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Bolivia

The challenge for Morales

- IV Online magazine - 2006 - IV377 - April 2006 -

Publication date: Wednesday 12 April 2006

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We obviously do not yet know what this new experience of a party in power that has come from social movements, will lead to. Nevertheless, from the time of the nomination of the government cabinet, Morales clearly distinguished himself from Lula da Silva and Tabare Vazquez, by proposing a team that gets away from the traditional schema of the division between economic ministries that were given to technocrats and political and social ministries directed by militants of the party. [1] In welcoming in its ranks intellectuals from the middle classes as well as genuine Masista militants who have been for a long time in social struggles, the government is after all very representative of what the MAS is today: an attempt at articulating social movements whose demands are sometimes marked by corporatism, and the body of "professionals and technicians" who are ready to place themselves at their service. [2]

The internal difficulties that threaten the government's cohesion are in fact very comparable to those that the MAS has previously experienced and is still experiencing. These difficulties can seem all the more marked because of the absence of a leadership with a coherent political project, which is illustrated by the systematic failure of every attempt to define a Masista ideology.

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

Morales is being closely watched by all sides

This carries a strong risk of involving the government cabinet in resolving "public problems" on a one-off basis, thus demonstrating its weaknesses and reinforcing the role of the "chief".

The task of articulating the strictly union demands coming from different social sectors could prove to be impossible in the long term: an interesting case is the position of the government on the Free Trade Agreement (TLC) with the United States. Morales publicly opposed this on March 16, 2006, enforcing silence on the Minister of Labour, Santiago Galvez, who had however taken a position in favor of the agreement during the campaign - in his capacity as a trade union leader of factory workers.

The nomination of Galvez had given rise to congratulations from leaders who are opposed to the MAS because of its reformism. So this case underlines how certain social movements that are supposedly "radical" know very well how to combine a revolutionary discourse with economic "pragmatism". [3]

In this context, where even within the government, the lack of "political" cadres makes itself felt, it is very likely that the "invited" intellectuals will once again have considerable influence on the political orientation of the MAS and of the government. "Defence of democracy" as an objective superior to all others seems to be being replaced by the "way out of the crisis through pacts" proposed by [Vice-President] Alvaro Garcia Linera. Despite his radical past as an indigenist guerrilla, Garcia Linera, who is already the theoretician of "Andean-Amazonian capitalism" of which the aim is to create a "productive shock" in Bolivia to resolve chronic poverty, seems to be making permanent negotiations with the right-wing social sectors in Bolivia one of the criteria of the building of a "new Bolivia". The risk here is that despite their corporatist tendencies and the presence in the government of some of their leaders, the social movements will be increasingly marginalized - within a process that is however being conducted in their name - in favor of the "pact" with the elites who yesterday governed the country.

To these internal difficulties must of course be added many external constraints.

First of all there is obviously the pressure of the Bush administration, which seems to have decided to give the new

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Bolivian government no breathing space. Over and above the various minor diplomatic incidents provoked by the United States, whose effect is essentially symbolic, (like the withdrawal of the visa granted to the Cocalera leader Leonilda Surita, who was accused without any proof of having links with terrorist organizations), the loss by Bolivia of the Colombian soya market because of the signature in February 2006 of a TLC between that country and the United States (which is likely to lead in the next year to the loss of more than 10,000 jobs), reminds us, if it was necessary, that the means of pressure on the Morales government that the powerful neighbor has are numerous. This also encourages the questionings of whether or not Bolivia has "the means of a rupture" [with imperialism and the Bolivian elites], which are illustrated even by the MAS's own discourse - for example on the nationalization of hydrocarbons, where it systematically oscillates between radicality and moderation.

It remains very difficult looking at its first steps to know whether the Morales government will or will not go forward to a rupture.

Certainly this new government has taken courageous decision, like the refusal to negotiate a TLC with the United States, in favor of a TCP (Commercial Agreement for the Peoples) whose content remains to be defined; the suspension of the call for tenders concerning the iron deposits of Mutun so as to revise a mining code that is much too favourable to private companies; or the 100% increase in the Bolivian minimum wage (from 440 to 880 Bolivianos, that is, from US\$55 to US\$110).

