

ABSTRACT

Bolivia had seen nearly a decade of economic recession and political strife when current President Evo Morales took office. He won the December 2005 election with 54 percent of the vote, a true majority and the widest margin of victory of any Bolivian candidate in history. Beyond earning the most votes of any candidate ever, Morales was also the first Bolivian president of poor indigenous origin, and he promised to elevate the status of his people, which account for more than two-thirds of the Bolivian population. His party, Movimiento al Socialismo, shifts the country dramatically to the left to the cheers of the oppressed Bolivian majority and to the scorn of the United States and the elite foreign interests and corporations of Bolivia. Bolivia is the poorest country in South America, but it has the second-largest reserves of natural gas on the continent. The 46 year-old Morales won the presidency in December with more popular support than any Bolivian president in decades. He is the latest in a string of left-leaning leaders to assume power in South America in what many see as a backlash against U.S.-backed free-market policies. Bolivia has had five presidents in four years. 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. During his campaign, Morales said he would be the United States' "worst nightmare." He blasted the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas, saying the idea was a sure way to enslave Latin Americans to the interests of American big business. The U.S has criticized Morales for his close ties to Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez and Cuban president Fidel Castro. In the first of the wave of year-long presidential elections in Latin America to mark a significant shift in the Western Hemispheric balance of power between the United States and Brazil, Bolivians voted into power Evo Morales who is pledged to end Bolivia's dependence on the United States and to join the forces of regional autonomy and integration. Presenting himself as Washington's "worst nightmare," Morales stands on the far left of the current tendencies in South America to seek alternatives to Washington's neoliberal economic policies. An admirer of Cuba's Fidel Castro and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, Morales based his campaign on promises to wrest control of the gas reserves and the hydrocarbons industry from the multinational energy corporations that had invested in Bolivia during its pro-U.S. administrations of the past 20 years. Morales also pledged to decriminalize the cultivation of the coca leaf -- the source of cocaine -- for its traditional uses as a mild stimulant and medicinal tea, and to fight the cocaine trade, promising to end cooperation with Washington's programs to eliminate the crop. Morales wrapped up his proposals in an ideology that attacked the neoliberal market model and offered in its place a vision of cooperative socialism and regional integration similar to Chavez's "Bolivarian Revolution."