

EVO MORALES ELECTED BOLIVIAN PRESIDENT IN LANDSLIDE VICTORY

According to exit polls, socialist Evo Morales received 51 percent of the votes in Bolivia's December 18th presidential election, enough to secure his victory. Right-wing candidate Jorge Quiroga admitted defeat with 32 percent of the votes.

"I hope xenophobia will be extinguished," declared Bolivia's president-elect at a press conference on Sunday morning after casting his vote in front of hundreds of villagers on the school grounds at Villa 14 de Septiembre in Chapare, Bolivia. Morales, soon to become Latin America's first indigenous president, said: "We only want to live well...The poor don't want to be rich, they just want equality."

The occasion was rich in symbolism. Evo wore a short-sleeved shirt and jeans and enjoyed a breakfast of fish and boiled yuca with village leaders and journalists before going to vote. This reflected the charming (but bewildering, for some observers) informality of his entire campaign. Then a campesino with a cowboy hat rode a buffalo through the village waving the ancient, multi-coloured wipala (indigenous) flag, which some say must become the new emblem of a re-founded Bolivia.

At the press conference, Evo was flanked by women and men cocaleros (coca farmers) who casually chewed coca leaves spread across the table. It was through his leadership of brave resistance to the US and Bolivian government's coca eradication program that Evo has emerged as the unifying electoral focus for disparate strands of huge popular protest.

"Zero coca would mean zero cocaleros," said Evo today. In a long fight, with many deaths, injuries and jailings, the cocaleros often blockaded the central highway between La Paz and Santa Cruz, choking the economy. At last, in October 2004, former president Carlos Mesa signed a pact allowing each farming family in Chapare to cultivate coca on one 'cato' (approximately 0.4 acres) of land.

Contrary to reports, Evo says he is happy with the 'cato' for now and, as president, he would mount a international campaign for the right to legally export many coca-containing products, such as health cures, shampoos and biscuits. The national cocalero federation unequivocally opposes cocaine trafficking.

Evo reiterated his commitment to nationalize the country's gas and oil resources but also stretched out a hand to the private sector, stating that "all honest people can join us, including businessmen who want to work for the country."

But he will face huge challenges developing Latin America's second-poorest country. This was reflected in miniature in Villa Tunari on Saturday as four teenage girls in an internet café loudly discussed plans to emigrate to Spain.

Bolivia relies on money sent home by more than a million economic migrants for an estimated 8-10 per cent of its national earnings.

Morales was also forthright about his international orientation, "Fidel is my friend and I respect the Cuban people. I respect Chavez because he talks of a big Latin American nation."