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## Indigenous Empowerment in Evo Morales’s Bolivia

JOHN CRABTREE

In his inaugural address as Bolivia’s first elected indigenous president on January 22, 2006, Evo Morales declared, “The 500 years of Indian resistance have not been in vain. From 500 years of resistance we pass to another 500 years in power.” He also spoke of the revolutionary tradition in Bolivia and its struggle against US imperialism and the neoliberal governments in Latin America whose pro-market economic reforms Washington had supported in recent decades. He invoked the spirit of the Cuban Revolution and one of its leading figures, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, who was killed on Bolivian soil in 1967. The day before his inauguration, Morales presided at a spectacular event at Tiwanaku, the pre-Inca site on the Altiplano near La Paz, in which he celebrated indigenous identity before a crowd that included delegations of native peoples from across Latin America and as far away as Canada and the United States.

The new president, elected with 54 percent of the vote the previous month, thus embodied a dual discourse that called both for national liberation and for the cultural liberation of the indigenous peoples of Latin America. His success in blending these two elements lent his government authenticity and legitimacy that would serve it well in the years ahead. But it would also become a source of tension as Morales tried to reconcile these two different aspirations, a balance that has proved increasingly difficult to maintain.

### RISING UP

The salience of indigenous politics in Latin America is, of course, nothing new. Arguably, it goes back to the Spanish invasion of the six-

teenth century and the various indigenous rebellions that took place in the decades and centuries that followed, probably peaking in the twin late-eighteenth-century uprisings of Túpac Amaru and Tupak Katari in Peru and Bolivia, respectively. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw multiple uprisings of indigenous peoples, in large part triggered by the encroachment of cash-crop agriculture on much older forms of communal indigenous landholding. These included the rebellion led by Emiliano Zapata during the Mexican Revolution; and in Bolivia, the revolt led by Zárate Willka in 1899, which was part of the civil war of that year.

In the 1970s and 1980s, indigenous politics gained new prominence, in part because of the frustrations of class-based politics but also through the appearance of new, indigenous actors on the political scene. In parts of Latin America where indigenous populations represented a sizable proportion of the population—or in others where minority indigenous groups retained an important degree of cultural cohesiveness—indigenous peoples began to mobilize and make demands on the state. They started to openly challenge the prevalent discourses in which they were effectively deemed second- or even third-class citizens within political systems dominated by those of European origin and/or mestizos. In Ecuador, for example, indigenous peoples from both the highlands and the Amazon lowlands began to exert pressure on the government through such institutions as the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). In some instances, such social movements spawned political parties that managed to win significant shares of the vote.

At the same time, localized indigenous resistance to natural resource exploitation led to pro-

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tests by groups such as the Mapuche in southern Chile. Emblematic figures like Guatemala's Rigoberta Menchú, winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, became international ambassadors for addressing the plight of Latin America's indigenous peoples. In Colombia, the 1991 constitution included special political rights for indigenous peoples. In 1992, the fifth centenary of the start of the Spanish conquest became an occasion for the assertion of indigenous rights.

Of all the countries of Latin America, Bolivia has one of the largest indigenous populations. Estimates vary, but the 2001 census showed 61 percent self-identifying as "indigenous." It is, however, a heterogeneous population, including peasant farmers in the Altiplano and Andean valleys, people from lowland indigenous tribes, and indigenous migrants to urban areas and the tropical zone.

There has always been a large overlap between ethnicity and class in Bolivia; both the peasantry and many in the working class are indigenous by origin. But with regard to landholding, there has long been a divide between the individual ownership of land by highland peasants and the territories of indigenous groupings (both in the lowlands and in more remote parts of the highlands) where land was owned and worked collectively, forming the basis of separate cultural identities derived from the pre-Columbian period. Peasant ownership resulted from the land reform enacted by the government of the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (MNR) under President Víctor Paz Estenssoro, which had taken power in a 1952 revolution. As well as agrarian reform, the revolution brought with it the nationalization of the country's mining industry and the introduction of universal suffrage. The distribution of land to peasant families, however, did little to guarantee the territories held by indigenous peoples; indeed, the MNR government sought to suppress distinctions in the rural sphere based on ethnic tradition and culture.

