



The Landslide in Bolivia

Introduction to Álvaro García Linera

THE VICTORY OF Evo Morales and the Movimiento al Socialismo coalition in the Bolivian presidential and legislative elections on 18 December 2005, after five years of tumultuous mass protests against Washington-backed privatization and coca eradication programmes, opens a new period in the country's history. In electoral terms, it would be hard to exaggerate the significance of the result. Whereas successful Bolivian presidential candidates usually score below 25 per cent of the popular vote, and none has ever topped 37 per cent, Morales and his vice-president Álvaro García Linera have won 54 per cent, on a turnout of 85 per cent. They carried all the cities except the right-wing stronghold of Santa Cruz, and even took 33 per cent to the Right's 42 per cent in Santa Cruz Department, thanks in large part to García's months of campaigning there, and despite the disqualification of hundreds of thousands of voters on a technicality. Morales is the first Bolivian president ever to have been accorded an absolute majority. In the only country in the western hemisphere in which the bulk of the population identifies itself as indigenous, he is the first indigenous head of state.

The question as to whether a Morales–García government will follow the Lula or the Chávez path—willing subordination to global capital, or robust populist reformism along the lines of Bolivarian social democracy—though pertinent, ignores the distinctiveness of Bolivia's developmental path and its long-standing insurrectionary traditions. MAS itself is not so much a party, in the accepted sense of the term, as a coalition of personalist factions, with that of Morales exercising unquestioned supremacy; it has none of the bureaucratic infrastructure of the Brazilian PT, for example. Formed to represent the coca-growers of Chapare in the 1998 elections, MAS only broke through onto the national stage in 2002, when Morales, the *cocaleros'* charismatic union leader, was just beaten by Sánchez de Lozada for the presidency by 23 to 21 per cent, and MAS became the second largest grouping in the Chamber of Deputies.

MAS has had a complex relationship to the multi-hued mass protests that have, since 2000, successfully overturned the privatization programme in the 'Water War' of Cochabamba; stymied the us-backed coca eradication projects in the Yungas and the Chapare; forced the repeal of an IMF-imposed tax increase, aimed at replenishing state coffers emptied

after Sánchez de Lozada's pro-multinational reforms slashed hydrocarbon royalties from 50 to 18 per cent; rallied against the export of raw Bolivian gas and for its domestic processing, in the Days of October 2003 that saw the ousting of Sánchez de Lozada; and renewed demands for hydrocarbon nationalization in the summer of 2005, bringing down his successor, Carlos Mesa. The MAS central leadership and Morales have often tail-ended these mobilizations, whose common objectives have been to establish sovereign control over national resources and to convoke a constituent assembly to restructure political and economic life.¹ At the same time, MAS has been the only available vehicle for their national articulation.

Morales, born in Oruro in 1959, migrated to the Chapare with his family as a child and was involved in *cocalero* organizing from his early teens; his brother remains in Oruro and has a powerful MAS base there. Álvaro García Linera, his vice-president, was born into a middle-class *mestizo* family in Cochabamba in 1962 and radicalized in high school under the Banzer dictatorship. As a maths and science student at UNAM in Mexico City, 1981–85, he was closely involved in Central American solidarity campaigns against the Reagan-backed counter-insurgencies. Returning to Bolivia, he worked with militant tin miners in the Cédulas Mineras de Base, which later fused with the 'red *ayllu*' wing of the high-plains Aymara peasant movement, forming the EGTK (Tupac Katari Guerrilla Army), one of Latin America's few indigenous-led guerrilla forces, in 1990. His first book, *Crítica de la nación y la nación crítica*, was published in 1989 under the *nom de guerre* Qananchiri—Aymara for 'the one who clarifies things'. *De demonios escondidos y momentos de revolución* came out under the same name in 1991. Captured the following year, García was held indefinitely in Chonchocoro Maximum Security Prison on charges of armed uprising. *Forma valor y forma comunidad de los procesos de trabajo*, published from gaol in 1995, reflected his reading.

