

BOLIVIA - President Evo Morales on Latin America, U.S. Foreign Policy and the Role of the Indigenous People of Bolivia

Evo Morales, Amy Goodman & Juan Gonzalez, Democracy Now!

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[Democracy Now! News Program](#) - Friday, September 22nd, 2006 - Ten months ago, Evo Morales made history when he became the country's first indigenous leader. At his inauguration in January, he declared the end of Bolivia's colonial and neo-liberal era. Since then he has moved to nationalize parts of the country's vast energy reserves and strengthen Bolivia's ties to Venezuela and Cuba.

Morales' rise to power began with his leadership of the coca growers union and his high-profile opposition to the U.S.-funded eradication of the coca crop. He helped to lead the street demonstrations by Indian and union groups that toppled the country's last two presidents.

On Tuesday, Morales spoke for the first time before the United Nations General Assembly in New York. He vowed to never yield to U.S. pressure to criminalize coca production. During his speech he held up a coca leaf even though it is banned in the United States.

Juan Gonzalez and I [Amy Goodman] sat down with Bolivian President Evo Morales for one of his first extended televised interviews in the United States.

AMY GOODMAN: Welcome to Democracy Now! and the United States, President Evo Morales. Why did you bring a coca leaf to the United Nations?

PRESIDENT EVO MORALES: [translated] First of all, thanks very much for the invitation to speak with you today. It's the first time I've been in these lands, the United States. And as the coca leaf has been permanently accused of being a drug, so I brought the leaf to demonstrate that the coca leaf is not a drug. The coca leaf is green. It's not white. So I came to show that the coca leaf is not a drug and it can be beneficial to humanity. So that's why I was there at the first ordinary session at the United Nations with a coca leaf. Had it been a drug, I would have been detained certainly. We're starting the campaign to bring dignity back to the coca leaf, starting with the decriminalization of the coca leaf.

AMY GOODMAN: How is it used for beneficial purposes? Why is it so important to you in Bolivia?

PRESIDENT EVO MORALES: [translated] The coca leaf is part of culture. There is legal consumption, traditional consumption, which is called the piccheo in Bolivia, the chaccheo in Peru, el mambeo in Colombia, which is the traditional chewing of coca. Moreover, this traditional consumption is backed up by scientific research done in universities in Europe and the United States. Not long ago a study came out of Harvard University that said it's a very nutritious - it's a good source of nutrition, that it can not only be used through chewing, but could also be consumed through eating. The last study done by the World Health Organization has demonstrated clearly that the coca leaf does no harm to people.

And there's also ritual uses, including in the Aymara culture, for example, when you ask for someone's hand in marriage, the coca leaf plays an important part in that ritual. We could also talk about a number of pharmaceutical products that come or derive from the coca leaf. The first local anesthetics that were used in modern medicine were derived from the coca leaf. Up to some five, six, seven years ago, there was a company from the United States that used to come to the Chapare to buy coca to be exported to the

United States for the use in making Coca-Cola. And we can think of a lot of products, industrial products, that could be derived from the coca leaf that would be beneficial to humanity.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Mr. President, in the United States voters here are accustomed to leaders promising much, but when they get into office delivering very little. Since you have become president in Bolivia, you have moved rapidly to make changes. You've cut your own salary. You've raised the minimum wage by 50%. What is the message you are trying to send to your own people and to Latin American leaders in general?

PRESIDENT EVO MORALES: [translated] I never wanted to be a politician. In my country, politicians are seen as liars, thieves, arrogant people. In 1997 they tried to get me to run for president. I rejected that idea, even though that brought me problems with my own grassroots organizations. Then I was later obligated to become a member of the lower house of parliament. I didn't want to do that at the time, either. I preferred to be the head of a rat than the tail of a horse. I preferred to be the head of my own organizations fighting for human rights and fighting for the rights of the members, and not getting involved in electoral political processes and wind up not fulfilling promises.

But what I was learning in that period in '95, '96, '97, is that to get involved in politics means taking on the responsibility, a new way of looking at politics as serving the people, because to get into politics means service. And after hearing the demands, the broad demands of our grassroots organizations, I decided finally to run for president.

And for the last elections, we had a ten-point program. And of those ten, we've fulfilled six already. The austerity measures that you mentioned a moment ago, I cut my own salary by more than 50%, and the ministers' as well as also the members of congress, and that money has been redirected to health and education, convinced of the idea that to arrive at the presidency means that you're there to serve the people. And we said we were going to do a consultation for a referendum on autonomy, greater autonomy for the regions, and we've done that. 58% of the population said no to greater autonomy, although it is important to secure more autonomy for the regions and the indigenous communities.

