration, Morales spoke at the judiciary headquarters in the central city of Sucre. He harshly questioned judicial officials and said there are serious indications of illicit enrichment by lawyers, judges, and prosecutors. He admitted that the system for choosing justices had failed, when in October 2011 judges for the four main courts created by the 2009 Constitution were elected by popular vote for the first time in history: the Tribunal Supremo de Justicia (9 members), Consejo de la Magistratura (5), Tribunal Constitucional Plurinacional (7), and Tribunal Agroambiental (7).

On the day of his formal swearing in, Morales convened a summit to be held this year "in which ideas aimed at the consultation, conceived as one of the last alternatives to overcome the judicial crisis, will be outlined. We will make a revolution within the Bolivian justice system and to that end all social sectors will be convened, so that this profound transformation is truly revolutionary," he said.

The president explained that the crisis in the court system shows up in many ways: for example, a delay in addressing cases. The percentage of inmates with fixed sentences barely accounts for 16% of the cases submitted to judges for consideration, he said, while prisoners in custody under preventative detention without an open case against them account for 84% of inmates.

Adding to what Morales has said, Nardi Suxo, head of the Ministerio de Transparencia Institucional y Lucha Contra la Corrupción, said that illicit enrichment has been proven against 50 of the 105
justices, prosecutors, and police who have been investigated. Review of the statements filed by several hundred police and magistrates is still pending.

The irregularities were uncovered when sworn affidavits regarding assets, signed at the time of taking office, were compared to holdings in 2013. The number of proven cases of corruption includes 20 prosecutors, 18 judges, and 12 police, and, according to Suxo, the majority of those persons multiplied their assets 15 or even 20 times during their time in office. "We have been threatened, they have sent letter bombs and beaten our family members. It seems they are acting like a true mafia," Suxo said in statements published by the ANSA news agency on Jan. 9.

"We now have that judiciary, which moves at a snail's pace and has so many proven corruption cases, ready to judge traitors who have given away the riches of the Bolivian people, and we are concerned that these are the people passing judgment on the traitors," Morales said. The president was referring to the beginning of a trial in which the accused are former President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (1993-1907, 2002-2003), who hid in the US for years, and businessman and opposition leader Samuel Doria Medina, who headed the Ministerio de Planeamiento y Coordinación during the administration of President Jaime Paz Zamora (1989-1993). Both are indicted for roles in the fraudulent privatizations of state-owned businesses that occurred under neoliberal governments during the last decade of the last century.

Indigenous ceremony for indigenous leader

Formal inauguration ceremonies were like those of any other president in any other country of the world, with special guests, a military gala, and the swearing in of the new ministers. But the inauguration of Evo Morales and Vice President Álvaro García Linera was planned in a country that preserves the values of a thousand-year-old culture. As a previous step to the swearing in, and in an essential act for an indigenous president of a country of indigenous majorities—the UNDP says that 62% of the population is indigenous and 29% mestizo—a day before he took the formal oath, Morales assumed the leadership of the country’s 36 indigenous groups in a ceremony celebrated in the Tiwanaku ruins, 71 km southwest of La Paz.

"Today we reaffirm our identity, our democratic and cultural revolution, and the era of Pachakuti [Pacha meaning balance; kuti, return]. It is the return to equilibrium, a return to equality with complimentary policies and solidarity for this process of changes," the president said.

Following a "cleansing" ceremony—a purification of body and soul—under the direction of two pairs of amautas (sages), Morales was dressed in a tunic made of vicuña wool, at the foot of the Bennett monolith, a 7-meter stone sculpture that is housed in the Tiwanaku museum. The unku, or vicuña tunic, was embossed with gold and silver Andean sun decorations on the bodice, as was the lluku, or four-cornered hat that also was part of the president’s ritual clothing. Each point of the hat represents one of the four suyos, or regions, that make up the Tahuantinsuyo, or Incan Empire: Kollasuyo, Antisuyo, Chjinchasuyo, and Contisuyo. The ritual attire of the Abia Yala (the original name of the peoples who inhabited this region) was completed with white wool pants and traditional wiskhu suuta, or sandals. The costume was made by artisans from the 36 tribes.

Accompanied by a group of amautas, Morales traveled through the Tiwanaku plain to the hill where the main ritual was performed in the temple of the Akapaná pyramid. During the nearly one-hour ceremony, the events were accompanied with the sound of Andean music. It ended with the
presentation of a baton on the steps of the Puerta del Sol of the Kalasasaya temple, a site sacred for indigenous people in western Bolivia.

The ruins of Tiwanaku—designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site—is noted for its huge walls of straight and symmetrical stones build by the Incas who developed their culture on the shores of Lake Titicaca, the highest lake in the world.

In the ceremonial swearing in, another unique thing happened. Thousands of military and police in uniform, accompanied by their families, who mixed among the crowd, cheered the indigenous president, waving square, seven-colored wiphala flags that are a unique and ancient tradition of the Andean peoples.

"We have improved the economic and social situation, but we still need to consolidate this process. ... We have democracy and political stability, something that surprises me," the president said while participants looked at each other. They understood: in the nearly two centuries since independence from Spain, Bolivia held the world record for coups d’état, with more than 150 during these 189 years.

Then, Morales listed the achievements of his administrations during which growth increased from 4.8% in 2006 to 5.5% last year, with per capita income increasing from US$1,182 to US$2,757 and unemployment falling from 8.1% to 3.2%. During his two administrations, inflation varied between 4.8% and 5.1%, exports grew from US$3 billion to $12 billion, and foreign reserves went from US$1.7 billion to US$15.6 billion.

Morales added that during his years in office the minimum salary grew more than 200% and some 68,000 housing units were provided. "I repeat the words of an Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) report that Bolivia is the country that has broadest pension coverage for the population over age 65. It’s true, 95% of our seniors are protected by the Renta Dignidad program, created to take care of people without retirement programs, which includes artists, intellectuals, transportation workers, commercial vendors, domestic workers, and campesinos (NotiSur, Oct. 24, 2014). This, like the Juancito Pinto [for children] and Juana Azurduy [for single mothers] programs, for which we have earmarked US$8.5 billion, we can do with income generated from the nationalization of oil and energy (NotiSur, Nov. 17, 2006, and April 19, 2013)."

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