

# Bolivia: A Democratic Revolution Transforming Society

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Last March Evo Morales, first indigenous president of Bolivia, instituted in his country a loan to be granted to all children under the age of 12 years living in poor rural communities. During the launching event, Morales approached an indigenous boy and asked him, “What are you going to do now with this money?” The little boy answered “I am going to use it to study because I want to become a president of us like you are.”

Such an answer from an indigenous child would have been unthinkable just a couple of years ago, since the aspirations of the vast majority of indigenous Bolivians were limited to day-to-day survival. This answer thus reflects one of the major transformations taking place in Bolivian society. The arrival of Evo Morales Ayma to the presidency of the poorest country in South America is unquestionably a victory of the people.

Since election of Morales in 2005, Bolivia has seen many important changes, some more visible than others. According to the Center for Economic and Policy Research ([www.cepr.net](http://www.cepr.net)), the government’s assertion of control over the oil and gas industry has brought the country major economic gains. Agrarian reform has received a new impulse, as idle and illegally obtained land is returned to landless farmers.

Other less tangible changes can be seen in the strengthening of the indigenous population’s pride, self-esteem, and leadership in a country where for more than 182 years a racist colonial system consigned them to subhuman status, death, and historical oblivion.

These deep changes aim not only to reduce poverty and improve economic performance, but also to transform the nation and break with its colonial and racist past.

Today, the Bolivian state – not the government – is facing a critical crisis of hegemony. According to Bolivian vice-president Alvaro Garcia Linera, the crisis has a double structural dimension. On one hand, the neoliberal model imposed on Bolivia by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Washington in the mid-eighties has failed. On the other hand, he says, the elitist, racist, anti-national and anti-social colonial state has exhausted its resources and stands bankrupt.

## **Colonial state under attack**

With the emergence of a new indigenous popular government, the old colonial system, where skin colour and an indigenous last name were grounds for discrimination and exclusion, is now rapidly collapsing. That in itself is a deep social transformation that some have called a democratic revolution. Moreover, the new government is strongly oriented to the defence of Bolivian national sovereignty, through recovering public control of natural

resources and land, as well as self-determination for the various indigenous nations that coexist in Bolivia.

These changes go against the interests of the traditional ruling class. They also resist an imperialist agenda that aims to keep Latin American countries subservient to the U.S. and transnational corporations.

And thanks in large measure to Evo Morales and his party, MAS (Movement Toward Socialism), the neoliberal anti-social project has not been consummated. It is more likely that a new nation will soon be born, rather than the old resurrected. For in the 2005 presidential elections, the vast majority of Bolivians (the excluded ones) supported Morales and said “no more” to the old colonial and neoliberal regime.

Raul Prada Alcoreza, Bolivian sociologist, points out the factors at work:

- More than 20 years of indigenous popular resistance against neoliberal policies. Since mid-eighties the indigenous movement and in particular the coca growers' movement has provided the core of resistance to neoliberalism.
  
- An historic opportunity for the indigenous population to bring to an end more than 500 years of racism and discrimination.
  
- The old system's decline, which became evident in severe social conflicts such as the Cochabamba Water Wars of 2000 and the so-called Gas War of 2003. Both of these dealt resounding defeats to neoliberalism.
  
- The growing trend across Latin America for national liberation from U.S. and neoliberal domination. Notable examples of this trend are countries like Cuba and Venezuela, and social movements throughout the region, such as the landless movement in Brazil and the Zapatistas in Mexico.

### **The Constituent Assembly: A ship loaded with hopes**

Rosario Ricaldi, one of the MAS Constituent Assembly delegates, explains that the assembly's goal is to draft a new constitution that takes into account historically marginalized sectors such as the indigenous people, respects their territorial and cultural rights, and ends the colonial state. For Ricaldi and other MAS members, the new constitution must end all abuses that discriminate against the original people.

The convening of the Constituent Assembly has given rise to a destabilization campaign and an ethnic confrontation that threaten the process as a whole. After a full year of activity, with various interruptions, the assembly missed its original deadline of August 6, 2007, without any significant achievement.