We said we were going to nationalize the gas and oil sector. We did, without expropriating or kicking out any of the companies. We said it's important to have partners, but not bosses. And we did it. The investor has the right to recuperate their investment and to a reasonable profit, but we can't allow for the sacking of the country and only the companies benefiting, not the people. I just came from a meeting of political analysts, foreign policy analysts here, and they seemed to understand our proposals.

The struggle against corruption, it's a key issue in my country. We're starting that campaign aggressively, starting with members of the executive branch. The judicial branch still is not accompanying this process. And I can talk a lot about the other things that we're doing to meet the demands that were accumulated over time. For example, the centers for eye treatments and surgery, the literacy work that we're doing.

We've also made advances in terms of giving people legal documents, something that oftentimes indigenous peoples don't have. These are the social problems that my family has lived. My mother, for example, never had an ID. She didn't know when she was born. There's an anecdote about my father. One day I found his ID, and there was a birthdate on it. I said to my sister Esther, "Okay, let's have a party. We know what my father's birthday is." She was very happy. She said, "Yes, let's do this birthday party." We said to my father, "We're going to do a party for you." And he said, "But I don't know what my birthday is." We showed him his ID, and we said, "Here it is. Here's your birthday." And he said very bitterly, "I had to invent that date when I was drafted in the military." My father didn't know when he was born.

And when I was in a big political rally in 1999 in the electoral campaigns for the municipalities and I asked everybody there to raise their hand, "Who's going to vote?" About two-thirds of the people raised their hands. Another third didn't raise their hand, and I said, "What's going on here? You're not going to vote for Evo Morales?" And they all said, "We don't have IDs. We don't have documents." And one companero came to me almost in tears. He said, "This society thinks I'm only useful for raising my hands or giving assent to something, but I'm not good enough to vote." He was from northern Potosi, from the

highlands. He didn't know when he was born. He didn't have a birth certificate. These are the sorts of problems. But with the help of some countries, we're receiving support so we can give people documents to fully incorporate them as citizens.

JUAN GONZALEZ: I'd like to ask you, when you ran for president, many of the public opinion polls in your country showed you with a sizeable support, but not really anywhere near the majority that you actually received. So it's obvious that they were not counting the sentiments of the people of your country properly. Why do you believe that you were able to mobilize such large support?

PRESIDENT EVO MORALES: [translated] In our culture, there is a cosmic law. Don't steal. Don't lie. Don't be lazy. You know, the people know I never made it to the university. I never had that chance to study. But nevertheless, since I was a young child, I've been involved in the social struggles. Starting in 1998, I was one of the principal leaders of a region. And all this time I had to suffer insinuations, attempts to buy me off. But in our culture, honesty is very important. I'm convinced still that it was that honesty that allowed me to arrive at the presidency.

In 2002, when we won the elections but they were stolen from us — I could explain that bitter situation of 2002. But because of a - well, through the electoral laws, campaigns are publicly financed, and we had been assigned more than a million dollars for our campaign. There's always expenses involved in a campaign, but we spent less than half-a-million dollars. The elections end, we closed the books, did our accounting. More than half-a-million dollars was left over. And I said, "We have to give this money back to the national electoral court, to the state." But some members of my party said, "But how are you going to give the money back. It's easy to buy papers in Bolivia to demonstrate other forms of accounting." I got angry, and I went on my own with just a couple of other people, and we gave that money back. People were impressed.

So, I can tell other stories like this. This year, in the election of the members of the constituent assembly, which we won in seven of the country's nine departments — in the national elections that took me to the presidency, we only won five of the nine — and in this case, we also gave back over a million dollars of assigned funds. Some people who are ill-informed said we should have spent that money on health and education, but no, that's impossible, because that's money only for electoral campaigns and had to be returned. Honesty is so important. Even though the international institutions have said that Bolivia is sort of the second worst place in terms of corruption internationally, but those are the people who had the government in the past.

Here, I haven't had the opportunity to talk about the Bolivians who have migrated to the United States, but when I was in Argentina and Europe, I have spoken with businesspeople who hire Bolivians there, and they all say, in Europe and Argentina, the Bolivians are honest and hard-working. Even though they're undocumented, they always pick the Bolivians to work, even if it's clandestinely. They choose the Bolivians because they're good workers. I was thinking we should talk to the secondary schoolteachers about creating a course for the secondary schools in honesty, because they said only through honesty are we going to make it to the presidency.

AMY GOODMAN: President Morales, President Chavez of Venezuela called President Bush a devil. What is your response to that?

PRESIDENT EVO MORALES: [translated] I'm not interested in commenting about these words between two presidents. But I'm convinced that people who represent a family, they can be professionals or not, they can be presidents or not. They all have dignity. One thing is to question someone's policies. We can have differences. But to attack someone's image or a direct offense, I don't think I share that.

