

## **Evo Morales No Che Guevara**

**By Ronald Bruce St John | January 9, 2006**

Evo Morales, president-elect of Bolivia, is often described in the Western media as a “leftist” if not a reincarnation of the legendary Ernesto “Che” Guevara. A mid-December article in *The Independent* saw Morales walking “in the footsteps of Che Guevara” while a more recent *Los Angeles Times* editorial was entitled, “Where ‘Che’ Left Off.” Flaccid comparisons like these fuel the conservative hysteria generated by Morales’ election, adding to the confusion as to the current political situation in Bolivia.

### **New Stage**

Che Guevara arrived in Bolivia in November 1966, determined to spark a revolution throughout South America. The first entry in the diary he meticulously kept during his ill-fated Bolivian campaign reads, “A new stage starts today.” He saw the remote southeastern corner of Bolivia as a *foco* insurreccional, a catalyst for a continent-wide revolution. His plan was to force the United States to honor treaty obligations to defend the Western Hemisphere, eventually bogging U.S. forces down in what he hoped would become “another Vietnam.”

Guevara enjoyed a close but ambivalent relationship with Fidel Castro. While he admired Castro, he had little regard for him as either a political thinker or a military leader. In turn, Castro felt a deep personal regard for Guevara but recognized he was dogmatic, arrogant, and impetuous. Castro was especially annoyed by the Argentine-born guerrilla’s bid for the ideological leadership of the Cuban revolution. Well before his arrival in Bolivia, Guevara sent Castro a confidential letter, relieving himself of all government and political responsibilities, including his rank of *comandante* and his status as a Cuban citizen. In so doing, he freed Castro and

the Cuban government from official responsibility for his actions as a guerrilla leader.

### **Bolivian Revolution Morales-Style**

In contrast to Guevara, Evo Morales has focused on a socioeconomic and political revolution in Bolivia, not the Western Hemisphere. Of Aymaran descent, he rose to national prominence as the leader of the *cocaleros* (coca leaf producers) in the remote Chapare region. Where Guevara was unable to attract indigenous support in Bolivia, Morales won 54% of the votes in the December polls, and his election marks the first time an indigenous politician has been elevated to the Bolivian presidency.

The policies advocated by Morales and his political party, the *Movimiento Al Socialismo* (MAS), resemble those of the leading opposition parties. All of them agree that the core external issue is the efficient exploitation of natural resources, primarily oil, and natural gas, as part of a broader economic policy designed to grow foreign trade and investment. Unanimity also exists on the need for landlocked Bolivia to acquire a Pacific port, an issue at the top of the foreign policy agenda since Chile occupied Bolivia’s coastline during the War of the Pacific (1879-1883).



---

While there is considerable agreement in Bolivia on the need to better exploit its natural resources, Morales and MAS separate from the opposition in insisting on some form of nationalization of the oil and gas industries. That said, he has repeatedly ruled out the confiscation or expropriation of assets as took place during the Cuban revolution where Guevara served for a time as minister of industry. Moreover, the MAS approach, determined to improve the economic well-being of the dominant indigenous segment of the population, has never advocated a Cuban-style brand of socialism.

---

While Bolivia has the second-largest natural gas reserves in the Western Hemisphere, together with sizeable oil reserves, actual revenues at present are limited. And they will remain so for the foreseeable future as the new government must renegotiate contracts with international energy companies and attract new foreign investment.

---

Finally, Morales lacks the power base Castro and Guevara enjoyed in Cuba and thus may soon find himself quite limited in what he can accomplish. While Bolivia has the second-largest natural gas reserves in the Western Hemisphere, together with sizeable oil reserves, actual revenues at present are limited. And they will remain so for the foreseeable future as the new government must renegotiate contracts with international energy companies and attract new foreign investment. In the meantime, Morales' shaky power base will become even more precarious if he fails to deliver promised socio-economic gains to his supporters. MAS remains a

loose amalgam of competing social groups, all of which expect immediate gains from Morales' election.

### Building Bridges

In the wake of his impressive victory, Morales has displayed admirable energy, reaching out to diverse constituencies in an apparent effort at national reconciliation. He met with members of the Asociación de Bancos Privados de Bolivia, a grouping of private bankers, as well as other private businessmen around the country. In addition, he traveled to Santa Cruz to meet with the Comité Cívico Pro Santa Cruz in recognition of Santa Cruz as the motor for national development as well as the birthplace of the regional autonomy movement. Morales drew repeated applause from his Santa Cruz audience, a group harshly critical of him in the past, when he guaranteed a referendum on regional autonomy and a constituent convention, together with "no expropriation or confiscation" of private property or assets.

Busy building bridges, Morales has come close to burning a few. The day after his Santa Cruz visit, he spent all night celebrating his victory with coca growers in the heart of the Chapare coca-growing region. Repeating his pledge to reject U.S. pressure to reduce coca production, he said, "we are winning the green battle; the coca leaf is beating the North American dollar." Even though Morales has pledged to develop legal markets for coca and crack down on drug trafficking, a close aide suggested recently that Bolivia would reject U.S. economic and military aid, which approximated \$91 million in 2005, if it was contingent on continued coca-eradication efforts.

