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Despite Feats, President of Bolivia Stirs Fierce Debate

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ACHACACHI, Bolivia -- The barefoot teen in the potato field acknowledged that his family of 12 still had nearly no money.

They live the way they have always lived. They still work the earth with wood-handled tools six days a week to grow their own food. They sell a pig or a sheep occasionally at the market but rarely leave their cluster of mud-brick homes next to the lone dirt road along the marshy shores of Lake Titicaca.

But under President Evo Morales, said 18-year-old Freddy Callisaya Mamani, something feels different about being an Indian in Bolivia.

"Now we can be equal with the others," he said. "Now there should be no more discrimination."

In three years, Morales has performed stunning political feats in this Andean nation, where he rose from being a coca union leader to become Bolivia's first indigenous president. He seized control of oil, mining and telecommunications companies. He cast out the American ambassador, accusing him of helping Morales's political enemies. He won a recall referendum with two-thirds of the vote. Last month, he pushed through a new constitution that could strengthen his powers and give him another five-year term.

But there is a fierce debate in Bolivia about whether the country is better off under Morales, particularly in terms of indigenous issues, the economy and the government's coca-leaf policy.

The president's supporters say he has embarked on a historic effort to right long-standing inequities and uplift the poor. His rivals, including those in the wealthier eastern regions that are home to more people of mixed or European heritage, want nothing to do with his government or its socialist program. They consider Morales a replica of President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela or Fidel Castro in Cuba, and view him as an authoritarian leader whose misguided economic plan is driving his country toward destitution.

The argument within Bolivia reflects the political alternatives now competing for ascendancy across South America. Leftist presidents in several countries are riding the wave of popular discontent to challenge traditional elites. The international financial crisis has only made the debate more urgent, as these leaders use the collapse of first-world economies to justify their policies.

"Misery, poverty, unemployment are growing, and global capitalism is largely to blame," Chávez told a crowd of thousands at a recent social forum in Brazil that Morales attended.

Regard for Indigenous Poor

One of the clearest effects of Morales's three years in power has been the shift in government attention, if at times more in words than actions, to the masses of indigenous poor in Bolivia. For the roughly 60 percent of Bolivians who describe themselves as being members of an indigenous group, his administration has offered something new: a stake in their government and hope for the future. Many of them, including Morales's fellow Aymara Indians, have been allowed to vote only since 1952. During his 2005 presidential campaign, his supporters held mock voting sessions to show illiterate farmers how to mark his name.

"This is a country that has existed in a state of de facto apartheid for decades, centuries, millennia, depends on how you want to count it," said Jim Shultz, director of the Democracy Center, a human rights organization based in Bolivia. "For people who were so used to being marginalized, even though they're the majority, to see somebody who looks like them, who dresses like them, who talks like them, become the president of their country, you can't underestimate the emotional symbolism of that."

Rufo Yanirico, an Aymara leader in the town of Achacachi and a member of an indigenous military group known as the Red Ponchos, recalled how his elementary school teachers used to be punished for speaking to students in Aymara. Bolivian military officers in the past would never shake hands with an Indian, he said, but at a festival in Achacachi in December, the soldiers were drinking and celebrating alongside the townspeople.

"They are aware that the social movements have a lot of strength now," he said. "The Spanish, the people who came from the west, they have governed us for 500 years. Now it is the time of the Aymara and Quechua."

Bolivia's new constitution outlines a number of rights for the 36 indigenous groups in the country, including setting aside seats in the National Congress and sanctioning a traditional justice system separate from the nation's courts. While there was broad support for the constitution, some indigenous leaders thought the document fell short of what they wanted, notably in a land-reform article that grandfathered in existing large estates.

"Our cause isn't this," said Felipe Quispe Huanca, an Aymara leader critical of Morales, as he held up a copy of the constitution. "We want our own Aymara state, totally independent," he added, describing Morales as a "neoliberal with an Indian face."

