

Evo Morales and the politics of indigenous Bolivian identity

Guy Stewart examines the downfall of Bolivia's longest-serving president and whether it risks energising anti-indigenous sentiment in national politics.

The political implosion of Bolivia's first indigenous president, Evo Morales, was marked by significant controversy. After becoming the longest-serving president in the nation's history, Morales' rapid downfall in 2019 was welcomed by communities in Bolivia and around the world. Claims that his government had rigged the election, along with his undeniable manipulation of election laws preventing him from vying for a fourth term, make for a lamentable contrast to the hope offered in his inauguration as the first president of Aymara descent. However, to relegate Morales to the infamous group of authoritarian 'Caudillos' that have historically brought economic ruin and distress to many Latin American states would be an unjust denial of the success his government had in the socioeconomic development of Bolivia (Krauze 2014). His legacy as the first president to emancipate the indigenous population and make strides in the protection of their cultural identity can still be upheld.

The electoral vote of 2019 catalysed the most turbulent year in Bolivian politics in recent memory. The election was destined for controversy, following Morales' widely criticised manipulation of constitutional law that would have prevented him from running for a fourth term. In a 2016 referendum, he asked the people to vote on an extension of term limits (Collins and Watts 2016). Meeting failure, he claimed it was a 'violation' of his human rights not to permit his continuation as candidate for his party, *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement for Socialism, or MAS) (Reuters 2017). His power over the courts produced a ruling in his favour, and he succeeded in extending his term (Slattery 2019). The Bolivian people, having suffered a history of authoritarian governments and fearful of a local replication of neighbouring violent Venezuelan politics, were rightly anxious about the state of their democracy (Kovarnik 2018). Protests from both pro- and anti-Morales camps ensued, and when he won the election of 2019, tolerance reached a breaking point.

While Morales undeniably defied constitutional law on term limits, further attacks on his integrity served to support the opposition's campaign. After a delay in vote counts raised questions, an investigation was launched by the Organisation of American States (OAS) (Ramos 2019). The organisation, which receives 60 percent of its funding from the US, expressed concerns with the legitimacy of the vote, claiming MAS had rigged the outcome (Lee and Renwick 2019). However, the Centre for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) found in their own investigation that the OAS did not provide sufficient evidence to back such claims, and that there was nothing to suggest any illegitimacy in the election results (Long et al. 2019). It is important not to downplay Morales' obvious corruption towards the end of his presidency; he defied the constitution both electorally and ideologically, pushing through infrastructure policy that negatively impacted indigenous people (Postero 2017, 131). However, the opposition's campaign to defame Morales' government and political movement meant possibly endangering the support for pro-indigenous politics that revolutionised Bolivia.

The political security and representation of the indigenous population is further compromised by the interim president, Jeanine Añez. A *mestizo* (of mixed Spanish and indigenous descent) opposition senator at the time of Morales' resignation, Añez declared herself president following Morales' exile to Mexico (BBC 2019). Although accusations that Morales' deposition was a coup remain contested, Añez has been clear in her political message (Chang et al. 2019). Despite holding no legitimate power, marching into office with a Bible in hand and the support of the military at her back, she has already suggested disallowing MAS from running a candidate in the next election (Krauss 2019; Open Democracy 2019). Añez also has a problematically racist

past, claiming that indigenous culture is 'satanic' and that it has no place in politics (Open Democracy 2019). This resurgence in indigenous discrimination is also made evident by the police, who killed pro-Morales protesters and were seen tearing the *Wiphala* (the indigenous flag that Morales instituted alongside Bolivia's independence-era flag) from their uniforms (Kurmanaev and Krauss 2019). While the opposition think they are restoring democracy after the corruption of Morales' presidency, they are in fact an elite minority that is unrepresentative of and threatening to indigenous identity.

This emancipation of the indigenous population came about with Morales' revolutionary political movement, which saw him inaugurated as President in 2006. Growing in political power from a Coca Union Leader to the founder of MAS, Morales' populist movement brought necessary change that Bolivia's indigenous population had been starved of for centuries (Postero 2017, 30). The party itself grew from a syndicate of *campesinos* (peasants) and *cocaleros* (coca farmers) in the mid-90s (Postero 2017, 30). It was, from its nascency, the exemplification of a political party that truly represents the indigenous community: its slogan was '*somos pueblo, somos MAS*' ('we are the people, we are MAS') (Postero 2017, 33). While the party was a revolutionary populist movement, it did not set out to destroy extant political institutions, but rather to develop them for the bettering of Bolivia's society (Quiroga and Pagliarone 2014, 212). This was to be accomplished through the amalgamation of indigenous culture and socialism as a new political ideology. The promotion of indigenous culture, history, and music became key for the popularisation of Morales' political movement, but the politicisation of indigenous culture was more than regalia (Stobart 2019). The key to MAS politics was the indigenous concept of *Vivir Bien* ('Live Well'), which seeks a more harmonious and holistic relationship between society and the environment (Wever 2017). While Morales has been criticised for promoting *Vivir Bien* while simultaneously continuing extractive economic practices (the extraction and sale of natural resources), the neoliberal economy that he inherited made it hard for such radical change to be implemented (Postero 2017, 34).