On a more positive note, a late December decision by the European Union to fund a study of coca

---

distribution and use, in an effort to determine how much of it goes to legal uses as opposed to cocaine production, was a welcome initiative which promised to reduce the rhetoric on both sides of the issue. About the same time, the International Monetary Fund announced it would extend 100% debt relief to Bolivia, an amount totaling approximately \$231 million, as part of a multilateral debt relief initiative.

### “Axis of Good”

Returning from the Chapare, Morales made his first trip abroad as president-elect, journeying to Havana where Cuban President Fidel Castro warmly greeted him as a visiting head of state. In the past, Morales has repeatedly declared himself an admirer of Castro and vowed to become a “nightmare” for Washington. In the course of this visit, Castro and Morales announced a 30-month plan to erase illiteracy in Bolivia, and Cuba agreed to provide up to 50,000 free eye operations to needy Bolivians and 5,000 scholarships for Bolivians to study medicine in Cuba. In turn, Morales distanced himself from the Bush administration, stating he would not be pressured by Washington.

Returning to La Paz, Morales enjoyed an hour-long meeting with U.S. Ambassador David Greenlee in the latter’s residence. Vice president-elect Alvaro Garcia Linera, who also attended, put a friendly face on the meeting, indicating the two sides spoke of democracy and drugs. While the U.S. embassy refused comment, the Bush administration used the encounter to reiterate early policy statements. In response to a question the following day, State Department spokesperson Sean McCormick stated the United States was willing to work with any democratically elected government in the hemisphere as long as it governed democratically. He added another condition in the Bolivian case

would be continued cooperation in the war on drugs.

---

Chávez termed the Castro-Chávez-Morales relationship an “axis of good,” a play on President Bush’s description of prewar Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an “axis of evil.”

---

One day after the Greenlee meeting, Morales embarked on a seven-nation international tour, designed in part to demonstrate his capacity to deal with world leaders. Venezuela was the first stop in a tour which included Belgium, Brazil, China, France, South Africa, and Spain. In Caracas, Morales proclaimed that he and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez were united in a “fight against neoliberalism and imperialism.” Warmly praising both Castro and Chávez, he embraced the Bush administration’s severest critics as his role models. Chávez termed the Castro-Chávez-Morales relationship an “axis of good,” a play on President Bush’s description of prewar Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an “axis of evil.” The Venezuelan president also indicated he would supply Bolivia with 150,000 barrels of diesel fuel a month, \$30 million in financing for social programs, and support for the policy to protect coca crops against U.S. eradication campaigns.

European leaders greeted the Morales message cautiously during his international tour, maintaining a certain distance from him. In Spain, the president-elect assured business leaders they had “nothing to fear” from his administration as Bolivia welcomed “partners and business leaders” albeit “not proprietors of our natural resources.” The

---

Spanish government agreed to forgive a “substantial” portion of Bolivia’s debt to Spain, but Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero later refused to appear with Morales at a news conference on the grounds it would breach diplomatic protocol for a sitting prime minister to appear with a president-elect. At the European Union, Javier Solana, the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, assured Morales the EU would work with his government but stressed how important it was for Bolivia to respect private investment and support the war on drugs. Apparently taking that message to heart, Morales emphasized during his subsequent visit to France that his administration would cooperate in the drug war as long as it was not a pretext for the maintenance of U.S. control over Bolivia. Describing the international energy companies as “partners,” he denounced “neoliberalism” as the wrong answer to poverty.

## Conclusion

As his inauguration draws near, Evo Morales has yet to define clearly his policy platform. Immediately following his election, he wisely reached out to private bankers and businessmen and courted the Comité Civico Pro Santa Cruz,

promising a climate favorable to jobs and investment. At the same time, he talked in vague terms about the need to gain control of Bolivia’s natural resources and ensured his cocalero supporters he would never adopt a coca cero (zero coca) policy. But exactly how he plans to implement such policies remains unclear.

Morales later sandwiched a La Paz meeting with U.S. Ambassador Greenlee between visits to Fidel Castro in Cuba and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. While his supporters billed the Greenlee meeting as “cordial,” the Bush administration quickly reiterated its “wait-and-see” policy. Evo Morales is no Che Guevara. Exactly who he is—and where he will take Bolivia—is another question. Given the fuzzy policies articulated to date, the answer may depend on which Morales shows up for the January 22 presidential inauguration.

---

*Ronald Bruce St John, an analyst for Foreign Policy In Focus ([www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org)), has published extensively on Latin American issues for over three decades. Author of *The Foreign Policy of Peru (1992)* and *La Política Exterior del Perú (1999)*, he is working on a history of Bolivian foreign policy.*

---

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org)). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

## Foreign Policy In Focus

“A Think Tank Without Walls”

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to “making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner.” For more information, visit [www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org).

### Recommended citation:

Ronald Bruce St John, “Evo Morales No Che Guevara,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, January 9, 2006).

### Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/3021>

### Production Information:

Writer: Ronald Bruce St John

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC

