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Bolivia

"The nationalisation of hydrocarbons will be our first task"

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After his unchallengeable victory in the presidential election of 18th December, the leader of the Bolivian peasants and indigenous people, president of the Movement towards socialism (MAS), Evo Morales, was interviewed in his campaign headquarter in La Paz by our correspondent in

Bolivia, Herve Do Alto. The President-elect spoke of the challenges facing the future MAS government, and in so doing came back to the issues that have been at the centre of the social struggles of recent years, issues like the nationalization of hydrocarbons and the defence of the cultivation of the coca leaf.

Q. After the results of the vote on Sunday evening, there is no longer any doubt that you will be elected president of the Republic of Bolivia. How do you feel personally about what has happened to you since Sunday?

A. I am very happy, because of the confidence that the Bolivian people have shown in me. I never thought I would be where I am now. To win with more 50% of the vote is something historic. We have broken a record in the entire history of Bolivian democracy. Furthermore, to represent the indigenous people, not only of Bolivia, but of the whole of Latin America is a source of great pride for me, as I hope it is for all those peoples.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/boliviaboom2.jpg>]

I want to prove myself worthy of my brothers. I also feel proud of all those from the middle classes, all the intellectuals and even employers who have joined us. I want them to feel proud of the indigenous people and of Evo Morales, and I hope that together we will be able to change our Bolivia, thinking of unity and of the poor and of those who are excluded in this country.

What in your opinion is responsible for this unprecedented success in the history of Bolivian democracy?

It is the result of a lot of hard work. At 5 o'clock in the morning we met to start work, for the campaign or to prepare the future government. We worked in coordination with the social movements and we will continue to do that tomorrow (Wednesday) through a big general assembly in Cochabamba. There will always be differences within these movements, but dialogue must prevail.

The role of the social movements will not be to give us orders, we will have to build this power together through debate. We feel ready to change the country, to change our Bolivia, so as to have an influence on our history, as did Tupac Katari, Tupac Amaru, and all those indigenous leaders who fought for the Tawantinsuyo [the pre-Colombian Inca Republic], as did Simon Bolivar who fought for the great Latin American fatherland. So we are going to continue our struggle in government, with the support of the social movements, with which we can affirm that we are the big majority, since

we
won the election with more than 50% votes.

You are often associated with Latin American political personalities such as Fidel Castro or Hugo Chavez. Can we then say that you are a socialist?

Obviously. Socialism involves a personal change. I have always said that it was necessary for us to change ourselves in order to change Bolivia.

As far as I'm concerned, that means not being egoist, not being individualist, not thinking about what is in it for me, not being a manipulator, and always thinking of the interest of the big majority of Bolivians. It is through my experience of union struggles that I learned all that. That's why we also have the will to change the MAS.

We are
staking our future on communitarian socialism, organised around the activity of peasant communities. Where does communism come from? Well, from communities!

Where I lived there was no private property, it was an agricultural zone which belonged to the whole of the community. So we have
to take over and strengthen these forms of organization, which are collective and based on solidarity, so as to better share out our riches,
our wealth, in the whole of Bolivia.

What will be the first measure of your government concerning the cultivation of the coca leaf?

There will not be total eradication of coca. On the other hand, we want a rationalization of production that is destined for legal consumption. We
must put a stop to cocaine, to the drug trade. That's why I invite the North American government in particular to sign an effective pact to struggle against the drug trade, which would imply shared responsibility, so
as to be able to control the banking sector and the market. We don't just
need a law 1008 [the law that is the legislative framework concerning coca
in Bolivia] which would be concerned with treating "supply", we also need a
law 1008 to deal with "demand".

We will only be able to end the drug
trade
when there is zero market, zero demand, and zero cocaine addicts. If
there
is an illegal market in coca leaves, the legal market will continue to

be affected by it. That's why one of the keys to the struggle against the drug trade will also be the strengthening of the legal market.

Does that mean that the surface cultivated is going to decrease?

Our experience in Chapare [the coca producing region near Cochabamba] is of delimitation of cultivated surfaces by what we call the catu, 40 meters by 40 meters. This is undoubtedly the most important contribution of the movement of the peasant producers of the coca leaf to the struggle against the drug trade.

Will the nationalization of hydrocarbons be the first measure of your government?

Yes, as far as the economic domain is concerned. In the political domain, the priority will be the establishment of a Constituent Assembly, to put an end to the colonial state which has governed the Bolivian nation up until now.

The oil companies seem to fear that radical measures will be taken towards them, in the framework of this nationalization. Should they expect to see drastic changes in the conditions in which they exploit these resources?

For us it is not a question of confiscating or expropriating the property of the oil companies. However, they must not be able to have property right to the hydrocarbons, which really belong to us. From now on, it is our government which will exercise this right. We are going to nationalise the hydrocarbons, but not the property of the oil companies.

How are you going to go about recovering the property rights for the Bolivian state?