Since its inception, the Constituent Assembly has been plagued by confrontations with a re-emergent right-wing opposition, organized out of the city of Santa Cruz in the east of Bolivia. In Santa Cruz, the wealthiest province in Bolivia, the indigenous population is a minority,

while a strong corporate elite is aligned to the oil and gas multinationals and large agribusiness.

For the first eight months, the assembly was deadlocked over rules of procedure and debate, The opposition demanded a two-thirds majority for all votes as a way to prevent radical measures from being introduced into the new constitution.

Once this impasse was over, a combination of factors soon acted to again stall this process. Initially, when voting began within the assembly's 21 commissions over what report to present to the assembly as a whole, the MAS party manoeuvred in a few of the key commissions so that, in alliance with some smaller parties, it could essentially present both the majority and minority reports and lock out the right wing.

Then, on July 2, threatening to walk out of the assembly, the Santa Cruz-based right wing launched its proposed statutes for provincial autonomy, warning that the eastern half of the country would reject any constitution that did not incorporate its proposals.

At the same time, and almost out of nowhere, the demand arose to change the country's capital from La Paz to Sucre (where it had been located until 1898). The protests began in Sucre, supported by the opposition, aiming to create a diversion and heighten tensions. Ricaldi notes that right wing benefits from moving the capital to a city closer to its eastern base and away from the combative social movements predominantly based in the country's west. In response, around 1.5 million people mobilized in La Paz on July 20 to defend its status as the capital.

Congress has set December 6 as the new deadline for the Constituent Assembly's decisions; the measure limits and restricts its powers. The Assembly's sessions are now proceeding in conditions of instability, since it is constantly threatened by rightist destabilization.

### **For a pluri-national state**

Perhaps the most contentious issue before the Constituent Assembly is the MAS proposal to define Bolivia as a state that is not merely multicultural but pluri-national. This concept includes autonomy of indigenous communities, proposed as a counterweight to the right wing's regional autonomy.

Regional or provincial autonomy is a proposal presented by the right-wing opposition. The opposition movements are basically composed by elites of associations of private entrepreneurs and Civic Committees located in the eastern half of the country.

The elite's regional-autonomy proposal, as Bolivian sociologist and political analyst Prada Alcoreza has noted, is just a pretext to maintain their privileges and control over the land and resources, while subordinating the indigenous, campesino and working-class population through institutional corruption and racism.

By contrast, the pluri-national state recognizes and acknowledges all the indigenous nations that co-exist in Bolivia, with equal status.

Juvenal Quispe, Bolivian journalist and writer, explains that a pluri-national state would create a legal and constitutional framework for a nation of nations, with a single state and territorial autonomy at various levels. The peoples of Bolivia now have an historic

opportunity to build their future by going beyond the model of the Eurocentric political theories based on a past of colonialism, exploitation and discrimination, he says.

The elites are responding, as in Venezuela, with a mix of racism and fear, calling for “defense of democratic institutions” from attack by the “authoritarian government” of the “savage and ignorant Indians.”

The right-wing de-stabilization campaign in Bolivia is coordinated in large part by the U.S. embassy. The Right’s tactic of fomenting ethnic and regional confrontation bears a worrisome resemblance to recent bloody ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, where the new U.S. ambassador, Philip Goldberg, was previously posted. The same tactic divide-and-rule tactic lies at the heart of U.S. strategy in Iraq.

Imperialism will not surrender its “back yard” without a fight. The U.S. continues its energetic support of right-wing opposition groups and allies in Bolivia and other dissenting Latin American countries, with the threat of direct military intervention never far away. These efforts are backed up by coordinated media campaigns in North America seeking to demonize Latin American liberation movements and prepare public opinion for intervention.

### **Agrarian reform**

The pluri-national state and the autonomy reforms, whether proposed by the indigenous or the elite, hinge on ownership and control of land. According to Silvestre Saisari, leader of the Landless Movement, “Land is a centre of power. Whoever has the land has the power. We proposed the re-distribution of the land so the power of the elite will be affected.”

The opposition, composed of diverse elite and corporate interests, and the so-called “civic committees” in the east, are working to destroy the Constituent Assembly and government to preserve their control over the land.

