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Bolivia

What will the victory of Morales mean?

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Evo Morales, leader of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), won the December 18 presidential election with surprising ease. With 51% of the vote on the first round - more than 15% more than the polls predicted - Morales won outright on the first round. But what is the MAS? What does its victory mean?

The general elections of December 18th, 2005, was a result of a compromise between President Rodriguez and the social movements at the end of the crisis of May-June. Calling the election was key in getting the mobilizations called off.

They have now led to the victory of the president of the MAS-IPSP (Movement Towards Socialism-Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples), who embodies for many people the social struggles that the Republic has experienced since 2000 and the “water war” in Cochabamba.

If the victory of the MAS means the coming to power of a Left that has been excluded from it since the failure of the government of the UDP (Popular Democratic Union) faced with the economic crisis of 1985, it is nevertheless a Left whose background, sources, traditions and contemporary reality are complex and varied.

The MAS-IPSP, a party at the crossroads between the indigenous, left and nationalist traditions

The electoral successes of the MAS at the general elections of 2002, then at the municipal elections in 2004 (in spite of not winning control of any major city), although they expressed the undeniable popularity of Evo Morales, were also and above all the symbol of the irruption into the political field of a peasant and indigenous movement that is consolidating itself.

This movement, born at the beginning of the 1990s, is in a certain sense the result of a process of the creation of a “political instrument” that made possible the direct representation of Bolivian peasant and indigenous organisations [1].

The unions of coca growers, engaged since the end of the 1980s in a conflict with the Bolivian Army, which has the support of the American DEA (Drug enforcement Agency), were among its founders.

[https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/evo_morales_1-2.jpg]

Evo Morales

The aim of this “political instrument” is among other things, to favour a representation that is called “organic” of these union militants, through the collective adhesion of their organisations. The establishment of such a structural mechanism can be interpreted, in view of the history of this movement, as a double precaution. First of all in relation to the Katarist movement.

Katarism, in reference to the indigenous leader Tupac Katari who led an uprising around La Paz at the end of 18th century, is a current that contributed to the renewal of a peasant unionism that had up to then been allied to the

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military regimes. Its leaders sought to fight against the cooptation of union leaders and to elaborate an Indianist ideology which they could use as a support for struggles. [2], initially a cultural movement which emerged at the beginning of the 1970s, whose main objective was to rehabilitate an indigenous identity that was perceived to be oppressed and denied.

The Katarist leaders, among them Genaro Flores and Victor Hugo Cardenas, succeeded in making peasant unionism a bastion of the resistance to the military dictatorships, whereas up till then it had been one of their most loyal supports [3].

However, after democratisation, the entry into politics of the Katarist leaders led to a continual division of this movement and only generated a long line of small, sectarian political parties, whose forces were infinitely smaller than those of the United Union Confederation of Working Peasants of Bolivia (CSUTCB). Ideologically influenced by Katarism, in particular in its defence of a multi-ethnic and multicultural Bolivia, the leaders of the MAS never ceased to consider this current as a negative example from the organisational point of view.

The other decisive factor was the desire to build up a relationship of forces with the Left, which saw and still sees the peasant movement as a stepping-stone to its own emancipation. This virtually systematic disdain for a movement considered to be incapable of leading the social struggles of the country is illustrated by the statutes, still in force, of the Bolivian Workers' Confederation (COB), which attribute the leading role of the trade union entity to the miners, enthroned as the vanguard of the Bolivian proletariat (see the interview with Jaime Solares in this issue).

This is a paradox, when we know today that the miners, crushed by the neo-liberal reforms of 1985, have been reduced to a shadow of their former selves, while the peasants, reinforced numerically by the coca growers of whom many come from...the mines, have a representation within the COB that is inversely proportional to their weight in the political arena.

The virtual absence of a party apparatus, desired and theorised by the leaders of the "political instrument" in the name of the "organic" relations between the MAS and the organisations that are part of it, had however unexpected consequences on the social composition of the party and its leading bodies. As the general elections of 2002 approached [4] the lack of political cadres as well as the desire to attract the votes of the "urban middle classes" pushed Evo Morales in person to launch numerous invitations to intellectuals who came from the Left.

As a symbol, he chose Antonio Peredo, journalist and former Guevarist of the Communist Party, brother of Inti and Coco Peredo who had taken part in Che's guerrilla movement, as candidate for the vice-presidency.

The success obtained in 2002 (the MAS won more than 20 per cent of the votes and 35 members of parliament, thus becoming the second biggest party in Bolivia) therefore had the unexpected consequence of pushing into prominence personalities from the classical Left, foreign to the indigenist currents, within a party which mixes together in an atypical way two political traditions that had up to then carefully maintained independence from each other.

