

Is it the birth of a new era in Bolivia?

This is the first time a full-blooded Indian has become President of the country.

R. Viswanathan

THE VICTORY of Evo Morales is historic; the first time an indigenous Indian has become President of Bolivia, where 65 per cent of the 8.6 million people are Indians. According to a World Bank study, 74 per cent of Bolivian Indians are in dire poverty. Evo — as he is popularly called — is from the Aymara community, the largest ethnic group in the country.

This is also the first time a full-blooded Indian has become President of a Latin American country in the last 200 years. The only other Indian to become President was Benito Suarez in Mexico in the mid-1800s. President Alejandro Toledo of Peru is a mestizo (of mixed race).

Although the European colonisers systematically decimated the Indians, there are still about 35 million belonging to 400 different ethnic groups, forming six per cent of the total population of Latin America. Five countries, namely, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Guatemala, and Mexico, have sizeable populations of indigenous people. Most of them are mired in poverty and feel generally discriminated against by the ruling classes.

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of indigenous movements fighting for their right to a share of the land and power. Their uprisings have led to the overthrow of two governments in Bolivia and two in Ecuador in the last few years. Subcommandante Marcos of the Zapatista movement,

Coca leaves are sold in supermarkets of Bolivia and Peru. Most of the coca is grown in family plots and this is the sole income for many farmers. According to Evo, the countries that want to destroy coca are the enemies of the Indians. Since the United States has been actively eradicating coca plants in the region, the website says, "Long live coca ... Yankees go home."

Evo's stand on coca pits him dead against an important strategic policy of the U.S. towards Latin America. He had alleged that the U.S. used drug trafficking as a pretext to install military bases in the region. During the 2002 Presidential elections, the American Ambassador warned the U.S. would cut off aid if the Bolivians chose candidates like Evo. This certainly had the effect of boosting the popularity of Mr. Morales. Now the American think tanks are warning that Evo's election has made the axis of a duo (Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez) into that of a Trio. It is now for the Americans to see how to deal with a President who has been elected with the largest majority in the last 20 years in Bolivia.

In a press conference after the elections, Evo pledged to work with the U.S. against drug trafficking. He promised to control the areas under coca cultivation and hold a referendum on the issue.

Chavez's admirer

Evo is close to President Chavez of Venezuela, whose agenda for Venezuela and the region are in head-on collision with those of the U.S. Evo joined the anti-FTAA demonstration organised by Mr. Chavez in Mar del Plata during the Summit of Americas in November 2005. He calls Mr. Chavez "Mi Comandante" — my commander. While the anti-neoliberal rhetoric of Evo is as radical as that of Mr. Chavez, he has no oil wealth to back him up. Bolivia is the poorest country in Latin America, with a history of 200 military coups and instability. The country has

had five Presidents in the last four years. Evo cannot afford to be too adventurous, since he and Bolivia are more vulnerable.

Will he go the way of Mr. Chavez or that of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil is the question being asked by Bolivian businessmen and regional experts. Evo is the leader of a political party called "Movement to Socialism." He is relatively young (46) and has no previous government experience. He has been all along in the opposition fighting against the government.

Now as President, he would face the opposition of the well-entrenched traditional political and business oligarchies who would try to undermine his government at every step. More than that, he would face internal challenges from the extreme elements among his own supporters pushing him to deliver on his radical promises. He himself needs a transformation from an agitator to a responsible and pragmatic administrator.

Given these overwhelming challenges, he might follow the model of Lula and work with others in a non-confrontational manner. He might seek greater control over the gas sector, the principal national wealth of the country and might not go in for nationalisation, as he advocated before the elections.

The election of Evo has confirmed the recent trend of the re-emergence of the Left in recent years in Latin America. Leftists have already come to power in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Venezuela, and briefly in Ecuador.

The next battleground to test this trend would be Mexico where the leftist candidate Lopez Obrador is leading the opinion polls ahead of his conservative and centrist rivals in the elections to be held in July 2006. Thereafter, in the November 2006 elections in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas are hoping to come back to power.

(The author is with the Ministry of External Affairs. Views expressed here are personal.)



MAN OF THE PEOPLE: Bolivia's President-elect Evo Morales. — PHOTO: AP

has been a celebrated symbol of indigenous assertion in Mexico.

The victory of Evo has come as a morale booster to the indigenous communities and leaders across the region. They hailed it as a turning point in the history of 500 years of indigenous exclusion.

Evo is a leader of the coca growing indigenous community. His website opens with the invocation, "Graceful Pachamama, Mother Earth — thank you for the coca leaves." He has been fighting for the inalienable right of the indigenous people to grow coca leaves, a sacred plant for Indians and part of their livelihood and way of life. The Indians use coca leaves as a dietary supplement, to kill hunger, to get energy, and to make tea.