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Bolivia

"A government of the poor, for the poor"

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Juan Ramon Quintana had hardly had time to settle into his new job as Minister of the Presidency (which is what the Prime Minister is called in Bolivia) when he welcomed our Bolivian correspondent to his office in the Government Palace and gave him the interview that follows. He took the occasion to discuss the composition of the new government, which has a radical profile, as well as the tasks facing Evo Morales and his ministers. The interview was first published in the February 2nd issue of Rouge, weekly paper of the LCR (French section of the Fourth International).

Rouge: The governmental cabinet does not come across as one that will bring tranquillity to the markets and to the United States. Is this a political signal that Evo Morales wanted to send?

Juan Ramon Quintana - I think that this cabinet brings together the aspirations for change in Bolivian political life, insofar as it is made up of personalities who are close to the people, close to ordinary people. The ministers are people who have worked with the social movements, who have fought against the neo-liberal order, and they, more than anyone else, illustrate the virtues of resistance. They have the opportunity to learn how to govern.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/moralesdancesIV.jpg>]

They have been chosen according to several criteria: this is a constellation that is representative of Bolivian society. There are four women, which is a first in Bolivian history. It is also a cabinet that reflects the participation of social movements. There is also a regional representation, there are intellectuals and university professors, as well as businessmen. In other words, we have managed to find a democratic, plural and coherent formula that illustrates this desire for change.

The appointment of Andres Soliz Rada also comes over as a strong signal to the oil companies, insofar as he has always defended the nationalization of gas, without making any concessions to them.

Andres Soliz is a great fighter, who has always fought for the state to have sovereignty over its natural resources. He expresses an ideological struggle against the forms of imperialist domination of the United States, whether or not they are explicit. It is the continuity of the frustrated desire of nationalism that has existed since the 1930s. He is the heir of this current. He is not only an intellectual, but also someone who has taken part in social struggles.

We were surprised by the appointment of Casimira Rodriguez to head the Ministry of Justice. It is an incredibly strong signal to appoint a cleaning woman to this post!

It is the historic demand of a big majority of cleaning women who have always been marginalized, who are invisible to society, mistreated and excluded, treated like animals in our society. These women do not occupy a domestic space, but suffer every form of violence. Casimira Rodriguez illustrates the struggle against this centuries-long injustice against women of whom the majority do not have social security, citizenship, sometimes not even an identity card.

As concerns the military general staff, will there also be surprises?

I think that we are above all going to insist on the line laid down by the president, with criteria of selection based on respect for institutions, on respect for moral and ethical conduct, and lastly on a moral and patriotic reserve to defend the nation. These are the criteria that will guide our choice in this domain.

You have previously stated that the police and the army will no longer be an appendage of the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), which coordinates the anti-drug struggle in Bolivia and in Latin America. Do you maintain this attitude?

Yes. A chapter of the political history of Bolivia, these last twenty years, has been the lending out of soldiers and police, who have been subordinated to foreign governments. Our government is going to restore sovereignty, by regaining it at the heart of the state, with the army and the police.

Are we also entering into anew cycle of relations with Chile?

Yes, we think so, we are optimistic on this subject. Two new presidents are together entering a new epoch for Latin America. There is a sincere leadership on the part of the Socialist Party in Chile. Chile is showing signs of breaking with the traditional conservatism that has characterized its relations with Bolivia. Our president has the strongest historical legitimacy to be able to resolve the dispute that has separated us from this country for such a long time.

Is the appointment of Soliz Rada also the sign that the relations between Bolivia and its neighbours on the energy question are going to change?

Yes, because the changes in the organization of the executive power are going to illustrate the profound transformations of the state, first of all on the economic level. We are going towards a mixed economy, no longer a 100 per cent market economy. An economy where the state will be a central actor of the productive sector, where it will be the organiser of the economy, on a national level and abroad, for example in the energy domain.

The time has also come to put in place a government of the poor by the poor, with a presence of indigenous people that is no longer the caricature that was offered by Sanchez de Lozada from 1993 to 1997. We also need the presence of women. But this government is showing signs of being effective in terms of public investments, of the fight against corruption, discrimination and impunity.

These will be the axes of transformation of the state. Corruption was the weapon of state functionaries. Exclusion was the sign of racism. All that is going to change with this government.

One of the balance sheets we can draw from the inauguration of Evo Morales seems to be the symbolic affirmation of a rapprochement with Cuba and Venezuela, within what is being called "the axis of good". Do you share this perception?

I think that the relations between Bolivia, Havana and Caracas are taking on a new dimension on the level of cooperation in the fields of education, health, technique, etc. That is also reinforcing the nationalist line of our government on the energy question. There is a convergence with certain policies of Cuba and Venezuela. This axis is going to have to all intents and purposes the same status, in terms of its relevance, as the Buenos Aires, Brasilia, Montevideo, Asuncion axis has for Bolivia.

In the region, our insertion must be based on energy, while our cooperation with the Caribbean has more to do with social cooperation. These two axes are an equation for the unity of Latin America. There is no supremacy of one of the two axes over the other. They are complementary axes, which enable us to maintain an equilibrium in the region and to be less vulnerable to external instability.

It is a virtuous equilibrium where, for the first time in its history, Bolivia has an incredibly important weight for

exercising an indigenous leadership. We are going to export our specific leadership in the region.

Are you going to develop a "coca diplomacy", in favour of its depenalisation?

Yes, we are going to insist in Europe, in Asia and elsewhere, on this policy which the president has called "zero drug traffic, but not zero cocalero". What Evo Morales means is that we have to revalorise coca through its many possible uses, not only commercial but also and especially medical, for the health of humanity.

We have to give the coca leaf a humanitarian connotation. That obliges us to extend our markets for legal consumption of coca, in the first place with our neighbours. Because of the criminalisation of the coca leaf in recent years, we cannot make visible what could be called the other frontiers of the coca leaf. They have tarred us with this question, to the point of making our people doubt its own beliefs concerning this leaf and its importance in our culture.

Despite the important post you hold, you remain a personality who is not well known, even in Bolivia. Could you introduce yourself to our readers in a few words?

I have had a rather strange personal trajectory. When I was small, I wanted to be a priest, and I finally ended up in the army. Once I was in the army, I wanted to become a lawyer in order to defend those who were poorest and who were mistreated in the army, and that is how I became a sociologist. As a sociologist I wanted to work on the sociology of violence, and I ended up by becoming involved in politics. Now that I am a politician, I am wondering how my engagement as a soldier in the service of the people will end.