These two traditions nevertheless remain solidly attached to each other by a strong nationalist feeling, born among the peasants from opposition to the interference of the United States in Bolivian political life in general, and on the question of coca in particular, and coming from the anti-imperialist tradition within the Left.

In a certain fashion, the MAS took over the "revolutionary nationalism" that was defended for many years by the Revolutionary Nationalist Movement (MNR) up until its conversion to neo-liberalism in 1985, while expressing Katarist and to a lesser extent, Marxist ideas [5].

The social movements are still divided as the elections approach

Despite the preponderant weight of the MAS in the field of left politics, the Bolivian social movement remains strongly divided, in particular because of corporatist logics linked to local issues, and some of them sometimes appear to be radically critical of the party of Evo Morales.

However, it is the unity of the social movements, through the signing of a pact of revolutionary unity regrouping the MAS, the Pachakuti Indigenous Movement (MIP), the COB, the two CSUTCBs [6] and the organisations of El Alto, in March 2005, that was at the origin of the fall of the government of Carlos Mesa [7].

This unity quickly broke up, because of dissensions concerning the nationalisation of gas (the MAS was for a long time favourable to a "50-50" solution, before becoming a late convert to nationalisation) and from the traditional competition between leaderships that is so characteristic of Bolivian social movements.

To confront this problem, Evo Morales thought he had found the candidate who would make it possible to draw towards him the last movements who remained reticent, in the person of Alvaro Garcia Linera. This sociologist, who had become popular thanks in particular to his television appearances as a political analyst, is in fact a former comrade in struggle of Felipe Quispe, the leader of the MIP, who was imprisoned at the beginning of the 1990s for his activities in the Tupac Katari Guerrilla Army (EGTK).

Since then, he has basically confined himself to academic activities, while maintaining contacts with all the Bolivian social movements, without exception. When he agreed in mid-August to be the candidate of the MAS, it was with the ambition of regrouping on the same list, but behind Evo Morales, all the movements, with the aim of guaranteeing the broadest unity of the working-class, indigenous and intellectual Left.

Today this attempt by Alvaro Garcia and Evo Morales seems to have only half succeeded. The alliances achieved by the leadership of the MAS do in fact go beyond the traditional allies of the party: thus, among them we can count the Movement Without Fear (MSM) of the mayor of La Paz, Juan del Granado; many small left parties such as the Democratic Socialist Party (PSD) or the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of Bolivia (PCMLB, Maoist) which has a base in El Alto, and working-class sectors like the Confederation of Pensioners of Bolivia, the National Confederation of Micro and Small Businessmen (CONAMYPE) and also the co-operativist miners (FENCOMIN).

However, although this electoral unity of the Left is undoubtedly the broadest since the unity achieved by the UDP in 1982, the most important social leaders have remained outside it. Felipe Quispe is standing again for the MIP, but without much hope of repeating the result he got in 2002, 6 per cent. The division of the CSUTCB seems to have considerably weakened it, and Roman Loayza now comes across as the legitimate leader of the peasants, including in the Altiplano that was traditionally loyal to the "Maliku" [8].

As for Jaime Solares, the executive secretary of the COB, he almost became the vice-presidential candidate of the MIP, but the risk of losing his position in the Confederation seems to have convinced him to change his mind. Furthermore, he seems to be aiming to build a "political instrument of the workers" attached to the COB and the workers' movement, considering, following a very orthodox Marxist vision, that "the working class remains the only class capable of leading the Bolivian people towards its emancipation, not the peasantry" [9].

Both of them were approached by Alvaro Garcia to join the MAS lists. But the failure of such an alliance does not have the same causes according to each side. While Quispe and Solares stress the differences that were expressed during the May-June crisis, Garcia speaks of a simple problem of positions on the lists...A version that does after all

remain quite credible, when you see how the negotiations with the Regional Workers' Confederation (COR) and the Federation of Neighbourhood Committees (FEJUVE) of El Alto, which were largely commented on by the media, failed [10].

Whereas they almost stood for the party of Evo Morales, the leaders of the COR and the FEJUVE are now launching more and more criticisms of the MAS, reproaching it in particular with not according sufficient importance to the creation of a Constituent Assembly. This attitude is not understood on the side of the MAS, as the member of parliament and candidate Gustavo Torrico explains: "a law to convoke the Constituent Assembly that was drawn up by the present parliament would in all likelihood favour maintaining the presence of the most conservative sectors of society in the seats of power".

The incessant criticisms against the MAS have even led certain leaders to relativise the opposition between Evo Morales and the candidates of the Right, Samuel Doria Medina (National Unity UN) and Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga (Democratic Social Power, PODEMOS), in this way giving the impression that the radicalism of their discourse is not necessarily followed up by a consistent attitude in practice. Such is the case of Edgar Patana, leader of the COR of El Alto, who will vote "neither for Tuto nor for Evo. Both of them will have to prove themselves".

