

## **Morales and the Bolivian presidency: A closer look at solidarity in action January 2006**

*The following reflection was written by Fr. Eugene Toland, MM, a Maryknoll priest who has served for many years in South America. He currently lives in Bolivia and watched the campaign, election and inauguration of President Evo Morales first-hand.*

If you could imagine that in the United States a coalition of Indian tribes, Afro-Americans, Hispanics, union organizations, some progressive business people, professionals and academics and senior citizens of all races and colors who need health care at some point formed a political party and, with an Indian chief as their presidential candidate, pulled off a sweeping victory to win the White House with a majority of voters perceiving it to be a party that would make needed radical changes and would be honest, you would have some idea of what it is like here on Bolivia [with] Evo Morales as president. Even more, if you imagined that the election victory was so sweeping that it wiped out both the Democratic and Republican parties and left the winning party and another new party made up of transfers from the two traditional parties to fill the congressional seats of both houses you would have an even better sense of what has happened here.

Evo Morales and his political party, Movement towards Socialism (MAS), swept to victory on December 18 and now will control both houses of the Congress as well as the presidency. The MAS won the lower house with a majority and has now gained the support of two senators from smaller parties to control the senate.

### **Rise in popularity**

Since the day he was elected [until now], the general consensus is that everything Evo Morales and his party has said and done has gained him more support and popularity. He took off soon after the election to visit eight countries in Latin America, Europe, Africa and Asia. The purpose of the visits was to show, contrary to opinions before the election, that with a MAS victory Bolivia would not be isolated by the international community. Likewise the trips served to have Evo assure world leaders that Bolivia would abide by international agreements, its own laws, and respect private property. Finally, during the visits he asked advice from seasoned leaders of governments on how he might govern effectively as president. He did not go to ask for assistance but in the end most countries offered to provide financial and technical assistance to further the new government's programs. As he returned to Bolivia opinion polls in the country showed he had a 65 percent approval rating.

There was some controversy during the trip: Evo did not don a suit and tie even when he visited the King of Spain! That provoked a few negative editorial remarks in the world press that were responded to by editorials in Bolivia pointing out that the clothes do not make the man but rather his ideas and actions. Besides, some argued it might be time for a change in the established European western standard for what makes for a well dressed leader! Open collar is certainly more comfortable than a tie introduced into western society in 1660 by a Croatian regiment presenting itself to King Louis XVI.

### **Gas prices**

Two important visits of the newly elected president were to Brazil and Argentina, two friendly governments that import Bolivian natural gas. A Brazilian energy company is also one of the largest investors in the extraction of gas in Bolivia. With the visits Evo initiated conversations on a change in the sale price of the gas that would be more just for Bolivia and

fair to the importers. Likewise he repeated the intention of his government to be 50-50 “partners” with the energy companies investing in Bolivia and thus change the *give-away* contracts made by previous governments. One executive of the Brazilian gas company commented, “Better a small profit than no profit at all.” Affirming what Evo has said all along- that the gas companies will not pull out of Bolivia if the government demands a more just share of profits, since they know that there is money to be made here for decades and if they pullout for sure others, such as China, will fill the vacuum.

While Evo has been on the road his vice president, Alvaro García Linera, a former guerrilla who served some time in prison and later became a respected sociologist, and other members of the MAS team have been busy with the transition which has gone smoothly with the proactive cooperation of current interim President Eduardo Rodríguez, the chief justice who assumed office due to the constitutional crisis last June. Evo and his team have indicated that they will begin on day one to implement their program that was mandated by the overwhelming vote in December.

### **Changes on the way**

That agenda includes preparing for a constitutional convention to change many of the laws to achieve a more just and balanced distribution of power. Also the new government will fulfill its campaign pledge to implement laws to renegotiate the contracts dealing with the exploitation of the large natural gas fields so that the country obtains a just share of the profits.

Evo announced that there will also be a change in how the executive branch operates with elimination of some cabinet offices and introduction of others. For instance the departments for Indian affairs and for women will be eliminated since both groups will have ample representation in the cabinet and government. Evo joked that someone had suggested to him that his strongly indigenous government introduce a department for *K'aras*, the Aymara word for “white folk.” He did want to set up a Ministry of Sports and Culture (being an ardent soccer player himself), but there is no money in the budget for that this year.

### **U.S. don't push**

Evo has also indicated that he will enact a full investigation of the scandal case of the Chinese land-to-sky missiles that were somewhat outmoded and were taken by U.S. military personnel to be decommissioned but ended up being taken to the U.S. The fall-out caused President Rodríguez to relieve the commander of the army of his post and to accept the resignation of the minister of defense. The scuttlebutt is that the U.S. embassy somehow pressured someone to give up the missiles since the U.S. did not want them around with a “lefty” president in office, another sign of the extreme paranoia of the White House over what is happening in Latin America these days.

Reflecting an attitude of many, one member of the MAS transition team has said that the new government will end the long term interference of the U.S. government in the affairs of the Bolivian state removing what he referred to as a type of U.S. “hacienda” in the Quemado (Bolivian White House). However Evo has indicated that he is open to respectful relationships with all countries including the U.S. and, as is usual the case, the pre-campaign rhetoric has been toned down to a mature diplomatic discourse. While the U.S. government has been cautious in its acknowledgement of the MAS victory it recognizes that with Evo's overwhelming electoral mandate it has no choice but to deal respectfully with this new

government as with the other center-left governments elected recently in the continent. It is a wave that deserves a longer commentary later.

Most commentators recognize that with this election the country is at a critical juncture in its history with many of the recurring challenges of the past but with historic hopeful opportunities. The new government faces challenges of extreme poverty, wide gaps in distribution of wealth, attitudes of passivity and dependence on patrons, deep rooted corruption in government, the need to rewrite the constitution, provide a fair income from the country's gas deposits, the call for local autonomy in various regions of the country, and how to resolve the production of coca in face of U.S. demands. There will be pressures from below and from the big powerful interests within and outside the country.

Yet the opportunities are there with a economy that has shown signs of growth especially with agricultural and gas exports, and a wide sense among the population that it is time to work together to make major changes, including developing a culture of values that draw on ancient Andean "commandments"- "*do not rob, do not lie, do not be lazy*" and that promote solidarity for the benefit of the common good.

Clearly with an uncertain future we can only hope for the best for this poor country, but as well commit ourselves to lend what hand we can to help it grow into the nation its resilient people so well deserve.