It was during the 1970s that highland indigenous movements began to make their mark on Bolivia's politics. This was in large part a reaction against what was widely seen as the co-optation of the peasant movement in the 1950s and 1960s, first by the post-1952 MNR governments and then by a succession of military regimes through the so-called Peasant-Military Pact. By the late 1970s, the Kataristas, a group of young indigenous intellectuals who feared that their culture was at risk from the spread of what they saw as MNR-inspired

mestizo culture, had formed a party of their own and effectively taken control of the main peasant confederation, the Unified Syndical Confederation of Rural Workers of Bolivia.

They influenced the pro-indigenous policies enacted in Bolivia in the mid-1990s, particularly with respect to land titling, new forms of political and social participation, and encouragement of education in indigenous languages. Meanwhile, lowland organizations began to have an impact through the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia (CIDOB). The 1994 Popular Participation reform, under the aegis of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, involved a radical decentralization of political power and fiscal spending to the municipal level, along with systems of oversight by local grassroots organizations. It is credited by some authors with creating propitious conditions for the rise of Evo Morales and the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS), of which he was one of the founding leaders.

## COCA POWER

Morales, the son of indigenous peasants from Oruro in the highlands, was a migrant to the Chapare district of Cochabamba, which had become a major area of coca production by the 1980s. Like other migrants, he took with him the tradition of rural peasant unionism (*sindicalismo*) born of the 1953 land reform. Social and political organization in the Chapare was structured around the six federations into which the *cocalero* (coca grower) unions are divided. Although they are migrants, the largely Quechua-speaking people of the Chapare are overwhelmingly indigenous in origin.

When the "war on drugs" conducted by the government at the instigation of the United States reached its climax at the end of the 1990s, the union federations emerged as the main source of resistance. The coca leaf became the symbol of that resistance, representing both indigenous culture and the nationalist fight against outside interference. From time immemorial, rural people had used coca in religious rituals and chewed it as a form of sustenance and a means of mitigating fatigue.

The rise of Morales and the MAS embodied these two traditions, using the defense of natural resources as the leitmotif for bringing together disparate social movements from across the country at the beginning of the new millennium. The MAS thus managed to transcend its particular origins—as much syndicalist as indigenous—and grow into

a national movement with extraordinary speed, taking advantage of the atrophy of conventional political parties. In this sense it contrasts strongly with other more specifically *indigenista* movements that appealed to relatively small populations, such as the Pachakuti Indigenous Movement, which never managed to grow beyond its base among the Aymara communities in the vicinity of Lake Titicaca.

There were few parallels elsewhere in Latin America to the ascent of the MAS in Bolivia. Perhaps the nearest is in Ecuador, where a party founded in 1996, Pachakutik, sought to build politically on the foundations set by CONAIE and provide a vehicle for indigenous participation, incorporating (albeit uneasily) the interests of both lowland Amazonian tribes and highland Quechua speakers. Differences of tradition, organizational practice, and aspiration made it difficult to create a common political platform, and splits soon occurred.

In Mexico, the Zapatista movement that emerged in the southern jungles of Chiapas during the 1990s had rather different characteristics, involving a mix of guerrilla warfare and indigenous social activism, but it failed to build alliances in national politics. In Peru, a country with a large indigenous population, class-based politics impeded the development of a pro-indigenous agenda, which was also thwarted by the effects of the war against the Shining Path, a Maoist guerrilla group. Elsewhere, for example in Nicaragua (with the Miskito people), in Chile (with the Mapuche), and in Colombia and Venezuela (where indigenous people make up only very small sectors of the population), indigenous organizations remained local and limited in their political influence.

## PLURINATIONAL STATE

The election of Morales was part of a wider trend in Latin America that saw the election of a range of left-of-center governments in a so-called “pink tide.” Although the role of indigenous peoples in this shift varied from one country to another, the pink tide brought attempts to forge new bonds between the state and society, and in particular to increase public participation in politics. Probably the country with the closest affinity to Bolivia in this respect was once again Ecuador, where the ad-

ministration of Rafael Correa, voted into office in 2007, sought initially to include in the governing alliance leaders drawn from Pachakutik. It was, however, an alliance that proved short-lived.

