

An Interview with Álvaro García Linera, Vice President of Bolivia

Bolivia—Coming to Terms with Diversity

By Laura Carlsen | November 16, 2007

As head of Congress and the major political operator for President Evo Morales, Bolivia's Vice President Álvaro García Linera stands in the eye of a political hurricane. The changes proposed by the MAS government have unleashed protest from conservative sectors of society, leading to suspension of the Constituent Assembly called to revamp the nation's political institutions.

García Linera says the conflicts are to be expected, as Bolivian society takes on “the two conquests of equality”—political rights for indigenous peoples and economic equality through a redistribution of national wealth. He calls the Morales administration a “government of social movements” and describes the goals to build “institutions that allow us to recognize our pluralism” and “generate minimal levels of access to opportunities and resources.”

LC: The government of Evo Morales came to power with the symbolic force of being the first indigenous president in the country, and has promised to address an historic backlog of demands for indigenous rights. But the government also faces the challenge of achieving some degree of unity to carry out deep transformations in society. In practice, how do you reconcile these two responsibilities?

AGL: The presence of the first indigenous president is without a doubt the most important symbolic break in the last centuries in Bolivia. Within our political culture, both indigenous and non-indigenous people had always had an image of indigenous people as second-class citizens, in a position of permanent subordination. President Morales in the presidency marks a radical transformation, politically speaking, in this country because it re-establishes a principle of equality that had been denied by colonial or neocolonial practices, and by the mentality and the customs of society.

Since Morales has been president, the range of options and opportunities open to members of society has been socialized, has evened up. If an indigenous person can be president, then why not diplomat, congressional representative, member of the constituent assembly, or

minister or vice minister—all positions previously closed to the indigenous majority of the country.

But soon we saw that as political equality advanced, the challenge remained to expand this progress in political equality to other realms—notably, the economic realm in the form of a new redistribution of wealth. Not just because of the results of the elections, but because this was already on the agenda of grassroots mobilizations as a main demand coming from the most vulnerable sectors of Bolivian society.

So society was ready for, and needed, both these tasks to be taken on together: Political equality and recognition of equality for indigenous peoples, their culture, and their language; but also a redistribution of wealth to improve peoples' access to resources. And that's where the job of President Morales' government has gotten complicated.

LC: Why is that?

AGL: In other societies, political equality is not necessarily accompanied by an immediate effort to redistribute wealth. South Africa is a case in point: There was a huge battle for political equality and a slower process of redistribution, or economic equality. In the case of Bolivia, the two tasks had to be taken on simultaneously.

Modernity and the advance of the general process pushed the privileged sectors to accept political equality, but to accept redistribution of wealth is another matter. It generates more resistance from groups that are accustomed not only to holding positions of power but also to a form of allotment that earmarked public resources with their families' names on them.





This is the most difficult part of what we've taken on—the two conquests of equality. But the fact that there was already a democratic and redistributive agenda proposed by society since 2000 led to the need to assume both tasks simultaneously, with all the difficulties that you're seeing in these days and weeks—all predictable, of course.

LC: In this task where the government has to take measures that affect very powerful interests, how do you convince or obligate sectors with historic privileges to cede privileges in order to establish the new state and society?

AGL: Among the most privileged sectors, it requires—not “generosity,” because in politics and economics that term doesn't exist—but a strategic viewpoint. This is not a movement that at any time seeks to annul privileges. This is a movement that seeks to generate minimal levels of access to opportunities and resources.

From a strategic point of view, the most privileged sectors would understand that the best way to preserve part of their privileges is to cede part of their privileges. But when they are not willing to cede a part of these privileges, what that does is generate a pressure that's more and more adverse to them, with the risk that it could affect all their privileges.

If you look at the program put forth by the poor in Bolivia, it doesn't propose socializing all wealth or property. What you find is the demand for opportunities, a demand to take part in the distribution of resources. I haven't seen anyone who's saying “We have to take all the land away from the hacendados (large landowners).” They say, “We want to have land too, we also have a right to have land.” Same with natural resources, water, or oil. They're not saying “We want to expropriate oil and gas and kick all the foreign companies out” but rather, “We want to be included in the profits from these resources.”

