

Bolivia: Morales wins landslide re-election

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Bolivian President Evo Morales won re-election by a landslide Monday, receiving at least 62 percent of the vote compared to 23 percent for his nearest rival. The results of the balloting gave Morales a second five-year term, while his Movement Towards Socialism party, or MAS, gained a two-thirds majority in the upper house of the Bolivian congress and a substantial majority in the lower house.

However, the results exposed the continuing division of the country between the impoverished, predominantly indigenous highlands and the lowland regions, the center of the country's business elite and its agricultural and energy wealth.

The scale of Morales's election victory was roughly on a par with other recent votes, including the overwhelming defeat of a "re-call" referendum aimed at ousting him in August of last year and a constitutional referendum last January in which he secured the right to seek a second term.

Morales was first elected president in 2005, when he won just over 53 percent of the vote. He had come to political prominence as the leader of Bolivia's *cocalero* movement, which defended the interests of small coca growers against efforts of the Bolivian and US governments to eradicate the crop. Coca production became an increasingly important economic activity under conditions in which jobs in the country's mining sector were decimated and the economic viability of other crops declined.

Morales's first language is Aymara, and he describes himself as the country's first indigenous head of state.

The margin of victory in Sunday's election is an expression in part of the popularity of the various social assistance programs that the Morales government has managed to implement with increased revenues from the country's energy resources following the "nationalization" of Bolivian hydrocarbons in 2006. Announced with great fanfare, this action involved no

expropriations of foreign energy producers, consisting essentially of an increase in taxation on their profits.

The principal social assistance programs implemented by the Morales government consist of cash subsidies paid to pregnant women, children and the elderly. While these programs are popular and have reduced Bolivia's poverty rate, it remains among the highest in the world, with 60 percent of the population classified as poor and nearly half of that number in extreme poverty.

The aid programs have not altered the basic class relations that shape Bolivian society. They have had little impact on employment, with the majority of the population still subsisting outside of the so-called formal economy.

While promoting political and cultural autonomy for Bolivia's indigenous people, the government has done little to ameliorate the conditions for the masses of peasants through land reform. Land distribution in Bolivia remains among the most unequal in the world, with 91 percent of the arable land in the hands of barely 5 percent of the population.

Following the election, Morales's vice president, Alvaro Garcia Linera, promised the Argentine daily *Clarín* that there would be no land expropriations, insisting that the country's constitution guarantees the right of private property and the "economic, social role that it must play."

Despite the use of the word "socialism" in the name of the ruling party and the rhetoric of Morales and other officials, Garcia Linera has insisted that the government's real program is that of "Andean-Amazonian capitalism," by which he means the use of the state to promote capitalist development.

The Morales government has presided over one of the highest growth rates in Bolivia's history—and currently the highest in the entire hemisphere—thanks largely to the sharp rise in energy and mineral prices. In 2008, the

economy grew at a rate of 6.2 percent. With a decline in both prices and exports, this rate has fallen to a projected 3 percent growth rate for 2009.

The president and his party, the MAS, benefited from the disarray of their right-wing rivals, who proved unable to mount a unified ticket. The right's leading candidate, with 23 percent of the vote, was Manfred Reyes Villa, a former army captain and governor of Cochabamba, who was tried for corruption. Trailing him was cement magnate Samuel Doria Medina, with about 8 percent.

The character of the right-wing opposition was spelled out in Reyes Villa's choice for a running mate. Vice-presidential candidate Leopoldo Fernández conducted his election campaign from behind bars. The former head of the department of Pando, he was arrested on charges of having ordered the massacre of at least 13 peasants and students in the town of El Porvenir in September of last year.

The massacre came in the wake of the "civic coup" launched by the business elites in the so-called Media Luna (Half Moon—named for their geographical shape) departments of Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando and Tarija, which possess the lion's share of the country's natural gas reserves as well as most of the largest and most profitable agricultural estates. In support of the demand for secession from Bolivia, the action included the sacking of government offices and other acts of violence that left scores dead and wounded.

Morales and the MAS conducted their election campaign with the aim of placating some of these wealthier layers and, in particular, winning over better-off sections of the petty bourgeoisie. While making gains in the region, Morales trailed in three of the provinces, managing to secure a slightly greater vote than the rightist opposition only in Tarija, where 49 percent cast ballots for the incumbent, as opposed to 40 percent for Reyes Villa and 8 percent for Doria Medina.

After the announcement of the election results, Vice President Garcia Linera told the media, "I hope that the opposition groups abandon the savage opposition of the last four years, which has been based on the rejection of any government initiative, of dialogue and of offers of consensus."

Their debacle at the polls will not render the Bolivian right and the business elites any more amendable to the government's program. On the contrary, they will seek

other means of opposing the Morales government, which include the threat of turning to the traditional instrument for ousting Bolivian heads of state—military coup.

This opposition continues to enjoy the support of Washington. Following the events of September 2008, Morales ordered the expulsion of the US ambassador because of the embassy's links to the "civic coup." The Bush administration retaliated by expelling Bolivia's ambassador from Washington.

There has been no restoration of normal diplomatic relations under Obama. On the contrary, the new Democratic administration reimposed the principal punitive measure taken under Bush, canceling import duty waivers that are worth \$25 million annually to the Bolivian economy. The pretext for this action was that the Morales government had failed to sufficiently combat coca cultivation—this despite the fact that the increase in coca production in Bolivia is a fraction of the increase in Colombia, which remains Washington's closest ally in the region. It is estimated that trade sanction will cost some 20,000 Bolivian workers their jobs, mostly in textile and leather goods production.



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