



BOLIVIA SWEARS IN FIRST INDIAN PRESIDENT

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Evo Morales, the first Indian elected president of the South American nation of Bolivia, was sworn in Sunday.

Promising to improve the situation for the poor by reclaiming natural resources and moving away from U.S. policies, Morales demonstrated a continuing shift to the left in Latin American politics.

Thousands of people filled the streets of La Paz, Bolivia's capital, to celebrate the swearing in of Morales, 46, a former coca farmer and Aymara Indian who broke into tears as he took his oath of office.

Morales, who spoke in both Spanish and his native Aymara, expressed his joy at seeing so many indigenous Bolivians, who make up more than 60 percent of the population, celebrating in the colonial city's main plazas.

"Forty or 50 years ago, we didn't even have the right to enter the Plaza San Francisco or the Plaza Murillo," he said.

Political upheaval

Locked between Peru, Chile, Argentina and Brazil, with no access to the ocean for trade or fishing, Bolivia is among the poorest countries in Latin America.

Roughly two-thirds of Bolivians live on less than \$2 a day.

Morales comes to power after a period of political turmoil. Between 2003 and 2005 massive street protests against gas policies and government intervention in business toppled two Bolivian presidents.

Morales was elected with 54 percent of the vote in December after promising to reverse years of poverty and political domination by the country's rich elite.

He has protested the "neo-liberal" economic policies of the United States, a term that many in the region use to describe free trade.

Morales has said that he welcomes dialogue with the United States, which he refers to as "the empire."

“If the empire wants to support us, the support will be welcome,” he said. “With the United States, we want agreements, but not subordination.”

Coca eradication

Once the leader of the Bolivia’s coca farmers, Morales has long protested the U.S.-backed coca eradication plans.

Coca, the main ingredient in the illegal drug cocaine, should be grown for medicinal and traditional uses, Morales has said, though he also has promised to fight the drug trade.

“This political tool for the sovereignty of the people -- legally called the movement toward socialism -- was born to defend this coca leaf, to defend our land and territory,” Morales said while campaigning.

Bolivia has become the world's third largest cocaine producer. Last year, the United States spent about \$150 million to combat cocaine production and trafficking.

Rich in natural gas reserves

Bolivia also has large reserves of natural gas, which is used to fuel millions of homes in the United States.

Morales has promised to take over the gas reserves from the large oil and gas companies that have bought the rights to extract and sell the gas.

“It’s just not possible that Bolivians are (sitting) on top of the gas and going without gas. This has to end,” Morales said while visiting neighbor Argentina in the days before his inauguration.

Industry analysts believe that Morales is more likely to renegotiate oil company contracts, set higher taxes and stricter controls over production levels and prices, rather than wholly take over the industry, the BBC reported.

“He's going to drive a harder bargain and make sure that Bolivians get something from their resources. And he's in a very good position to do so,” Mark Weisbrot, from the Center for Economic and Policy Research, told the NewsHour.

Can change come quickly enough?

During his inauguration speech, Morales pledged to change the harsh reality that is life for many Bolivians

"We are here to change our history," Morales said. "This is the conscience of the people, our people, the fight of our people."

But critics worry that Morales will not be able to work quickly enough to make changes that will satisfy his left-leaning supporters.

They include Gregorio Machicado Quispe, 48, who told the New York Times, "We expect a complete change."

"The government needs to favor the poor, suffering classes," he said. "We have to control the wealth here in Bolivia."

And although he promised to be a "nightmare to the United States," Morales seems to have softened that stance since the election. He met with U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Shannon Saturday, to discuss how to continue a U.S.-Bolivian dialogue.

"We want the Bolivian people to succeed and for the Bolivian people to succeed, this government needs to succeed," Shannon said.

Bolivia joins a growing list of South American nations that have elected left-leaning candidates.

Last week, Chile elected Michelle Bachelet from the Socialist Party, joining leftist governments in Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay.

--Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra

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