The early years of the new millennium also saw shifts at the global level: the efforts of nongovernmental organizations and international agencies (particularly those of the United Nations) opened up new space for the promotion of pro-indigenous agendas. Key here was Convention 169, adopted by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1989, and the UN Declaration on Indigenous Rights of 2007. The former was particularly influential in reaffirming the rights of indigenous peoples to give or withhold consent before extractive and other projects could take place on their territories. It was ratified by most Latin American governments. The UN declaration, while not formally binding, was an important landmark in helping indigenous peoples combat discrimination and marginalization. It spelled out their individual and collective rights and the necessity of respecting their institutions, languages, and cultures.

Morales's election in 2005 was widely seen beyond Bolivia as a key moment in the expansion of indigenous peoples' influence. Although he was not the first indigenous

president in Latin America—Benito Juárez, who served five terms as president of Mexico from the 1850s into the 1870s, probably deserves that honor—he was the first to articulate a clearly *indigenista* ideology. The commitment to protecting and extending indigenous rights in Bolivia was written into what had become known as the October Agenda, a set of demands codified by the leaders of social movements at the time of Sánchez de Lozada's ouster as president in October 2003. (He was forced to resign following massive disturbances in El Alto and La Paz that he sought unsuccessfully to quell with military force, causing many casualties.)

That agenda echoed previous demands, especially by the lowland indigenous organizations represented in the CIDOB. In 1990, the confederation had spearheaded a 35-day march “for territory and dignity” from Trinidad, the capital of the Beni, a department in the lowlands of northeastern Bolivia, to the seat of government in La Paz. One of the main demands of the marchers, included years later in the October Agenda, was a complete re-

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vision of the constitution to incorporate a range of rights reflecting the majority status of Bolivia's indigenous peoples.

With Morales as president, these demands bore fruit in a new constitution in 2009. It defined Bolivia as a "plurinational state" made up of indigenous "nations," each with rights to autonomy, respect for its cultural identity and language, and protection of its territories. The constitution created special systems of parliamentary representation for indigenous peoples and pronounced the need for respecting traditional forms of indigenous justice. It proclaimed adherence to indigenous values, in particular the notion of "*vivir bien*," usually taken to mean living in harmony with the community and the natural environment. It afforded Bolivians of African descent the same rights as indigenous peoples. It thus advanced indigenous rights in significant ways.

The candidates elected in July 2006 to the Constituent Assembly, charged with drafting the new constitution, included many of indigenous origin. The president of the Assembly, Silvia Lazarte, was an indigenous woman from the Chapare, and pro-indigenous organizations—notably the CIDOB—played a major role behind the scenes in shaping sections of the constitution that related to indigenous rights. Though some of their ideas were whittled away in the give-and-take process of producing a final draft acceptable to a largely white opposition, the outcome was generally popular with indigenous citizens. The process served as a model for the revision of other countries' constitutions at the time, notably in Ecuador.

In the years after 2010, the Bolivian legislature passed laws to implement the new constitution, including one establishing rights of autonomy within specified territories, allowing for the introduction of local justice systems based on traditional customs. It also passed legislation to regulate enforcement of the constitutional provision granting the right of prior consultation to indigenous communities when they are potentially affected by extractive industries (as specified by ILO Convention 169).

Agrarian legislation, meanwhile, was passed to secure and extend defined indigenous territories. The 1953 land reform had done nothing to protect such territories. A 1996 law was intended to re-

dress the situation by demarcating and titling the territories, mainly in the eastern lowlands where land was still held collectively by specific ethnic groupings. During Morales's first term (2006–10), the government sought to accelerate agrarian reform by allocating large swaths of underused land to peasant farmers and indigenous communities alike. In the case of the latter, attention turned mainly to reaffirming collective indigenous landholding in the highlands, where attempts were made to reconstitute traditional, pre-Columbian forms of land tenure through local governing units known as *ayllus*.

