

10-21-2014

## Evo Morales' Incomplete Legacy

Lauren Carasik

*Western New England University School of Law*, [Carasik@law.wne.edu](mailto:Carasik@law.wne.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.law.wne.edu/media>



Part of the [Latina/o Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Lauren Carasik, *Evo Morales' Incomplete Legacy*, ALJAZEERA AMERICA (Oct. 21, 2014), <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/10/evo-morales-boliviapresidentelectionmovementtowardsocialism.html>

This Editorial is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications at Digital Commons @ Western New England University School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in Media Presence by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Western New England University School of Law. For more information, please contact [pnewcombe@law.wne.edu](mailto:pnewcombe@law.wne.edu).

# Evo Morales' incomplete legacy

*Bolivia must address its dependence on resource extraction to ensure continued social and economic progress*

October 21, 2014 8:30AM ET

by [Lauren Carasik](#) [@LCarasik](#)

Bolivian president Evo Morales decisively won re-election on Oct. 12, garnering 60 percent of the vote. Bolivia's first indigenous president, Morales has built a legacy of addressing the country's colonial and racist history. Over the last eight years in office, he has reined in the extreme social exclusion of the country's indigenous majority and confronted Bolivia's stark inequality, entrenched poverty and the powerful economic interests of domestic and international business elites. Riding on solid growth to a third term, his success also challenges the belief that leftist policies are bad for the economy.

Defying the free-market policy proposals of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, Morales' Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) has institutionalized the Andean concept of living well, a communitarian development model that values diversity, individual and community self-determination, economic and social equality and participation in governance. This policy revolution, which is fundamentally at odds with the neoliberal model imposed on Bolivia from the 1980s until Morales' first inauguration in 2006, has enabled the country's marginalized to transcend seemingly immutable social barriers, enshrine environmental protection in the constitution and ease poverty and misery in South America's poorest country.

Bolivia's newfound economic prosperity has won Morales further support from the urban middle class and elites. Although Morales made concessions to the right, he has alienated some Bolivians because his rhetoric about ethnic and economic inclusion, environmentalism and self-determination conflicts with his government's reliance on natural gas and mining. Critics, including those on the left, particularly note his administration's failure to develop an industrialized economy, which will perpetuate the country's reliance on resource extraction.

Despite progress on poverty alleviation and social inclusion, Bolivia cannot fundamentally alter the country's inequality and respect the environment without making strategic investments in a sustainable, environmentally friendly economic model that [generates productivity and promotes a more equitable economy](#).

### **Laudable progress**

To his enormous credit, Morales has fostered social and political progress. Bolivia's 2009 constitution institutionalized the concept of a plurinational state, a system of governance that explicitly recognizes the country's multiethnic character and promotes the participation of the indigenous majority in the political process. The constitution also promotes gender parity, requiring political parties to put forward a gender-balanced ticket (though the country is still plagued by rampant domestic violence, which afflicts more than half of Bolivian women, and restrictive abortion laws). In July the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared Bolivia [free of illiteracy](#).

Bolivia's economy has grown faster under Morales than in any other period in the past 35 years, according to the [Center for Economic and Policy Research](#). The nationalization of the gas and oil industries in 2006 provided resources to build savings and increase social spending. International reserves are equivalent to approximately half of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and represent [the highest ratio in the world](#), while spending on programs such as health, education and cash transfer programs to the elderly poor, pregnant women and schoolchildren is up 45 percent. Despite warnings from economists that nationalizations will scare away international investment, Bolivia had the highest foreign direct investment as a percent of GDP in South America in 2013. During Morales' tenure, poverty has fallen by 25 percent, extreme poverty dropped by 43 percent, and the inflation-adjusted minimum wage has increased by almost 90 percent. Investment in infrastructure development and public works projects like roads, soccer fields and stadiums have been popular.