And in fact, the measures we've taken—such as the nationalization of hydrocarbons that didn't expropriate fixed assets but rather took back property and decision-making capacity over gas and petroleum—illustrate the strategy of society and the government. But there are privileged sectors that have a short-term perspective and resist this redistribution.

The key for privileged sectors resides in not looking to the future in one year, but in 10, 20, or 30, or 50 years. This strategic point of view is what could help this process of redistribution of wealth and lead to a coming together, but in a more balanced way and not with the scandalous distances in terms of property and money that we still see in Bolivia.

LC: Speaking of these sectors and their resistance, today with the problems facing the Constituent Assembly, there has been talk of a growing political and social polarization in the country.

Do you agree with this assessment of the present moment?

AGL: Ethnic, class, and regional differences in Bolivia are not recent; they didn't appear this year or even in the last five or 10 years. They cut across our entire history as a republic.

Don't forget that Bolivia emerges as a republic refusing to recognize the right of citizenship for the indigenous majority. And that refusal was only slightly modified just 50 years ago when indigenous persons were granted the right to vote.

Even then, what doesn't disappear are the privileges in terms of access to and control of the positions of political, economic, and cultural power that run the society. It's not the forms but rather the practices and habits of society that continue to impede indigenous people from reaching decision-making spheres, due to that kind of "glass ceiling" that feminists talk about.

The fact that today these issues are on the agenda of debate is nothing new. The novelty is that society for the first time is forced to look at itself in the mirror, and it has to see its limitations, its cracks, its weaknesses. Exclusion and confrontation have been recurrent themes throughout Bolivia's history—uprisings, massacres every 10, every 15 years. The idea is that what's been a fissure in society for over 190 years must finally be resolved now, based on a democratic pact of mutual recognition.

The same goes for regional divisions. Bolivia is born as a republic as the fruit of a very particular alliance of more than 100 mini-republics—regions with their own leaders, economies, symbols, and political practices, all very fragmented. The process of building national unity has been to this day a tortuous process, with many imbalances.

In fact, the governments of the 19th century concentrated power, wealth, and privileges, where they established their control while leaving out the rest of the zones and regions.

It's no coincidence that by 1830 they were already talking about federalism. A hundred years ago there was a federalist proposal in the country that sought to redistribute political power among the regions. Again, it emerges as an historic fissure throughout the history of our republican life, and is never resolved. There was a federal civil war that ended up in the agreement to move the capital from Sucre to La Paz and after achieving that the next day they forgot about federalism. The regional elites of Santa Cruz have raised the flag of autonomy and decentralization since the 50s. When they came to power, they became centralists again, putting away their banners of autonomy and decentralization.

And now the issue comes up again—what we want is to have it resolved, not by pretending the problem had gone away like they did in the past, but to be resolved through an authentic territorial distribution of power, and not on a class basis.

Bolivia has been experiencing these ethnic, class, and regional tensions off and on throughout its history. The difference today is that in the past they were separated. An ethnic movement would arise and be "resolved" through massacres or bullets. Time would go by and the regional issue would come up and find some kind of half-way solution. A little while later, ethnic or class conflicts would emerge again.

Ethnic, cultural, and regional differences in our Bolivian society, today visible all at once, are not recent products. They are old wounds that have been present in our history and were never healed.

It's up to this generation—I'm not saying "this government," but this generation, this society—to resolve issues that couldn't be resolved in 182 years of political life as an independent republic. We have to resolve them, not by pretending the problem has gone away as leaders did in the past, but through an authentic territorial distribution of power, and not on a class basis. If we do, we will have resolved something that throughout our history couldn't be resolved by dictators or liberals or populists or caudillos.

At root, what you're seeing now is the real inner workings of society exposed. And you see the unhealed wounds, previously hidden behind bandages, and now we have to heal the three kinds of wounds at once.

There's no reason to become undone over these tensions because they're tensions that we've experienced before. Instead of worrying about these issues becoming visible, the concern would be if we did what past governments have done—just swept them under the rug.

Because this is the historic opportunity for society to finally come to terms with itself, to see a rebirth of our collective spirit based on who we really are—not the illusion of who we want to be, as the elites have always done before in this country.