Finally, the Morales government used the United Nations and other forums to assert a pro-indigenous agenda worldwide. It sought to propagate the notion of *vivir bien* as an alternative development parameter, in contrast to the materialist preoccupation with economic growth. This had an impact in some other Latin American countries, again notably in Ecuador where the same principle was written into its constitution as

reformed in 2008. It also had influence in neighboring Peru, but more at the level of indigenous organization than in state policy.

Morales's government took an aggressive stance in climate change negotiations, linking the issue to preservation of indigenous peoples' habitats. This effort probably reached its peak at the climate change conferences in Copenhagen in 2009 and in Cancún the following year. In between those meetings, Bolivia hosted the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in the town of Tiq-uipaya in April 2010.

## ECONOMIC UPLIFT

Events since 2000—not least the victory of Morales and the MAS in 2005—have proved to be greatly empowering for Bolivia's indigenous population, both rural and urban. Throughout its history, Bolivia has been a highly exclusionary society, suffused with ethnic and class discrimination. That has changed. In whatever manner the MAS government eventually comes to an end, the status quo ante will not return.

The election to the presidency of someone born to an indigent indigenous family has broken the glass ceiling that previously prevented people of a certain social and ethnic extraction from reaching

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positions of power. The social movements that coalesced around the MAS brought indigenous people into government. The composition of Morales's cabinets and the parliament since 2006 reflect this change, which has also brought indigenous women closer to the center of power. Such changes, of course, are part of a social transformation that has been gestating for years, if not generations. But it took the political upsets of the MAS's rise to power to provide the necessary catalyst.

Improved status and access to power have been accompanied by significant improvements in living standards. The reduction in poverty has clearly benefited indigenous Bolivians, most of whom were relegated to the poorest sector of society. In 2006, 59.9 percent of the population lived in poverty; in 2015 that number had fallen to 38.5 percent. In 2006, 37.7 percent lived in "extreme" poverty; by 2015 only 16.8 percent did.

This improvement in living standards was the result of both accelerated growth rates and policies of redistribution. The economy grew by an average of 5 percent between 2006 and 2015, the fastest growth since the 1970s, with gross domestic product per capita rising from \$1,227 to \$3,071. At the same time, inequality in Bolivia—which long had one of Latin America's most skewed income distributions—has fallen more sharply than almost anywhere else in the region, clearly to the benefit of the poorest in society.

Government moves to take back control of the hydrocarbon industry and raise tax rates on foreign energy companies, coupled with high prices for oil and gas during part of that period, provided the Bolivian state with ample resources for more proactive social policies. Increased revenue has been channeled into targeted conditional cash transfer programs aimed at vulnerable populations (such as schoolchildren and nursing mothers). The Morales administration has also expanded an existing universal pension entitlement for the elderly (the so-called *renta dignidad*). Sharp increases in public investment, particularly in infrastructure improvements, provided an important boost to employment among lower-income workers.

New economic actors have come to the fore in recent years, many of whom are of indigenous origin. Nowhere is this clearer than in El Alto, the township that borders La Paz and which now rivals the seat of government in population. While poverty is still widespread in El Alto, the informal economy in the city is burgeoning, spurred by contraband activity. Even within La Paz itself,

indigenous people have increasingly moved into previously white areas, breaking down patterns of exclusion. Elsewhere too, new indigenous elites have emerged—among the coca growers of the Chapare and Yungas, among former migrant families from the highlands who have become prosperous farmers in Santa Cruz, among those who run mining cooperatives in the highlands, and among some Altiplano peasants who have managed to take advantage of high world prices for grains like quinoa. Social and ethnic forms of differentiation are no longer so clearly one and the same.

### CULTURE CLASH

The policies of the Morales regime have both a pro-indigenous element and one much more associated with the nationalism and state building inherited with the legacy of the 1952 revolution. While clearly benefiting indigenous peoples, the reforms carried out since 2006 have been at least as much about state building as about the promotion of indigenous culture and values. A telling example was the so-called TIPNIS dispute in 2011 and 2012.

The dispute originated with plans to build a road through the Isiboro Sécore Indigenous Territory and National Park, or TIPNIS, to link up the cities of the Altiplano with the lowland departments of the north and east. It was part of a project of national integration and improving access to Bolivia's neighbors, in this case Brazil. But the road was perceived as a threat to indigenous territories and ways of life. Protesters held two lengthy and much-publicized marches from Trinidad to La Paz.