AMY GOODMAN: What is your assessment of President Bush?

PRESIDENT EVO MORALES: [translated] I hope that we can improve relations with Bush's government. We hope that they can accompany these deep democratic transformations that we're pursuing. We hope that we can continue with some support in health programs, but especially that they can accompany the

transformations that are in course in Bolivia.

The indigenous cultures are cultures of dialogue and of life, not cultures of death and war. I've said publicly and very respectfully that the United States and other countries should get their troops out of Iraq, because it's impossible that invaders and the invaded, and especially the innocent, continue to die. Conflicts should be discussed and debated in fora like the United Nations. I think it's important to democratize the United Nations so that we can deal with issues like humanity, how to save the planet, how to avoid loss.

The indigenous communities live in harmony not only with their fellow persons, but also with Mother Earth. And we're very worried about global warming, that's leaving people without water. In the past we've seen the bodies of water that were up to certain level, are now declining. That means that in a very short time we're going to have very serious problems. Without light, we can live with lamps, with oil lamps, but without water, we can't live. I saw in a forum sponsored by ex-President Clinton yesterday, there's a commission there that's studying these issues of global warming.

JUAN GONZALEZ: I'd like to ask you, in many poor countries around the world, it is said that the most powerful official in the country is the U.S. ambassador, but in your campaign, you actually ran against, not just the other opponents, but against the role of the U.S. embassy and the U.S. ambassador in Bolivia. What is the role that the United States has played historically not only in Bolivia, but in Latin America, as far as you're concerned?

PRESIDENT EVO MORALES: [translated] The arrogance of an ambassador or the arrogance of others, including a president, is always an error. This arrogance creates greater rebellion, greater resistance. In 2002, former U.S. ambassador to Bolivia, Manuel Rocha, said, "Don't vote for Evo Morales." And after that, people came out massively to vote for me. I said he was my best campaign chief. And a number of things were said about what would happen if I came to the presidency, that international cooperation would be reduced, we would no longer have access to markets, but in fact I've come to the presidency and we've seen a lot more support from other governments.

The United States embassy tried to effect the changes in the military high command. I said, "That's not going to be changed. That's a sovereign decision that we make." So for that, we have obvious differences, but we want to work out those differences. Even though we're an underdeveloped country, we're a sovereign country, a country with dignity. One of the advantages that we have is that we begin to return dignity to the country. The name Bolivia is now understood. Our peoples need a strong sense of self-esteem. We want relations with all the countries that will be based on mutual respect, relations of complementarity, balance, solidarity, and for now, cooperation so that we can assure the changes that we're trying to achieve.

JUAN GONZALEZ: In your nationalization, one of the groups in the gas companies that you nationalized were also Brazilian companies, as well. How have you been able to negotiate or deal with some of these inter-regional problems of the Brazilian companies also having such a huge say in your gas reserves?

PRESIDENT EVO MORALES: [translated] At first, there were protest and resistance, even from companero Lula — well, perhaps more the company. There was an emergency meeting of the four presidents in Iguassu in Argentina. We had a closed-door meeting between the four presidents. No minister's presence, without any press. This is the first time I've told anybody this. I was attacked. Lula was rough with me. "Where is our partnership? Where is that cordiality? Why didn't you consult me before the nationalization?"

But I defended myself, and I said that on a sovereign basis our country has every right to make decisions about the future of our strategic resources. We are generous. We are companeros. We are in solidarity. And as my older brother, and as the leader of a more developed country in the region, we recognize that and we respect that. I accept him as an older brother, because he too is a union leader. He's older than me. And he's older than I am, and in the Indian culture we respect our elders very much. But finally, he understood very well, because we were neither expropriating nor kicking out Petrobras.

What I explained is that after the supreme decree that did the nationalization, we were guaranteeing greater security, because the new contracts were going to be transparent and ratified through congress, because previously the contracts were kept under wraps, secret, and never ratified in congress. And we also showed technically, financially, with numbers, that the company was going to be able to recover their investment and would have a reasonable profit. They weren't going to have as much profit as before, because the largest oil fields – excuse me, from the largest gas fields, the companies only gave 18% of royalties to the state and took 82% in profit. But now, with the new law we've changed that around, now 82% for the government, for the state, and 18% for the companies. They're staying. There's no problems. And from that large field that Petrobras is managing, we've already seen \$150 million coming into government coffers now.

AMY GOODMAN: Mr. President, Bolivia was one of seven Condor countries that participated in the efforts to eliminate opponents of the regimes of past decades, that was spearheaded by Pinochet of Chile. The Banzer regime was an ally of the United States. As president, you're in a position to secure and release the documents of that period, perhaps millions of documents. Will you commit yourself to doing that?