This position is not however shared by everyone, as is demonstrated by Jaime Solares, who, although not supporting Morales, nevertheless declares that "the main enemies of the Bolivian people are the neo-liberals and the pro-imperialists, represented by the candidacies of Doria Medina and 'Tuto' Quiroga".

An electoral programme with ambiguous outlines...

If Alvaro Garcia failed somewhat in his attempt to win the favours of the leaders of the most significant social movements outside the MAS, on the other hand he succeeded in what was in a certain fashion the second objective of his candidacy: to involve the intellectuals and the "urban middle class" in the campaign of the MAS.

Around Alvaro Garcia a team of economists and sociologists has taken shape (Carlos Villegas, Juan Ramon Quintana, Elisabeth Salguero...) responsible for drawing up the most important parts of the MAS's programme, under the leadership of the vice-presidential candidate. So although they are integrated into the working commissions on the programme, it is not the principal leaders of the party who have taken charge of this task.

Thus, the phenomenon of "delegation" of political work to individuals whose origins are foreign to the party, which was already present in 2002, seems to have become further accentuated on the occasion of this 2005 campaign. There are very few "organic intellectuals" who come from the peasant and indigenous movement.

On the other hand, the inflow of intellectuals, some coming from the Left like Alvaro Garcia, is tending to modify, sometimes substantially, the programmatic orientations of the MAS, often giving them a "technocratic touch". We cannot however conclude that there is a kind of "sleight of hand" on the part of intellectuals who are taking over the party. It's more a question of what you might call a "reciprocal exchange of legitimacies": Evo Morales, who in his speeches, unceasingly celebrates "the alliance between the peasants and the intellectuals" is trying in this way to make credible the perspective of a MAS government; for the intellectuals, it is a question of legitimising in the political field a learning that is often purely "technical", because it is often disconnected, as a result of their own lack of militant experience, from any political involvement (in particular in the economic sphere).

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The programme of the party takes up many of the aspirations of the majority of social movements: convocation of a Constituent Assembly, nationalisation of hydrocarbons and natural resources, defence and industrialisation of the coca leaf, definition of policies, national as well as foreign, independently of the United States (a demand that is expressed in the slogan: “nationalise the government!”). All of these are points that, as such, conflict with the interests of the North American neighbour, as they conflict with those of the multinationals involved in the business of gas, wood or water (in particular the French companies Total and Suez-Lyonnaise des Eaux).

However, in spite of this apparent radicalism, the MAS is constantly, in the person of Alvaro Garcia, bringing nuances into the positions it takes and frequently proclaiming that no one need fear a Masista government, “except those who have really swindled the people”. This sometimes gave rise to tensions or misunderstandings in the MAS's own campaign: while Morales was demonstrating against the ALCA (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas) alongside Hugo Chavez in Mar del Plata, Alvaro Garcia was explaining that that didn't affect possible bilateral negotiations with the United States for a Free Trade treaty (TLC), a treaty that was desirable “as long as it does not infringe on the economic sovereignty of Bolivia” [11]; While Morales celebrates the fraternity that links him to Chavez or to Fidel Castro, Alvaro confesses his “admiration for European social democracy” and thinks that Venezuela, like “any other state, is above all seeking to satisfy its own interests in the framework of inter-state relations”.

So there is no “revolution” in view, nor very radical measures like a new agrarian reform or an ambitious programme of social aid, which could however seem to be “socially necessary” in a country where extreme poverty reigns. All the more so as Evo Morales has indicated that in spite of the mention in the programme of the repeal of supreme decree 21060, responsible for the massive privatisations of 1985, a Masista government would nevertheless begin to act with neo-liberal laws...

The main radical changes that the programme puts forward are above all in the sphere of production, through the rehabilitation of the state, whose role would be to coordinate the various platforms that comprise the Bolivian economy (large enterprises, communities and artisanal micro-enterprises), what Alvaro Garcia calls “Andean-Amazonian capitalism”, with the aim of producing a “productive shock” that would generate employment and wealth.

But in spite of the apparent moderation of the programme and the pledges constantly given to national and foreign capital by the presidential ticket, it would be a mistake to announce in advance a “Lula-type” scenario in Bolivia in the event of a victory of the MAS.

Some questions, such as the depenalisation of coca that is proposed by Morales, in fact polarise the political landscape and push the US embassy to intervene, certainly discreetly, but effectively, in local political life, as was demonstrated recently by the “missile scandal” [12].

What is more, the polarisation that also intervenes at a regional level should not be without its effects on the MAS government, which, we can imagine, will quickly be forced to choose between Washington and the Caracas-Havana axis [13].