Perhaps this is the big spiritual void that we Bolivians have had: that we never could be honest about who we are. We said we were a unified republic, when we

weren't. We've wanted to be modern, but we're not. We've wanted to be homogenous, but we're not. What we are is diverse, with many local and regional identities, and we have to build an institutional structure for what Bolivia really is. And that is exactly what we want to do now.

LC: In the context of these divisions, do you still think it's feasible to agree on a new constitution with profound changes, or will it be necessary to accept minor reforms?

AGL: The Constituent Assembly is conceived of and was convoked to create an institutional order that corresponds to the reality of who we are. Up to now, each one of our 17 of 18 constitutions has just tried to copy the latest institutional fashion—French, U.S., European. And it was clear that it didn't fit us, because these institutions correspond to other societies. We are indigenous and non-indigenous, we are modern and traditional, we are liberal and communitarist, we are a profoundly diverse society regionally and a hybrid in terms of social classes. So we have to have institutions that allow us to recognize that pluralism.

This is the great challenge of the Constituent Assembly. And that's why we are confident, we are betting on its success, in spite of the difficulties, with this idea of expressing the real society and projecting that in institutional and normative terms for the coming decades.

LC: You have spoken of diversity not only in terms of the need to recognize it in a new form of institutional-ity but also as the guiding principle of a new social pact. Reading the newspapers these days, diversity would appear to be more a factor of division. How do you move toward this vision of strength through diversity?

AGL: We've always been divided. It's just that now we're seeing ourselves with all our divisions and tendencies. The illusion of a monolithic, cohesive unity has broken like a glass thrown to the ground. And it can never be put back together. We can't go back to living with illusions. The key for all the groups is to affirm their difference, but at the same time produce a will to unity—to an agreed-on unity, not an imposed unity, not an illusive or merely superficial unity.

Sure, at first it's scary as everyone begins to wake up to the fact that they are different from the other, and to assume that difference and not to hide it. That's the first step in building real unity.

The second step is, based on the affirmation of differences, to affirm what we have in common. Without a doubt, the indigenous and peasant movements that have led this process are the most lucid in taking these steps. To give you an example: it would be very easy for the indigenous and peasant movement to demand that each community, each culture, each nationality have the right to the control and ownership of natural resources. Even the United Nations declaration recognizes that right—to land, forests, gas, and oil.

But what you see is that, at the same time as they say "we are indigenous peoples, we are nationalities with our own culture," they are also objectively asserting unity when they say "we have to nationalize hydrocarbons"—in the sense of a collective "I" that is above the particular language, culture, or region. The proposal to nationalize gas and oil didn't come from intellectuals or from the middle classes. It came out of the social movements, mostly indigenous and peasant.

That's why you see the indigenous-peasant sector leading changes today. Not because it mobilizes more people, not because it stages the biggest, most militant demonstrations, but because it proposed with greatest clarity this idea of the collective "I."

It is in this dialectic—between the individual and the community, between the differences and the commonalities—where the country's future will be decided.

Not all sectors have this way of looking at things, especially the privileged sectors. Sometimes the press focuses the cameras on the differences. Then you see a country that appears to be on the verge of a breakdown because everybody wants to assert their own identities and differences at their moment. The sectors that demand difference as a historic right because they were never allowed the right to difference are simultaneously the ones that fight the hardest, the ones who have done the most, to build a real common "I." Not a fictitious one, not just symbols and rites, but in real actions: the constituent assembly, nationalization of hydrocarbons, redistribution of wealth.

LC: You mention the responsibility of social movements. Other progressive governments, brought to power by grassroots movements, have been criticized for subsequently demobilizing or sidelining those movements. How do you conceive the role of social movements in the Morales government?

AGL: We consider this to be a government of social movements. Even though that means there are tensions. Because government and state are by definition a process of centralization of decisions. And by definition a social movement is a process of socialization and collective diffusion of decision-making, of controls. What's interesting is to ride on that tension. That's the novelty of the process.

You'll ask: But do you back up this claim of being a government of social movements? How can this be demonstrated in objective, material, practical terms?

On four levels, from the most general to the most specific.