Perhaps the most salient example of the emancipation of the indigenous communities of Bolivia is the new constitution of 2009. Morales set up the Constituent Assembly of indigenous people to re-create the constitution, producing the Plurinational State of Bolivia with aims of ending centuries of discrimination (Postero 2017, 118-21). The constitution positively impacted the indigenous community with the creation of antiracism laws, protections for the coca plant, and the reformation of land and farming laws, all of which are fundamental to the self-determination of the indigenous communities (Stobart 2019; Webber 2017). Jason Wolff, Senior Research Fellow at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, argues that the constitution of 2009 result of the indigenous-led political movement leaves 'no doubt that both Bolivia's government and the new parliament are more representative today than ever before' (Wolff 2011, 5).

Furthermore, Morales' brand of socialism did not just support indigenous identity, but it supported living standards as well. Bolivia has a majority indigenous or indigenous-identifying population, and before Morales' presidency they represented some of the poorest in Latin America (Postero 2017, 26; Stauffer 2018). With the introduction of socialist redistributive policies and the nationalisation of industries that had previously been foreign-owned - with gas being the most significant - Morales was able to rebalance the Bolivian economy (Pineo 2016). Morales' presidency can be characterised by a list of socioeconomic successes: doubling the GDP per capita, which remains one of the highest in Latin America, and the bringing down the poverty rate from two-thirds to just one-third of the population (Pineo 2016, 434-5). Poverty reduction policies have specifically targeted the worst-off, but they are as indiscriminatory as they are universally available (Pineo 2016, 436). Hence, Morales' socialist programme not only directly benefitted the indigenous population, but it guarded against replicating the discrimination seen in past political eras.

Morales' new socialist Plurinational State of Bolivia allowed for the emancipation of the indigenous population through wealth redistribution and by combating the foreign interventionism and imperialism that supported the previous neoliberal system. Indigenous Bolivians faced many challenges in the neoliberal era under a system riddled with conflict. To eliminate the rampant drug problem on their own soil, the US sought the eradication of Bolivian coca farms (Postero 2017, 29). Not only was this culturally aggressive, as the coca plant holds great significance for the indigenous people, but it also created a strenuous economic climate: the neoliberal economic system at the time supported so few industries - especially for the indigenous population - that the burgeoning market for the coca plant was a guaranteed avenue for income (Pineo 2016, 429).

Their eradication represents an insurmountable problem for the indigenous community. The US-led war on drugs was also physically aggressive: security forces committed human rights abuses against coca farmers (Gamarra 2007, 14). Morales has opposed such destructive foreign aggression through the expulsion of the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and organisations aiding its operations (Pineo 2016, 433). The protection of the coca plant in the 2009 constitution, along with continued military and police efforts to tackle drug trafficking, has legitimised this industry for the indigenous population (Wolff 2011, 5). Most importantly, enshrining the right to grow such a culturally important plant means strengthening and protecting the expression of indigenous identity in Bolivia.

Despite Morales' rejection of US imperialism, it continued to challenge the power of his government. The decline in financial support from the US over the period of Morales' presidency is attributable to his expulsion of US organisations and politicians, however, the reduction in aid was also seen in Carlos Mesa's preceding government (Wolff 2011, 10). This is particularly important if we also consider the evidence of continued American support for the anti-socialist and anti-Morales opposition. Through its aid policy 'Fortalecimiento de Instituciones Democráticas' (Strengthening of Democratic Institutions, or FIDEM), the US supported opposition groups at a regional government level (Wolff 2011, 11). Thus, historical and continued US intervention made it 'part and party to Bolivia's internal conflicts' and the conflict between the socialist and neoliberal agendas that directly impact the indigenous population (Wolff 2011, 17).

Furthermore, the United States has not shied away from influencing the present course of Bolivian politics. The instalment of Jeanine Añez as interim president is not only marred by her problematic character, but many also believe that public support from the US puts her legitimacy into question (Changet al. 2019). This is undoubtedly because she wishes to see a return to neoliberal politics and economics, a system which is fundamental to the United States' hegemony in the Americas (Petras and Veltmeyer 2007). Are we therefore seeing the surfacing of a scheme employed by the US to dismantle a socialist government, evidenced in their support for Morales opposers? It is hard to prove such a claim, but it remains certain that a political revolution, key to the emancipation of the indigenous people and their identity, is now under an onslaught which echoes racist and discriminatory politics and policies of the past.

Evo Morales' presidency crumbled because of his corrupt and unconstitutional desire to retain power (Johnson 2019). He began to ignore the very people that drove his instalment as Bolivia's first indigenous president, and with that his government lost sight of its core ideology. However, with such a revolution taking place, Morales faced challenges to his movement from the beginning. If Bolivia sees the reinstatement of democracy, it will be offered a chance to continue the important changes that Morales and the MAS set about making. The danger of the current political climate and the anti-Morales sentiment is that the opposition see it as legitimising their anti-indigenous campaign. We are witnessing a resurgence in Bolivia of the ugliest ghosts from the pre-Morales era, and while they may not have disappeared with the nation's first indigenous president, his emancipation of the indigenous people and support for their identity is a legacy that should not be forgotten.

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