But parallel to this, the law convening the election of the Constituent Assembly, negotiated according to the line of "a way out of the crisis through pacts" of Garcia Linera, seems at first sight unsatisfactory compared to the demands of the social movements: no representation of either indigenous or trade union organizations; limiting of the powers of the Constituent Assembly by maintaining in place the present Congress and by using the present Constitution as a working base...

However, although this law was in fact a so-called "special" law which required a two-thirds majority in Congress, which the MAS does not have and which consequently required a consensus with the Right, it is striking to note that the MAS leadership refused after having envisaged it, to have recourse to mass mobilizations to exert pressure on the Right in Congress. This is all the more worrying in that the right-wing political forces seem to be still suffering from the shock of their rout on December 18, 2005, are politically inaudible and only maintain a potential for contesting the government's action through the Pro-Santa Cruz Civic Committee. This constituent assembly - the demand for which has been maintained by social movements for more than 15 years now - is already being denounced by certain social movements outside the MAS, in particular the COB trade union confederation.

In fact, there is still a space for the "social Left" despite the presence of the MAS in government. Represented by leaders such as Jaime Solares, Felipe Quispe, Edgar Patana, and especially Oscar Olivera (spokesperson for the Coordinadora de Defensa del Agua y el Gas which arose from the "water war" in 2000 in Cochabamba, who is a sympathizer of the MAS but wants to keep his independence), this Left continues to have a potential for mobilization independent of the government, making it possible for it to involve, as it has done in the past, the rank and file of the MAS in the social mobilization that could develop around the debates over the nationalization of gas. This can act as a counterweight to the tendency that exists within the MAS to subject the social movements to the action of the government, as Alvaro Garcia suggested during an interview given to the newspaper Pagina 12. Asked about the contestation of the draft law convoking the Constituent Assembly by certain organizations within the MAS itself, he replied: "These movements have not yet taken the measure of the historic moment that they are living through, since it is now they who occupy the seats of power. But in the stage that we are going through, this is no doubt normal". [4]

This can also lead us to think that the Masista government is not for the moment condemned to repeat the disillusion of the experiences in neighbouring countries. And that we can still believe that a government that comes out of struggles, maintains an "organic" link with social movements and relies on their development, can be a force

for social transformation.

[1] On the composition of the Morales government see "[The Morales government](#)", International Viewpoint 375, February 2006; and also James Petras, "El peculiar comienzo de Evo Morales", February 2006 and Pablo Stefanoni, "El peculiar sociología de James Petras". The latter two documents can be consulted on the web site <salaprensa.free.fr-> <http://www.salaprensa.free.fr>>.

[2] The singularity of the MAS as a "political party" lies in the theorized rejection of any idea of building a party apparatus, thus making the local branches of the MAS, including in the urban areas, a sort of "general assemblies of social movements". At a time of the renewal of social movements in Latin America and the debates flowing from that on relations with state power, it is interesting to note that the MAS - IPSP is the only party which has adopted a structure - we could even say an absence of structure - which places radically at its centre the social movements that take part in it. This choice distinguishes it from the Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in Mexico or the Movement of Patriotic Unity Pachakutik - New Country (MUPP-NP) in Ecuador.

[3] In this respect the town of El Alto is a case that is extremely interesting because of electoral sociology. Although it was the epicentre of the two "gas wars" of October 2003 and May-June 2005, its population elected twice in a row as mayor, in 1999 and 2004, Jose Luis Paredes, a former member of the MIR who has just one the prefectural elections in La Paz, standing for the coalition led by the principal right-wing candidate, Jorge "Tuto Quiroga".

Paredes explained to the Argentinian newspaper Pagina 12 during the 2004 election that he "(had) made the choice of centering (his) campaign on the signature of a free trade agreement with United States". Although the inhabitants of El Alto have become the heralds of the social struggle, they have nonetheless basically remained small traders...

[4] The interview was published on March 13, 2006.