

Why President Evo Morales's racial politics in Bolivia may backfire

The Mugabe of the Andes?

by Eliza Barclay

AT FIRST GLANCE, Plan 3000, a satellite shantytown outside Santa Cruz, Bolivia's largest city, does not scream opportunity. Its unpaved main road, faintly lit by the erratic electricity, is cratered with caramel-colored puddles, and a stench from open sewers hangs in the humid air. But standing next to his tropical-fruit-juice cart, William Martinez, an indigenous Bolivian with a thatch of black hair and broad shoulders, says it offers more promise than his hometown of La Paz. The administrative capital and its most famous resident, President Evo Morales, Martinez says, seem increasingly distant and out of touch. "The president has resentment toward the middle class, the mestizos," Martinez told me. "Instead of governing for a whole country, he is governing only for the indigenous class and has brought racism with him ... We don't want to march [with him], we want to work."

Since his landslide win in 2005, Morales has championed the country's indigenous majority (some 55 percent of the population), particularly his own Aymara group, which suffered discrimination and lacked political clout for centuries. But as he has consolidated power among the patchwork of indigenous groups in the western highlands, Morales has deployed a rhetoric studded with racial references aimed at his opposition, which is led by wealthy, mostly white businessmen and concentrated in the lowland eastern region that includes Santa Cruz. "He had the chance to be the Mandela of Bolivia, but instead he chose to be the Mugabe," said Luis Eduardo Siles, a columnist and former congressman in La Paz sympathetic to the opposition. "He has renewed ethnic divisions as an ingredient of his political success."

As the various factions of the opposition and Morales tussled over his economic policies and constitutional reforms, the country split along clear geographical and class lines and murkier racial ones. In September, tensions crackled into violent protests, including one incident in which 30 people died. But Morales has prevailed, at least on paper: on January 25, Bolivians ratified a new constitution that grants autonomy and seats in its congress to the country's 36 indigenous groups. The final results showed 61 percent of a record turnout voting yes.

Still, Morales's racially charged approach may be losing its appeal. Martinez and other indigenous citizens in Santa Cruz and LaPaz say they are growing weary of the calls and threats from Morales's Movement Toward Socialism, or MAS, party. One community leader near La Paz said MAS representatives threatened her constituents with fines if they did not join a march in October to support constitutional reforms.

As onetime backers have begun to criticize the president's tactics, the list of his political enemies has expanded beyond the Santa Cruz "elite." Felipe Quispe, a militant Aymara political leader who has questioned Morales's own indigenous identity, vociferously opposed the constitutional reforms. Savina Cuéllar, the indigenous prefect of the Chuquisaca region, also recently split with Morales. More generally, argues Miguel Centellas, a blogger and political scientist at Mount St. Mary's University, Morales's support among middle-class leftists is beginning to decline, in part for economic reasons.

Although the lowlands have prospered from farming and natural gas, the highland regions remain stuck in a poverty trap that Morales has shown little flair for unlocking. When he expelled the U.S. ambassador and the Drug Enforcement Administration in late 2008, he killed a trade agreement with the United States that was one of the few lifelines for Bolivia's exports. Depressed oil and gas prices have since meant less revenue for Bolivia, and less support from Morales's chief mentor and benefactor, Venezuela's Hugo Chávez. The only growth industry, in fact, appears to be coca.