What seems sure today is that the Masista government, unlike the cases of Gutierrez or Lula, will have no respite either from its opposition or from the United States. For them, the victory for Evo is a nightmare, because it calls into question the structures of a colonial state that have always been profitable for them since the Republic was installed in 1825 [14]. The Masista government also has the responsibility of not disappointing the hopes that the popular movements, the poorest and the excluded have placed in it.

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[1] These organisations are the United Union Confederation of Working Peasants of Bolivia (CSUTCB), the Union Confederation of Settlers of Bolivia (CSCB) and the National Federation of Peasant Women of Bolivia (FNCMB), as well as the Confederation of the Indigenous of the East of Bolivia (CIDOB).

[2] Katarism "rebuilt" an indigenous identity, where the Army as well as the MNR governments only saw "peasants". From that flows an ideology that theorises the double oppression of the peasants, by their economic condition, but also by their condition as indigenous people who are victims of discrimination within a colonial state. Its principal leaders, such as Genaro Flores, subsequently played a key role in the struggle for the re-establishment of democracy. The links with the Army were definitively broken with the founding of the CSUTCB in 1979 and its affiliation to the COB the following year, the first stage in the building of a peasant unionism of struggle in Bolivia.

[3] Implicit from the beginning of the 1960s, this alliance was concretised in 1964 with the signing of the military-peasant pact (PMC) which tied the union leaders to the regime of General Barrientos. The frustration engendered by the absence of a thorough agrarian reform after the 1952 revolution was one of the causes of this alliance, at first sight unexpected.

[4] Thanks to the acquisition of the name "MAS", recognised by the National Electoral Court, the IPSP was able to participate independently in elections from 2002 onwards, whereas it had previously had to resort to alliances with the left coalitions, in 1993 (with Eje Pachakuti) and in 1997 (with Izquierda Unida).

[5] See Pablo Stefanoni, "MAS-IPSP: la emergencia del nacionalismo plebeyo". Observatorio social de America Latina no. 12, 2003, pp 57-6.

[6] The CSUTCB, led by Felipe Quispe since 1998, suffered a split - for which the members of the MAS were responsible - at its congress in Sucre in June 2003. There are now two peasant confederations, one led by Quispe and under the influence of the MIP, the other, the majority, led by a MAS senator, Roman Loayza.

[7] See the article by Remberto Arias in this issue.

[8] The "Maliku", which corresponds to a title in the Aymara communities, is the nickname of Felipe Quispe.

[9] See the interview with Jaime Solares in this issue.

[10] Close to Abel Mamani, the secretary of the neighbourhood organisation, Alvaro Garcia hoped to make the El Alto leader the MAS's candidate for prefect of La Paz.

But the COR and the FEJUVE, adopting an intransigent attitude that has echoes of old practices, demanded the four single-member constituencies that make up El Alto, two multi-member constituencies (for one of which Edgar Patana, the leader of the COR, wanted to be candidate) and one senator, on top of the candidacy of Mamani for prefect. (See "Por sus alianzas, el MAS tiene problemas con sus candidatos", La Razon, September 8th, 2005). Confronted with these demands, the MAS finally preferred to break off the negotiations, at the risk of seeing its support in the city somewhat eroded.

[11] "El Estado es para hacerse amar, pero tambien para hacerse temer", La Razon, November 11th, 2005.

[12] On November 18th, 2005, the newspaper Pulso revealed that 28 missiles belonging to the Bolivian Army, bought from China at the beginning of the 1990s, had been delivered in the greatest secrecy to the United States, supposedly to be destroyed because of their obsolete character, on the orders of the Rodriguez government.

After the president had denied having delivered the missiles to the North American neighbour, the Minister of Defence, Gonzalo Mendez, finally revealed that the newspaper's version was true, justifying the decision with technical arguments that astonished specialists of the military institution. (See Abdel Padilla and Pablo Stefanoni, "Historia secreta de los misiles", Pulso, November 18th, 2005; and A. Padilla and P. Stefanoni, "Operacion Camuflaje", Pulso, November 25th, 2005). Apart from the fact that it tarnished the supposed neutrality of a Rodriguez government that finally was not content just to ensure a "smooth transition" until the elections, this scandal allows us to formulate a number of hypotheses as to what the United States and certain sectors of Bolivian society are ready to do to neutralise as far as possible a future government led by Evo Morales.

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[13] Although the way the recent Summit of the Americas at Mar del Plata in Argentina went, because of the attitude of Nestor Kirchner and Lula Da Silva, could lead us to moderate such a dichotomy.

[14] Luis Tapia, "El Presidente colonial", in *Horizontes y limites des estado y el poder*, Muela del Diablo, La Paz, 2005, pp 77-110.