The most general: the program of changes and transformations in the government is, without a doubt, the program proposed by the social mobilizations over the last five, 10, 15 years. What the government of President Morales has done is simply to practically transcribe into decree or law what was collectively built up by society itself through social movements. Land, hydrocarbons, Constituent Assembly, the issue of autonomies, redistribution of wealth, process of industrialization, and so many things still pending—the big decisions of this government have been historically proposed over the past 10 years by the social movements.

The second level is that for the government's major decisions—all of them, without exception—we've consulted with the leadership of the different social movements. Not all the social movements, of course, but a good part of the most active social movements in the country. The issue of water, the law on agrarian reform with indigenous and peasant organizations, the issue of hydrocarbons with neighborhood assemblies in El Alto, mobilized workers, and so on. There isn't one important measure that isn't marked by a process of feedback and consultation with these sectors, because every one of these actions can only be sustained through mobilization of society, not through bureaucratic action.

Third, in the structure of the government, among its upper- and medium-level leaders you'll find the presence of a good part of the sectors' and movements' leadership. Whether as mayors, prefects (the provincial leadership), parliamentary representatives, constituent assemblypersons, ministers, there's a practical, physical presence of grassroots leadership in government.

To what degree they maintain their connection to their constituents is a different problem. To what degree they could become bureaucratized is definitely a risk. But if you watch the parliament on television or the assembly, you see an enormous presence of these sectors. This is something that was unthinkable five or 10 years ago, because these were positions reserved for certain families, for elites cultivated in foreign universities, with famous last names, and a tradition of being in politics.

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In fourth place, because even if the social movement itself can't move into government administration, as a movement, the process of selection of government officials obligatorily passes not only through a criteria of merit but also through approval from social movements and organizations. Here it's equally valid to have a masters or doctorate from Harvard as to have links with the peasant federation. Yes, this can slow up certain areas of government efficiency but it's a sign of the times.

These are the four elements that show you a government of social movements. Does that mean that all social movements are in the government? No, there are other social movements that remain on the margins of government. But there's no doubt that the mobilizing nucleus of the last decades is what sustains this government.

LC: You and the president come from a background of participation in movements. What are the big surprises or unexpected challenges of coming to government?

AGL: There are so many.

There's clearly a leap between the logic of mobilization and protest, to the logic of administration. However, the Movement toward Socialism (MAS) as a coalition of social organizations has experienced a learning curve and transition from strictly making demands and being a union movement to increasingly becoming a revolutionary political entity. This started 10 years ago when the unions began to control local governments. The agrarian unions entered the mayorships and had to put to the test their demands with transparency. It's not a lot of time, many parties have to spend 30 years preparing for governing. In our case, there were 10 years of training—too fast.

But for better or worse, you have there a first period of gestation of political leaders who had to combine the discourse of mobilization with the ability to govern. These leaders that were trained since the 90s in local government, several of them are now in parliament or are even vice ministers. There has been a small training school, rapid, but training in this new logic.

It also has to do with the fact that this social movement matures very quickly since 2000, to go from confrontational strategies to proposing designs for the nation. It isn't usual, even in the history of Bolivia, to see this kind of political maturation. It means that increasingly in the process of mobilization and protest the issues that you enter into dialogue with the government on are no longer "how can I get something for my sector?" but "how can I change Bolivia?" The Constituent Assembly arose as a proposal since 2000-2001, recovery of control over of the hydrocarbon sector in 2003, a new law on land since 1999—there were already general guidelines developed for defining public goods.

When President Morales, colleagues, myself, arrive here we have to change part of the chip in our brains. What we decide to do is very clear: there are a lot of things we don't know and we have to learn, but there are a lot of things that we have to do. Because we came to act; we didn't come to administer government, we came to change it. So what do we decide? The first decision of President Morales was to leave the technical base of intermediate officials in all the ministries and institutions intact and just make changes on the level of ministers and vice ministers with political leaders.

Those were the months last year that we had problems—when public administration didn't work so well, there wasn't good implementation of the budget, there were contradictions between ministries. However, if we had tried to replace all the staff at once from the beginning and install pure political leaders, it would have been a catastrophe.

There have been difficulties that we've admitted publicly of course, but it still is remarkable what we've achieved with these decisions. Economic growth; modification of the economic structure of society; implementation, albeit gradual, of some things at the social level; and so many changes still pending.

For this reason, I believe it's a healthy process and full of vitality and has good possibilities of success.

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