

### Exclusive Interview with MAS' Vice-Presidential Candidate

# Two Opposing Views of Social Change in Bolivia

By Raúl Zibechi | December 14, 2005

Bolivia's social movements divide roughly into two camps on the issue of how to effect structural reforms: those who advocate that the central government should play the leading role and those who insist that organized civil society must play that role.

The December 18 election will be the first since the September-October 2003 popular uprising that toppled the government of then-President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada and brought to the fore issues such as the nationalization of hydrocarbons and the call for a National Constituent Assembly. For the first time in this Andean country's history where more than 60% of the population identifies itself as indigenous, an indigenous candidate could become president.

In the 2002 presidential elections, the U.S. ambassador, Manuel Rocha, directly intervened in the electoral campaign by saying that "his government would view with disfavor the election of Evo Morales" of the Movement toward Socialism (MAS, for its initials in Spanish), whom he accused of being a "narco-cocaine producer" and an "instrument" of Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro.

Lately, however, the embassy has opted to remain silent but there is no doubt that it would prefer the victory of Jorge Tuto Quiroga, former vice president under Hugo Bánzer (first a dictator, then a constitutional president), or of Samuel Doria Medina, one of the wealthiest businessmen in the country. Both these candidates represent the neoliberal right wing, although the second presents himself as a centrist.

## A Complicated Situation

The candidate who emerges as president from the voting booths will face a political landscape shaped by the power of grassroots movements. Since 2000 popular movements have challenged each successive president to the point where two (Sánchez de Lozada and his successor Carlos Mesa) were unable to finish out their terms. The Bolivian government rests on a narrow social stratum and does not represent the immense majority of the population.

Bolivia is a colonial state: Although more than 60% of the population is indigenous and speaks primarily Aymara and Quechua, only Spanish-speaking whites and mestizos hold ministerial or judicial positions, positions of leadership in the armed forces, or high-level offices in public administration. Until recently, they controlled almost every single seat in the parliament. In the 2002 elections, a significant number of indigenous representatives won legislative seats: 35 deputies and senators from the MAS party, and six from the Pachakutik Indigenous Movement (MIP, for its initials in Spanish).

It is a racist state, both because of its lack of integration and its attitude toward the majority of the population. A poor Indian, who does not speak Spanish well and dresses traditionally, has little to no chance of winning a lawsuit in court against a white person well-versed in the dominant administrative system who has resources and influence. In some ways, the continued revolts since the famous "Water War" of 2000 in Cochabamba represent the rise of the marginalized who are struggling to find new forums for expression, consolidate their own spaces, and assert their rights. To be heard, they have rebelled—at the cost of over one hundred deaths and thousands of wounded.

The strength of the Bolivian social movements, today the strongest on the continent, has forced the elite to backpedal. According to all indications, they would be willing to tolerate a government presided over by an indigenous leader. The last polls show Morales with a 2-5 point lead over Quiroga.

If it appears after the election that Morales won the most votes and the parliament chooses not to recognize him as president, the country would descend into an ungovernable turmoil since the majority would feel cheated.



It is also likely that if a MAS government does not succeed in taking rapid steps toward nationalizing the oil and gas industry and convoking a National Constituent Assembly, the dissatisfaction of the population would prevent it from maintaining the minimum level of stability necessary for governing.

The demand for a Constituent Assembly demonstrates the complexity of the situation in Bolivia. One problem is the relative autonomy of Santa Cruz, the wealthiest district of the country, made up in large part of landowners tied to the agribusiness industry that see the indigenous population as a threat to their interests. This sector aspires to separate itself from the rest of the country and has been accused of maintaining armed militias ready to fight the social movement.

Another problem facing the next government is the future of the oil industry. Here Brazil has enormous interests in Bolivia. Petrobras, the Brazilian state-owned oil giant, controls 25% of the natural gas reserves located in the Tarija district, owns the pipelines for exporting gas to Brazil and the country's two petroleum refineries, and controls close to 40% of the livestock and agriculture business of Santa Cruz, much of which is run by Brazilian ranchers.

Alvaro García Linera, a sociologist and the vice-presidential candidate for MAS, observed, "Brazil has many interests in Bolivia. It is a powerful country and will

surely seek to protect its interests. The United States does not have direct interests in the oil industry because it does not have any businesses in the area."