Nevertheless, outside of the arena of the Constituent Assembly, the government has achieved amazing progress in conducting a real agrarian reform. In November 2006 the MAS government passed a reform bill for the effective distribution of unused land to landless farmers.

In Bolivia the 70% of the land belongs to the 5% of the population, an injustice that has fuelled protest since Bolivia’s revolution of the 1950s.

An agrarian law originally passed in 1996, after many years of massive and historical marches demanding recognition of indigenous land, authorized the state to expropriate lands not being used productively. However, as journalist Pablo Stefanoni notes, in practice the titles given to indigenous communities allowed only one owner, causing internal disputes, breaking with the indigenous communal land practices, and disrupting traditional land-based cultural organization.

The old agrarian law also allowed landowners to keep their unused lands if they paid a 1% property tax on the land’s value – and landowners themselves determined this value.

The government has now legislated the necessary changes to the old law, and its Land and Territory commission has announced that in the next few weeks the principles of this law will be elevated to the constitutional level.

According to Miguel Urioste, president of Tierra Foundation in Bolivia and long-time advocate of agrarian reform, the new regulations grant government agencies power to identify large land estates and re-distribute them without compensation based on the soil's productivity and the needs of the landless campesino and indigenous people.

This historical achievement was possible thanks not only to the political will of the Morales administration, but also to the pressure and mobilizations of the social movements that marched from different regions of the countryside to La Paz demanding Senate approval of the bill.

Unlike with past marches, this time participants were not met in La Paz by military and police bullets and tear gas, but by communal kitchens with food and water for the protesters.

### **The invisible effects of the revolution**

Bolivia's first presidency by an indigenous person is a revolutionary fact that is modifying public opinions on politics and state authority. "It's a feeling of a political takeover by the people" says Beatriz Vaca, a campesina woman who now works at the micro-credit vice-ministry. "Being an indigenous person is ceasing to have a negative connotation. On the contrary, it is becoming a source of pride both in and out of the country," adds Vaca.

The trend is toward a revolutionary process that transforms society and its power relationships. The people have an opportunity to build a new and revolutionary form of power.

Of every 10 people in Bolivia, almost seven are extremely poor; of those seven people, four are indigenous. As President, Morales represents not only indigenous people but the poor that have taken over the government.

In an interview in Bolivia Rising blog ([www.boliviarising.blogspot.com](http://www.boliviarising.blogspot.com)), Mario Guzman Saldaña, Bolivian ambassador in the USA, points out that President Morales and Chancellor David Choquehuanca and other indigenous leaders in the government are teaching those of us who are not indigenous how to live and understand things, in different way.

First, Saldaña says, "There is a clear decision, through the people, their government, and the state, to change the direction of our history - for example, through the recovery of our natural resources." The other key factor, Saldaña says, is to understand that humans must establish a different relationship with nature.

The president and the chancellor, says Saldaña, often speak of "living well," which from the indigenous point of view means an open relationship with nature, considering even trees and rocks as important beings. Rituals and ceremonies have been introduced that previously had been performed only in indigenous communities.

When the vice-president, Alvaro Garcia Linera, was preparing to visit the United States, an Aymara ceremony was held for him in the presidential palace - for the first time in history - blessing his journey and bestowing good wishes upon his mission. Also President Morales, as one of his first acts upon nationalizing an industry, made a special offering to Pachamama (Mother Earth).

Colonialism and neoliberalism tried to relegate the indigenous world to the trash can of

history. Now through its growing influence, a new renaissance is around the corner.

This influence can also be seen in other political developments such the new water ministry and new water law which respects indigenous' ancestral and traditional ways of water management. The judicial system now acknowledges the traditional communal justice system.

### **A ray of hope**

Exciting economical and political developments are taking place in the Andes. Yet they are encountering strong opposition that threatens to overturn what has been achieved until now. However one thing is certain: despite threat, delays, and problems, the courageous Bolivian people won't take a step backward after gaining all they've conquered up to now.

Bolivia's unique democratic revolution is a ray of hope and a breath of fresh air for all the excluded ones in the world. Yet this dream for freedom and dignity is still a fragile process under constant attack – a process that deserves external support and global solidarity.

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