

Bolivia: 'Never Before Have We Seen Such Changes'

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Alina Canaviri Sullcani is a Bolivian indigenous peasant now visiting Australia. Canaviri is active in Santa Cruz as a leader of the National Federation of Indigenous Peasant Women of Bolivia "Bartolina Sisa" and the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) party led by President Evo Morales.

Canaviri spoke at the Latin America solidarity conference in Melbourne over October 8-9 and will be a featured guest at the solidarity conference held in Sydney over October 16 and 17 (visit www.latinamericasolidarity.org for details).

Green Left Weekly's Federico Fuentes spoke to Canaviri on the process of change in Bolivia being led by Morales, the country's first president from the indigenous majority.

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What has the Morales government meant for Bolivia's social movements and indigenous peoples?

In the context of the process of change under way, it is very important for us because it signifies that we are representing ourselves in government. Now, for the first time, we have an indigenous president that represents us and puts forward proposals that above all else are gathered from the social movements, from the grassroots.

And not just from the indigenous peasant bases, but from social organisations and intellectuals. That is why we, as peasant women now playing a key role in decision making, see this as a very important advance for us.

If we look at the new Plurinational Assembly and the cabinet, it is clear that different social organisations are represented there.

The minister of justice is part of the federation of peasant women. The minister of productive development and plural economy is also an indigenous peasant woman. There are many other social sectors represented in the different ministries.

In the assembly, we don't just see ties and suits; now we see indigenous men and women, as well as gas workers and miners, bringing their proposals to approve laws together with the Bolivian people.

What has been the impact of the fact that these movements now feel part of the government?

Before, we used to carry out blockades, hunger strikes and marches. But now, social organisations have begun making proposals. Each sector has proposals.

I believe that we, as social organisations, have advanced a lot in the area of participation, above all else. We, as the indigenous peasant movement, had never taken part in the decision-making process; we were never taken into consideration by the laws, not even in the constitution.

The constitution didn't even recognise us; now [due to a new constitution approved by popular vote] we are recognised.

Moreover, this government has nationalised companies, whereas previous governments privatised everything to make money off these companies for themselves.

And from the nationalisations, particularly of hydrocarbons, the people have received many benefits, such as social security payments for schoolchildren, pregnant women and the elderly.

There are many things that have improved the quality of life of the most disadvantaged. There has also been redistribution of land [to peasants to farm]. Never in Bolivia's history had we seen a piece of land being given to a woman; today state policy prioritises women in regards to distributing plots of land.

Now that the MAS controls two-thirds of the Plurinational Assembly, what are the priorities for social movements in regards to laws?

Well, one of them is to do with social control. We are involving all the social movements in controlling the state's budget and how it is used. Also the Law Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz deals with corruption. It aims to ensure that anyone robbing the Bolivian people is punished.

It is important to note these laws emerged from the social movements. These laws were discussed by the Eastern Bloc [which unites indigenous peasant organisations from Santa Cruz], the Unity Pact [involving the most important indigenous and peasant confederations at the national level] and the Conalcam [National Coalition for Change, which unites indigenous, peasant, women's, urban and worker organisations, among others, that support the process of change].

As social movements, we took part by proposing laws and regulations for the new constitution. But the work of approving laws to regulate the new constitution has only just begun.

What can you tell us about the proposed law against racism that has been attacked in Bolivia and internationally as violating free speech?

Unfortunately, racism has always existed among all the capitalist elites across the world. Even though they are a minority, they have prohibited us as indigenous peasant women from being able to walk in the main plazas — even though we are entitled to the same rights as them.

Therefore, this law was proposed by those of us who have not been protected by laws, who have been victims of racism, of insults, in order to say no more racism, no more discrimination.

We know the media have been one of the key driving forces of this racism and of the fascist right, calling on the people to mobilise [against the government and indigenous peoples]. Many people fell into the trap of going along with some of the media outlets that will be affected by the new law.

And who are the owners of these media outlets that have so much power at the national scale? [Osvaldo] Monasterio, for example, is the owner of Unitel. And who is Monasterio? He is one of the largest landowners in the department of Santa Cruz.

What they are doing is simply defending their personal interests, forcing many journalists to print lies, and that is why they reject the new law against racism. At the same time, there are many journalists and broadcasters who agree with the law.

Do you have anything else to add?

Only to say that no doubt we will be debating issues such as these at the Latin America solidarity conference — issues such as how we are taking part in the process of change, how we as indigenous women are contributing to the process.

That is why I would like to invite all the brothers and sisters, particularly those young people who believe another world is possible, to take part in the conference.

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