Brazil's behavior toward Bolivia has raised many doubts in the past. During the extended Bolivian crises, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's adviser, Marco Aurelio García, visited the country twice to ensure that despite the chaos, the flow of natural gas from Bolivia to Brazil would not be disrupted. That flow is vital for an industry like Sao Pablo's, the productive center of the country, which gets 30% of its gas from Bolivia. Lula himself was in Bolivia just before the 2004 referendum on the oil and gas industry, to defend the business interests of the state-owned Petrobras. In García Linera's opinion, Brazil is keenly interested in the political stability of its neighbor. "We hope that when the oil and gas industry is discussed there is a non-interventionist attitude, with no pressure and acceptance of Bolivia's sovereignty," he noted. But at one point later in the interview he added: "We fear Brazil more than we do the United States."

In any case, MAS is showing itself to be more and more prudent on the issue of nationalization. The objective, it seems, is not nationalization but rather, to work towards "a modification of relations where foreign investors are minority partners with the government," he concluded. MAS leaders are conscious of the tight space they have for maneuvering: if they decide the Bolivian State should nationalize the oil and gas industry, they will confront multinational corporations and powerful regional and world forces. But if they do not, the population could take to the streets again, thus destabilizing even a government run by an indigenous president.

## Government as the Instrument for Change

Evo Morales' running mate was a member of the Guerrilla Army of Tupac Katari during the 1990s and spent five years in prison. Consistent with his past, he maintains a vision of social change in which the state is the principal protagonist, although now he believes these changes will take place through legal and peaceful avenues.

"After the events of June when the popular uprising forced Mesa's resignation," reflected Alvaro García Linera, "the country entered a period of truce and the process of *electoralización* of the struggle for power



Evo Moral, candidate for president who currently shows a 2-5 point lead in the polls.  
Photo: Bolivia Indymedia.

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began. Bolivia has been living through a power struggle for four years now. There is a polarization between the candidates, which is expressed through a polarization of platforms. Evo Morales' proposal is for reform, nationalization of the oil and gas industry, redistribution of wealth and land, and to give the state a new role in the economy, weakening the role of foreign investment."

The experience of MAS cannot be compared to that of other parties on the continent in large part because Morales is an indigenous leader in a society where indigenous peoples have always been excluded. His candidacy represents a radical departure from the norm, since it is in essence the decolonization of the nation state. The second difference is that MAS is not a party but rather "a coalition of flexible social movements that has expanded its actions to the electoral arena. There is no structure; it is a leader and movements, and there is nothing in between. This means that MAS must depend on mobilizations or on the temperament of the social movements," says García Linera. The third difference is that Evo Morales's candidacy occurs at a time when neoliberal policies are experiencing a moral defeat throughout the hemisphere.

García Linera believes that Bolivia is experiencing profound social and cultural changes that also affect the electoral realm. Before, "the indigenous population always voted for non-indigenous candidates because they saw themselves as incapable." In this context, the massive support for the indigenous candidacy of Morales indicates "an ideological breakdown of domination."

But not having a solid party is producing unprecedented difficulties too. García Linera rhetorically asks: "How can you govern through social movements?" In his view, "Governments concentrate the decision-making process and social movements decentralize it. How can the state be reconciled with the movements? Social movements seek power but then often fall back into corporatist practices. Social movements cannot direct nor occupy the state."

This debate is crucial for a party that has essentially been formed by the movement of campesino coca leaf producers of Chapare and receives support from many of the nation's other principal social movements, including members of mining cooperatives, the "irrigation" campesinos of Cochabamba who launched the Water War in 2000, the Landless Movement, part of the

National Campesino Organization, and the neighborhood councils of El Alto.

As an intellectual, García Linera posits that power is not something to be taken, but rather a social relationship built on the existing balance of forces. But as a politician, he defends the centrality of the state in society, to the point of maintaining that there is no way to avoid it: "The Constitution and the law constitute a map for social movements, since we all played a role in creating the state. The state is domination, and at the same time, resistance. All struggles pass through the state—even the struggle against the state passes through the state. The social movement builds resistance to the state, and also demands rights within the state." In line with this conclusion, MAS proposes to change the character of the Bolivian state, passing from what is described as a colonial state to a democratic one.