**If Morales and his party want to live up to their ecological, participatory and egalitarian discourse to ensure that all Bolivians can live well, they will have to do more to liberate Bolivia from its extractivist economy.**

Bolivia's undeniable success is recognized outside the country as well. The [IMF and the World Bank](#), once consistently staunch promoters of neoliberal policies of privatization and fiscal austerity measures, now praise Bolivia's model as a success story.

Morales has rebuffed Washington's hegemony in the region, [expelling U.S. Ambassador Philip Goldberg](#) in 2008 and the U.S. [Agency for International Development](#) in 2013, both for alleged connections to opposition groups seeking to oust the government. He has also rejected the United States' militarized approach to the war on drugs. Instead, Bolivia has worked with farmers on a sovereign and culturally specific approach to control the cultivation [of coca](#). The U.S. has been unwilling to recognize the program's successes, repeatedly arguing that Bolivia's anti-drug efforts have [failed demonstrably](#). But a June report from [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime](#) found that Bolivia has reduced illicit production for the third consecutive year. Its policies of social control have been implemented with far less bloodshed than the militarized alternative.

### **Intoxicated with power**

Still, Morales has critics among indigenous groups, environmentalists and economists who fear that Bolivia's overreliance on hydrocarbons and minerals is making the country vulnerable to global price fluctuations and comes at an unacceptable environmental cost. Others claim that legislative advances toward a multiethnic, earth-respecting socialist democracy are not supported by the political will and resources necessary to realize them. For example, his plan from 2011 to 2012 to build a road through the Isiboro Sécore National Park and Indigenous Territory engendered wide opposition. Critics claimed that the plan

demonstrated selective respect for the right of indigenous groups to control their territories and contradicted MAS' pro-nature agenda. Detractors condemned the government's repression of protesters. The country's mining law, [passed in May 2014](#), criminalizes protests and circumvents socially responsible mining practices. Environmentalists denounce his plan to build a nuclear power plant in the seismically unstable department of La Paz as well as concessions to agribusiness demands to use GMOs in soy production.

There are concerns about police corruption, weak democratic institutions (the country's judiciary is poorly functioning, with pretrial detainees accounting for a whopping [83 percent of those in detention](#)) and allegations that MAS is becoming increasingly authoritarian, co-opting social movements and demonstrating intolerance for dissent. Last week Morales told the BBC he would [not seek another term in 2020](#). But several critics say Morales is intoxicated with power, noting the fact that he has not groomed a successor to ensure a stable and durable future for the party. Concerns about Morales' unchecked power are not limited to opposition critics: In last week's election, even some Morales supporters declined to vote for the party's slate of legislators.

## **U.S. reaction**

Morales' failings have garnered inordinate attention in U.S. media. For example, on Oct. 16, [The New York Times](#) concluded that Morales represents a threat to democracy in the region and has eroded Washington's influence, narrowing cooperation on development, military and counternarcotics, which has "damaged the prospects for trade and security cooperation." Tellingly, the standard of measure is not poverty alleviation, indigenous empowerment or the democratically expressed will of the masses but the extent to which [his government defies U.S. interests and edicts](#).

Morales' supporters point out to his critics that he had little choice than to be more of a [pragmatist](#) than an ideologue. He faces difficult choices in balancing development for a desperately poor country with good environmental stewardship. And dismantling centuries of colonialism and decades of neoliberal

economic policies to build more inclusive and egalitarian institutions will take time.

Overall, despite some disappointments, life has improved measurably for Bolivia's poor communities, and there is intangible but meaningful progress in valorizing the dignity of marginalized people. To be clear, Morales is not presiding over a postcapitalist economy. Despite his uniquely Bolivian vision, he faces serious challenges in developing a sustainable economic model in the shadow of a stratified global order that continues to elevate private wealth over the health of the planet and its inhabitants. But if Morales and MAS want to live up to their ecological, participatory and egalitarian discourse to ensure that all Bolivians can live well now and in the future, they will have to do more to liberate Bolivia from its extractivist economy and not merely tinker around the edges.

*Lauren Carasik is a clinical professor of law and the director of the international human rights clinic at the Western New England University School of Law.*

*The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.*