

BOLIVIA - Two Cheers for Evo Morales?

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Feb. 1, 2006 - The election of Evo Morales as President of Bolivia has sparked an extensive debate about how far left Latin America is moving. Or rather, an extensive debate about what it means to be on the "left" in Latin America (or anywhere). There have been, it seems to me, four different ways of appreciating the electoral victory of Morales, which reflect four different political sociologies.

There is a large group of Latin American left intellectuals, and their sympathizers elsewhere in the world, who have hailed the election of Morales enthusiastically. They analyze the situation this way. Morales is an Aymara, the first indigenous person to be elected president of Bolivia, whose population is more than 60% indigenous. This is a social and political triumph, even a social revolution, and in any case social justice. Morales has himself emphasized this element, engaging in a traditional Inca ceremony immediately before his formal inauguration as president. Furthermore, the indigenous populations of Bolivia clearly greeted his election with joy.

But Morales also campaigned on economic themes. He campaigned against the U.S.-endorsed program to eradicate coca production. He was against the privatization of water, and called for nationalization of the gas deposits via renegotiation of the contracts with foreign firms for the exploitation of natural gas resources. These have all been hot issues in Bolivia for the last decade. In his new cabinet, he has placed in charge of these issues persons identified with the popular struggle.

Finally, there is the geopolitical commitment. He has attacked U.S. imperialism. His first international visits after his election were to Cuba and Venezuela, whose leaders warmly embraced him. He then flew to Spain, France, China, South Africa, and Brazil, where he was received again with great enthusiasm.

Nonetheless, there is another smaller group of Latin American intellectuals and activists who are distinctly cool about Morales. They see him as someone who did not himself lead any of the popular struggles of the last five years (except that of the coca farmers), but came on board cautiously after others had fought and won. They see him as someone who won't really nationalize Bolivia's resources but merely settle for increased rents. And they see him as another Lula, that is, as someone who will fail to meet popular expectations on social issues.

Then there is the U.S. right who essentially agree with the analysis of the first group. They see Morales as a dangerous lackey of Chavez who will stir up anti-U.S. sentiment throughout Latin America, and hinder foreign investment. The U.S. government in the previous election threatened to cut off all aid to Bolivia if Morales were elected. He wasn't elected then. But this time, when he got a stunning 54% of the vote on the first ballot, the U.S. officially has been quieter, but not at all happy.

And then there are some non-left Latin American intellectuals who essentially agree with the second group, but of course not from the same standpoint. It is striking that both Mario Vargas Llosa of Peru and Jorge Castañeda of Mexico wrote op-ed pieces after the election, agreeing with the second group that Morales could turn out to be more like Lula than like Chavez, and that therefore the U.S. government should tone down its hostility and court him. The Financial Times took the same line.

The election of Morales has to be put into the overall context of elections throughout Latin America in recent years: not only Lula in Brazil and Chavez in Venezuela, but Tabaré in Uruguay, Kirchner in Argentina, even Bachelet in Chile, as well as the probable election this year of Lopez Obrador in Mexico and maybe even Ortega in Nicaragua. These are all elections about whose results the U.S. government

was not happy. In each case, Washington would have preferred a more conservative opponent. To be sure, not one of those elected is a Che Guevara. But the sum of all of them has definitely moved Latin America to the left, if not to the far left.

Is moving to the center-left but not to the far left really a conquest of the left? That depends on whether the tendency picks up momentum. And this depends in part on what happens far beyond Latin America - in the Middle East, in Europe, in the United States itself. Evo Morales got off to a splendid start with a very forthright and militant speech at his inauguration. For those on the left in Latin America and elsewhere, the victory of Morales is a moment for two cheers, waiting to see if he will be able to fulfill the program he has laid out, in which case it will turn out to be three.

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These [commentaries](#), published twice monthly, are intended to be reflections on the contemporary world scene, as seen from the perspective not of the immediate headlines but of the long term.

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