The centrality of the state in MAS's views is not just based on the leftist traditions of Latin America, but also on some notable characteristics of Western culture. "The State is the only rational entity in Bolivia," observed García Linera. "The future of Bolivia is modernity, according to García Linera, "not the family-based economy."

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"In El Alto, 60 soldiers killed 70 people in half an hour," he said, "Is it possible to overcome the odds under these conditions? Until you have modernity on your side, you cannot win. Premodernity cannot triumph. The traditional and local are products of domination. To praise them is to praise domination. The 'local' is encouraged by the World Bank." Such claims are certainly controversial in a country where the majority of the population belongs to the sector considered premodern, including the family-based or informal economic sectors.

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## Betting on Civil Society

Perhaps the clearest alternative to the state-centered proposal is emerging from participants in Cochabamba's "Water War." Price increases under privatization gave rise to the most important cycle of protests since the revolution of 1952. Oscar Olivera, of the Water Coordinating Committee of Cochabamba, is a point of reference for those looking beyond the December 18 elections.

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In spite of the fact that Olivera, like many of his allies, more or less conditionally supports MAS, he maintains: “The elections are a maneuver of the right wing, transnational corporations, and the United States to dilute and hinder the popular movement of the last five years to nationalize the oil and gas industry.” But he also considers the elections to be “a space in which conservative and popular agendas confront each other.” Olivera believes it is necessary to participate in the elections because they form part of “a process of building strength so that in the next government—whoever controls it—we can regain control of natural resources and end the monopoly that the political parties have over electoral politics.”

Nevertheless, Olivera fears that a MAS-run government would be limited to running the state, seeking greater autonomy from international financial institutions, and little more. “That would be fatal because the people want much more,” he said. For the social movements, Olivera believes, the scene can be very complex, since Evo Morales and MAS in the name of governing may be able

to assume control “and direct the movements to manage water rights in El Alto and Cochabamba or redistribute land.”

This type of maneuver would lend support to Morales' claim that he is the only one who can govern the country because of the good relations he maintains with the social movements. A second problem is that they are “beginning to add labels to nationalization.” Now Morales talks of a “responsible nationalization,” which, in Olivera's opinion, causes people to suspect they will be tricked again and that a MAS-led government will be limited to “administering a state apparatus that does not work, instead of supporting the struggles that have been taking place for five years.”

As a way of continuing to strengthen the social movements, considered the key to Bolivia's future, the sectors grouped in the National Association of Irrigation Farmers and the Potable Water Committees convoked the first Congress of the National Front for the Defense of Water and Basic Human Services in early December. This alliance of movements—whose best-known example is the Water Coordinating Committee of Cochabamba—brings together some of the most dynamic movements in the country, including the Federation of Neighborhood Councils of El Alto (FEJUVE, for its initials in Spanish), the Coordinating Committee of Neighborhood Councils of the outlying districts of Oruro, the semi-urban and rural Water and Drainage Cooperatives of Santa Cruz, in addition to neighborhood organizations, irrigation farmers, cooperatives, as well as committees on water rights, electricity, and the defense of basic services from almost all of the districts.

This alliance brings together some of the most interesting collective management experience, although this has not been covered by the media. Prime examples are that of Oruro and Santa Cruz. Oruro is a traditional mining city, while Santa Cruz is the most dynamic economic region of the country, where there is a high incidence of rural and indigenous emigration. In both cities, the State fails to cover the most basic public services for the poorest parts of the population.

The Coordinating Committee of semi-urban neighborhood councils of Oruro is the most powerful social factor of the Northern Plateau, according to Olivera, and “has created autonomous forms of management for providing water, collecting garbage, eliminating waste on the edge

of town, providing electricity legitimately while exercising autonomy.”

“This is something new,” he said, “that they have managed this without the help of advisers or experts. I would say it is a more profound experience than that of El Alto’s, though not as politicized.” The grassroots organizations of Oruro have created new structures of social and economic relations in outlying communities where the government has been absent. Under the name of Coordinating Committee, they are emulating the experience of Cochabamba while at the same time establishing a strong relationship with the other members of the National Front.