PRESIDENT EVO MORALES: [translated] We're in a phase of not only revealing those documents, but also trying to find out what happened to people who were disappeared under Plan Condor. Some members of the military high command are actually cooperating, who at the time were probably lower-ranking officers or cadets. We have to dignify humanity, ending impunity. And it's imperative that the armed forces become dignified before the country, as well. It's important to note how much the image of the armed forces has improved next to my person in the country today. We're going to continue with this campaign through my minister of justice and to reveal, uncover, to clarify many facts. I very much want to find the bodies also of many of our mining leaders and the body of Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz.

AMY GOODMAN: Who was?

PRESIDENT EVO MORALES: [translated] He was a Socialist leader, who put Banzer on trial, and under the Garcia Meza dictatorship he was machine-gunned, and his remains disappeared. An intellectual who led the second nationalization of our gas and oil industries. Now we're in the third nationalization.

AMY GOODMAN: Do you think Henry Kissinger, who supported Pinochet and the generals in Argentina through Latin America, should be tried for war crimes?

PRESIDENT EVO MORALES: [translated] I'm not sure. That's probably something for the United States to take up, but I want to take advantage of this opportunity to call on the people of the United States to help us in our efforts to extradite two [inaudible] people who practiced genocide, who were corrupt under previous administrations and who today are free here in the United States.

AMY GOODMAN: Names?

PRESIDENT EVO MORALES: [translated] Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, former president, who in 2003 was responsible for the death of over a hundred people killed by gunfire, along with his minister, Carlos Sanchez Berzain. We're trying now to use all of the instruments at our disposal to extradite him, but it's not moving forward. It's running into some resistance here in the United States. A government that says it fights against terrorism, for human rights, against corruption, it's not conceivable that this person would still be here. So we ask the people, the government and all the institutions of human rights to help with this.

JUAN GONZALEZ: I'd like to ask you, you've on several occasions mentioned your indigenous origins in your movement. Throughout Latin America now, 500 years after the European conquest, the Native peoples of Mexico, Peru, Colombia, Bolivia, are taking much more of a role politically. What is the importance of this movement to Latin America?

PRESIDENT EVO MORALES: [translated] They excluded for over 500 years, exploited, and in many cases — for over 500 years also have full rights. I mentioned at the United Nations that 34 years ago, my mother

didn't have the right to walk through public spaces, on sidewalks, in public plazas. And there are some fascist and racist sectors in Santa Cruz, who don't want those people to enter into the fairgrounds today. And this is sort of like a fair of producers, as well as cattlemen, and it's always been inaugurated by the president, and they're angry because this president, the Aymara president, is not going to inaugurate it.

So there's this strong feeling of excluded people, discriminated peoples to unite, but not for revenge against anybody nor to oppress or to subordinate anybody, but rather our struggle that recognizing we have obligations that our rights be fully respected. The thinking of indigenous peoples is not of exclusion. I can tell you about the experiences of the Aymara, the Quechua from the highlands and the valleys in Bolivia, of how they welcome people in, but not exclude people. This is the sector that's been discriminated against. We've been called everything. We've been called animals. Manuel Rocha once called me the Andean Taliban. But we want fundamentally our rights to be respected. That's our struggle.

AMY GOODMAN: A question about — very last question, and that is, Mr. President, you said that the ambassador, the U.S. ambassador said people shouldn't vote for you. Do you feel the U.S. is funding opposition groups to you?

PRESIDENT EVO MORALES: [translated] I don't have any documentary evidence, although the head of USAID for Latin America stated that they were going to finance a political counterbalance opposition.

AMY GOODMAN: And your response?

PRESIDENT EVO MORALES: [translated] This is the problem that we face. If there's going to be U.S. financing, it has to be coordinated through our municipal authorities, as well as our national authorities. These economic supports that come from USAID, for example, that come from taxpayers' money here in the United States, have to be useful for social ends, and not for political purposes, nor for corruption. And why do I mention corruption? And our mayors, for example, in Chapare can build a wonderful sports field for 30,000 bolivianos. USAID does it for 90,000. With that money, we could do three, not just one. We want those funds to be used well and benefit of young people.

AMY GOODMAN: Mr. President, thank you very much.

JUAN GONZALEZ: Thank you.

PRESIDENT EVO MORALES: [translated] Thank you very much for the interview. A special greeting to the United States people, and thanks for opening this space to me. On my arrival here in the United States, I've encountered many friends. I have spoken with ex-presidents Carter and Clinton. We've had good conversations. And it seems like the business sectors are starting to understand our message, that we want partners and not bosses. And many thanks for this interview.

This interview was broadcasted during the Democracy Now! TV News Program. The text published here is a rush transcript.

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