The TIPNIS dispute did much to stain the government's reputation, both domestically and internationally, as a defender of indigenous rights. It caused the rupture of the Unity Pact, an alliance of social movements that formed the base of the Morales government, by alienating the CIDOB and Conamaq, the federation of highland indigenous peoples. The dispute was also, in part, triggered by the ambition of the Chapare *cocaleros* to move north into this designated indigenous territory on the boundaries of Cochabamba and the Beni. It exposed the differences between the interests of indigenous peasants and those of tribal peoples, a clash—also witnessed in other parts of the country—of cultures and lifestyles. When push came to shove, the government came down in favor of the peasants.

## SHIFTING PRIORITIES

The land redistribution agenda, so much a feature of Morales's first term in office (2006–10), received much less attention during his second term (2010–15), to the detriment of both tribal indigenous peoples and peasant populations. The emphasis of public policy shifted from redistribution toward maximizing food production. This coincided with a rapprochement with the landowning elites of the eastern lowlands, particularly those in Santa Cruz who dominated cash-crop agriculture. In 2008, the government had been shaken by a major political crisis triggered by the new constitution. The most conservative elements of Santa Cruz society threatened secession. The 2009 referendum to ratify the constitution took place at the same time as a parallel plebiscite that would set new limits on landholding. Crucially, these were not made retroactive, in a major concession to the big landowners of Santa Cruz.

The government's economic agenda was driven increasingly by the need to maximize investment in extractive industries, particularly natural gas, which accounted for half the country's export earnings and was a key source of tax revenue. Amid signs that gas reserves were diminishing, the search for new supplies took priority over further protection of indigenous rights. This led to conflict with indigenous groups, particularly with the Guarani people whose lands overlapped the main gas-production fields in Tarija. As the search for new gas fields moved northward into the Amazon lowlands, more territorial disputes erupted.

The Morales government's 10-year development plan (the so-called Patriotic Agenda), published in 2015, provided further evidence of its shift away from a pro-indigenous discourse toward a much more traditional plan of economic and social development. It emphasized the need to maintain growth levels, raise productivity, and sustain public investment and social welfare spending. The urgency of maximizing all exploitable resources increased with the fall in commodity prices and the risk that posed to a state-centered model of development reliant on resource rents. Although the Patriotic Agenda nodded in the direction of *vivir bien* and respect for Mother Earth, the environmental and pro-indigenous rhetoric took a back

seat to boosting domestic production of agricultural commodities, for both local consumption and export. Even the peasant sector, long the political base of the MAS, saw its role sidelined in the new paradigm.

With the opposition parties divided, Morales won a third term in December 2014, albeit with a slightly lower percentage of the vote (61 percent) than in 2009. He dismissed opposition objections about the constitutionality of another term, arguing that this counted only as his first reelection under the 2009 constitution. However, he prepared to run again in 2019 by holding a referendum to approve a constitutional amendment allowing him a fourth term. His narrow defeat in the referendum reflected a fall-off in support for his government and disapproval of its reluctance to loosen its grip on power. This was most notable among urban middle-class voters, though it was also discernible among those involved in social movements that had previously been loyal to the regime. But by the end of 2016 it appeared that the MAS would use alternative methods to change the constitution to enable Morales to run once again.

## LASTING LEGACY?

The cultural and political tradition that Evo Morales and his fellow *cocaleros* came from was grounded in a syndicalist tradition, but it also was inspired by the emergence of *indigenismo* from the 1970s onwards. These two traditions merged in a country in which social class and ethnicity had long been closely intertwined. The Morales administration sought to give indigenous peoples more rights and greater influence in government, effectively breaking down traditional patterns of exclusion. Such policies have brought major benefits to the poorest, mainly indigenous section of society, and have reduced inequality in this highly inequitable country.

However, when pro-indigenous policy initiatives clashed with more conventional development strategies, the latter tended to prevail. And although the Bolivian example provided an inspiration to other Latin American countries, in practice its impact on policy making elsewhere was relatively limited, with the possible exception of Ecuador. ■