Simply by relying on the political Constitution of the state, which has up to now been trampled underfoot. From now on, whatever the oil company that wants to invest in the country, it will have to be subordinate to the Constitution. Many lawyers affirm that the contracts which at present govern the links between these enterprises and the Bolivian state are null and

void
in law, because they have not been ratified by the Congress.

Any
contract
has to be ratified by the Congress to be able to be implemented. That
means
that these contracts are anti-constitutional and have therefore been
implemented illegally. From now on, it is the state that will be the
owner
of the hydrocarbons, on the surface as well as under the ground. In
every
case, with companies which demonstrate a responsible attitude, we will
guarantee them a return on their investments, because any enterprise
that
invests is logically seeking to make profits. But these profits must be
earned in a fair and transparent fashion, and the first beneficiary
must
remain the state.

We cannot continue with the kind of sharing where the
state only earned 18 per cent of royalties and the companies 82 per cent.

That must change. If the people have voted for nationalisation, for me,
the
voice of the people is the voice of God, and so we have to respect it.

**Since the gas is governed by a fixed price, Bolivia sometimes sells it
at a
price inferior to the market price. Does that mean that your government
will
fix a minimum price for gas?**

There must first of all be a price for the domestic market. That must
be one
of our priorities. We have to put an end to this situation where, under
the
ground, we have all this wealth at our disposal, while in the daily
life of
the people, the majority continue to use wood for heating. That is why
we
need a special price for the domestic market, a price that is not
subject to
the demands of the international market. Secondly, the contracts that
have
governed the conditions of sale up to now, these same contracts which
are
marked as unconstitutional, are precisely the ones that force us to
sell our
barrels of oil at 16 or 17 dollars, whereas in fact the price is of the

order of 60 dollar. So it really is the case that we have to put an end to these contracts and impose a revision of them.

Argentina is at present paying a price that is much lower than that, as are a certain number of other neighbouring countries. What will be the consequences of such a policy for these countries?

First of all we will have to solve our problems of domestic supply.

Once that is done our priority objective will be to increase our exports to the countries of the region. I cannot say as of now what prices we will establish, but in any case, when I say that our exports must be guided by the principle of equilibrium, I mean that we now have to move towards inter-state relations. It must no longer be Repsol Argentina that buys gas from Repsol Bolivia. It must be the Bolivian state, acting in a sovereign way, that sells its gas to the Argentinean state. That is the only viable way of making sure that the resources generated by the gas are beneficial to the big majority of people, rather than to the oil companies who are only a minority.

The day after you were elected, the United States sent you a rather chilly message of congratulations. How do you see relations between Bolivia and the United States evolving from now on?

We are ready to dialogue with all governments, including with the United States. If the North American government adopts a democratic attitude towards us and respects the choice of the Bolivian people, we will have relations with them, but relations that exclude any relationship of submission or subordination.

They will be relations whose aim is to resolve the problems of the people. If the Bush government respects and defends human rights, and also the struggle against poverty, it will be welcome. But we will not accept blackmail or any sort of horse-trading.

However, we are not alone. We are going to begin a foreign trip in January, a trip that will start with a visit to Nelson Mandela in South Africa, then one to Lula in Brazil. On top of that I have a meeting that has several times been postponed, with the Chinese government.

Two political personalities seem at present to polarise the political scene in Latin America, Nestor Kirchner and Vicente Fox. What are your relations with them?

Kirchner called me to congratulate me, but Fox didn't, nor for that matter the North American Embassy. But I'm not complaining. They have the right to call me or not call me, but in any case, we respect all governments and their policies and we are not going to interfere in debates about domestic policies.

We have allies in the social movements of the whole world, including those in the United States. We will continue as always to look for allies who are capable of advising us and guiding us in our struggle. I still have a lot to learn, from the Bolivian people as from the people of Latin America.

Jorge Quiroga [candidate of the right-wing alliance PODEMOS (Democratic and Social Power), who came second with 28 per cent of the vote] committed himself to signing the Free Trade Agreement (TLC) with the United States. The MAS seems on the other hand to have adopted a more ambiguous attitude concerning free-trade agreements and to be in favour of projects of regional integration. What is going to happen with the TLC and with Mercosur, where Bolivia at present has the status of an associate state?

Whatever commercial treaty we are talking about, the TLC, ALCA (the Free Trade Area of the Americas) or whatever, all must be directed towards a just and equitable vision of trade, a vision where the micro and small businesses, the small producers and even the Bolivian agro-alimentary industry, are the ones who resolve their own problems, in order to avoid the states that subsidise their agriculture flooding countries like ours

with
their exports. I believe that this is a central theme. That is why we
must
revise these treaties to enable these small structures to have
guaranteed
markets. Perhaps we will also be able to enter the North American
market,
who knows, maybe with coca! (laughs). If we find a market for quinoa or
for
lama meat, we will sign, but we will not get involved in that kind of
thing
if it is a question of agreements whose consequence could be to
eliminate
the small producers.

Interviewed on Tuesday December 20th, 2005.