But to many Indians, Morales has taken the first steps. Mamani, from the village along Lake Titicaca, said his family's meager earnings have been augmented by government payments. Bulldozers and backhoes have been brought in to pave the community's dirt road. Someone, it seems, is paying attention.

"We receive a lot more help because of President Evo Morales," he said.

Economic Uncertainty

The Bolivian economy has fared well, by some measures, in Morales's first three years. On the strength of then-high prices for petroleum and minerals, the value of Bolivia's exports, which hovered around \$1 billion a year for the decade before Morales took over, shot up to nearly \$5 billion in 2007. More than \$7 billion in reserves now buffer the economy.

"I think Morales has governed these three years in an epoch of an extraordinary boom, a kind that Bolivia had never seen before," said Carlos Toranzo, an economist in La Paz.

The crux of the Morales economic plan, according to the president's budget vice minister, Emilio Pinto Marin, is to distribute more equally what few resources the country has and to keep foreign interests as "partners, not masters." To that end, Morales has nationalized the petroleum industry -- Bolivia has the continent's second-largest reserves of natural gas behind Venezuela -- and begun extracting more revenue from foreign companies. And he has given cash to the poor, about \$30 a month to elderly citizens and about \$30 a year to young students, building on programs from earlier administrations.

But economists outside the government predict that neither policy will serve Bolivia in the long term. The petroleum industry is wobbling, commodity prices have plunged, and poverty -- estimated at 60 percent in Bolivia -- does not appear to be decreasing.

Under the government's new conditions, oil companies have to hand over in royalties and taxes 70 to 80 percent of their revenue, industry experts said, a large cash boost for the young administration. But the decision, along with flare-ups of political violence and a fluid legal framework, has stifled foreign investment.

"The prospects that Bolivia had in 2005 about actually becoming an energy hub in the Southern Cone, now, a few years later, is nonexistent," said Carlos Alberto López, a former secretary of energy and hydrocarbons and a senior associate at Cambridge Energy Research Associates. "Bolivia has become an energy black hole."

Coca-Leaf Controversy

Since Morales became president, government policy on the coca leaf, the raw material for cocaine, has proved equally polarizing, and it has been at the center of Bolivia's strained relationship with the United States.

Morales came to prominence as an organizer of coca growers during the fight against U.S.-backed eradication programs in the 1980s and 1990s. Bolivia is one of the world's leading producers of cocaine, and that fact has defined U.S. policy toward the country for years.

Morales and others defended their right to grow coca for its traditional uses -- in chewing and tea-drinking -- and fought against foreign intervention. The conflict left hundreds of Bolivian civilians, soldiers and police dead, and Morales himself was imprisoned and beaten.

"To a certain extent, not to diminish Evo Morales's own capacity, but we have the U.S. to thank for an Evo Morales presidency," said Kathryn Ledebur, director of the Andean Information Network. "Because the harder the U.S. pushed or the more the U.S. attacked, verbally or otherwise, the greater the popularity of Evo Morales."

As president, Morales has made the coca leaf a national symbol. The new constitution enshrines it as a cultural resource that promotes "social cohesion." Morales has raised by nearly 20,000 acres the area that Bolivians can legally plant coca, a move that Bush administration officials considered encouraging to the drug trade.

Last year, Bolivia expelled the U.S. ambassador on charges that he was conspiring with Morales's opponents. Morales has also ejected Drug Enforcement Administration agents, accusing them of spying. The Bush administration said Bolivia had failed to live up to its drug-fighting responsibilities and suspended trade preferences.

Bolivian counter-narcotics officials acknowledge that the amount of cocaine seized has increased under Morales, from 14 tons in 2006 to 29 tons in 2008. But there seems little desire to go back to the old eradication approach.

"With this government, the coca grower doesn't fight us," said Col. René Sanabria Oropeza, director general of Bolivia's anti-drug police force. They allow us to do our work. We have access now to the entire country."