After an activist campaign secured the release of the EGTK militants in 1997, García found a post teaching sociology at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés in La Paz, producing, among other works, *Reproletarización* (1999), *La condición obrera* (2001) and *Estado multinacional* (2005). He was a founding member of the radical intellectual forum Comuna in La Paz, contributing a stream of essays to their collections.² A creative interpreter of Bourdieu, García became one of the leading theorists of, and speakers for, Bolivia's rising indigenous, rural and working-class social movements. Following the 2002 elections, his contributions on radio and TV helped redefine the terms of the national debate to reflect the new centrality of

¹ See Forrest Hylton and Sinclair Thomson, 'The Chequered Rainbow', NLR 35, Sept–Oct 2005.

² See *El regreso de la Bolivia plebeya*, 2000; *Tiempos de rebelión*, 2001; *Pluriverso: Teoría política boliviana*, 2001; *Democratizaciones plebeyas*, 2002; *Memorias de octubre*, 2004; *Horizontes y límites del Estado y el poder*, 2005.

these currents and their demands. As an educated *mestizo* who had taken up arms with the indigenous guerrilla, suffered imprisonment yet not reneged, García had acquired a particular prestige and legitimacy in the eyes of many in the popular movements. When, in the summer of 2005, Morales and his advisors invited him to stand as vice-presidential candidate for MAS, of which he was not a member, García asked that the social movements be given time to express their views, rather than agreeing to a *caudillo* arrangement.

As García describes in the essay published below, 'State Crisis and Popular Power', written before the elections, Bolivia currently confronts a crisis both of the colonial republican state and of the neoliberal model. The new Morales–García government will be faced with an entrenched economic and political elite, with powerful agribusiness interests in the eastern part of the country arguing for regional autonomy. It will come under strong pressure from oil and gas multinationals, led by Brazil's Petrobras and Spain's Repsol, over nationalization, and from the US Embassy over coca production and relations with Caracas and Havana.

Though MAS will have a bare majority in the Chamber of Deputies, having won 65 out of 130 seats in December, it will be in a minority in the new Senate, elected under the ferociously disproportional system favoured by Bolivia's political caste (in each of the nine Departments, the lead party gets two seats, the second party one). MAS has 12 Senate seats out of 27; PODEMOS, the new conservative coalition, has 13 seats; the MNR and UN each have one—the electoral collapse of the former being another significant outcome of the polls. In addition, the right has won six of the nine departmental Prefectures—comparable to US state governors' mansions—including not only Santa Cruz but Cochabamba and La Paz; MAS holds only Oruro, Potosí and Chuquisaca, making regional resistance to central government initiatives likely. As Morales's chief economic advisor Carlos Villegas has pointed out, MAS also suffers from a lack of competent administrators.

Morales has announced that it is the new Constituent Assembly, to be elected in July 2006, that will determine sovereignty over Bolivia's mineral and hydrocarbon deposits and set parameters for relations with the multinationals, as well as crafting more representative political institutions. The MAS programme also calls for the right of households to cultivate a half-hectare of coca for personal use, while condemning narcotrafficking. Unlike the Lula government, that of Morales faces pressure from highly mobilized popular movements, and will have to meet some of their expectations if it is to avoid confronting the street protests that toppled two Bolivian presidents in as many years. Cultural concessions may come cheap. But the demand that gas reserves be processed domestically, for value added, rather than exported raw by the MNCs at bargain prices, remains crucial for the national development of a country

where three-quarters of rural homes lack electricity. If the party, such as it is, attempts to rule *over* the movements, Morales and García will find themselves vulnerable from the Right and, within their own ranks, to advocates of more vertical, *caudillista* modes of command. Alternatively, MAS might seek to devise ways to strengthen the movements that brought it to executive and legislative power, thus recasting relations between state and society so as to expand opportunities for political participation. A failure to move towards a solution of the social and political crisis currently confronting Bolivia, however, may bolster the attractions of maximalism, both on the *altiplano* and in Santa Cruz.