In the eastern zone, for decades there have been water cooperatives in the semi-urban areas of Santa Cruz building wells collectively. Unlike in Cochabamba, where each cooperative has a few dozen or a few hundred families, in Santa Cruz they vary between 6 and 15 thousand hookups, providing water for nearly a million users. Now they have decided to fight not just for water but also for basic services like electricity, natural gas, garbage collection, and decontamination of the rivers.

According to Olivera, “There exists a model of decentralized water management system run by neighborhoods. That model is expanding. The old cooperatives from 20 years ago in the semi-urban zones of Santa Cruz have generated a strong change in the social relations of the city and region. Now one of the most important centers for the National Front is located in Santa Cruz.”

The idea of defining and synthesizing all of these collective and communal management experiences emerged one year ago. It is focused on highlighting alternatives to the public and private models (since they share a strong theme of centralization that discourages social participation) that are, in effect, already functioning. In almost all cases, they are making political demands, like not paying certain taxes (such as certain Santa Cruz cooperatives have done) and demanding regular deliveries of domestic natural gas. Almost all of them seek to change law concerning electricity and potable water.

“We are letting the next government know we are creating a movement, a nonpartisan social-political front that addresses the most vital needs of the people through



The September-October 2003 popular uprising that toppled the government of then-President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada.  
Photo: Bolivia Indymedia.

a profound change in power relations, social relations, and the management of water, electricity, and garbage,” Olivera concluded.

## An Uncertain Future

The debate over the long-term options of the social movements takes on special importance when faced with the possibility of Morales becoming president. According to most political forecasts, his government would be “handcuffed” and his authority to govern questioned along every step of the way. The Senate will be in the hands of the right. The administration will be obligated to make alliances with members of the House of Representatives, and it is unlikely that MAS will win any of the nine available seats being contested.

Faced with these circumstances, the director of the Center for Judicial Studies and Social Research (CEJIS, for its initials in Spanish) of Santa Cruz, Carlos Romero, observed, “Whoever controls the political power of the various regions, with demands for autonomy in several of them, can block the governing power of the central government in those regions, especially if the MAS party wins, by implementing a kind of regional siege on the central power.”

MAS’s political-electoral decision was to give heightened visibility to Evo Morales at the expense of undercutting the rest of the candidates. “This misjudgment has become evident in every corner of the country,” argued Mario Ronald Durán, ex-university director. Faced with this somber situation, it is being asked: “Is it smart for MAS to control the next government under these circumstances?”

This question should not be taken lightly, given other experiences in the region, particularly that of PT and President Lula in Brazil, which demonstrate the cost of governing without solid institutional support. But in Bolivia, the situation is graver still, since unlike with PT

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and the Broad Front of Uruguay (which took hold of the presidency after having governed the most important municipalities and states of the country), MAS does not have any experience managing institutional affairs, in a state apparatus where the public officials of the colonial order will be capable of neutralizing any decision made by the executive branch led by Morales.

It's unlikely that the profound cycle of protest in Bolivia between 2000 and 2005 (which peaked in October 2003) has come to an end. More likely, there will be a regrouping of grassroots forces that Olivera describes. In 2005 social movements have managed to dismantle critical manifestations of the dominant order. But its organizing power has been confined to certain social sectors, especially the Aymara, as well as to urban sectors like that of El Alto. Nevertheless, the ability of the social movement to deploy its forces, which has proved powerful enough to topple governments and obstruct elite policies, hasn't been capable of creating alternative forms of governance that encompass the whole country.

The challenge now is for social movements to find ways of growing in a new, more adverse context, which could oscillate between attempts by the government to co-opt or divide them one on side and on the other side by diverse and complex forms of repression—be they from

the state itself or from civil organizations like those that are associated with the autonomy-seeking right wing in Santa Cruz.

In any case, social movements will continue to grow—as is being shown by the experiences of the Front for the Defense of Water and Basic Human Services. It is coming from a process of internal development of the new social actors—a type of internal growth that seeks to deepen the experience of collective control over production and reproduction. It was this path that allowed the Bolivian social movement, toward the end of the 1990s, to make a tremendous leap forward. But like the development of Zapatista autonomy or the one that led the Brazilian landless rural population to take their demands to the city, it is a process that is largely ignored by dominant media.

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