

Farmers' fears highlight growing rift with Morales

With a program to redistribute land in place and plans to nationalize Bolivia's gas, President Evo Morales is taking a sharp turn to the left.

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CUATRO CAÑADAS, Bolivia -- Tsutomu Fukuhara spent 22 years building up his soybean farm in this corner of eastern Bolivia, starting with 250 acres worth \$2,000 and now farming 12,000 acres worth \$2 million.

But beyond the usual worries of weather and crop prices, the son of Japanese immigrants has a new concern: President Evo Morales' decision to confiscate "idle" lands from large farmers and give it to the landless poor.

"I have a family," said Fukuhara. "I have debts, I have people who work for me, I've dedicated my life to the farm. I'll fight to the death to protect it."

Fukuhara is not alone in feeling threatened by Morales, who last week began awarding 9,600 square miles of state lands to poor Indians -- the first step of a program to distribute 77,000 square miles of state and private lands, an area larger than Florida's 54,000 square miles.

The National Farming Confederation has announced it would create "self-defense" groups to protect members' lands. The government, in turn, said such groups would be illegal and branded those who defend the farmers "traitors."

Violence already flared last week as shootouts on farms occupied by squatters in two separate incidents left one dead and 10 wounded.

The land dispute underscores the growing tensions between Morales and the largely poor Andean region in the west on one hand, and Bolivia's business and agriculture industry leaders in the eastern lowlands region of Santa Cruz on the other.

POPULIST MEASURES

Morales' land-redistribution program followed his controversial May 1 decree to expropriate the majority stakes held by private companies in Bolivia's natural-gas industry.

He also has indicated that he wants to nationalize the mining and forestry industries, stirring initial concerns among U.S.-based mining companies -- such as Apex Silver, Coeur d'Alene and Newmont -- that together have invested \$750 million in Bolivia.

The populist measures -- taking from wealthy Bolivians and foreign investors and giving to the poor -- are popular with voters, and that's just the point, analysts say, pointing to the upcoming July 2 election for representatives to an assembly that will rewrite Bolivia's constitution.

"Everything is for domestic consumption, that's the one thing I have learned," said a Latin American diplomat who asked for anonymity because he didn't have his country's approval to speak on the record. "The idea is to gather as many votes as possible for the Constituent Assembly, regardless of the consequences, which will be addressed later."

Morales governed as a leftist moderate in the mold of Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva during the first 90 days after he took office on Jan. 22. Now he draws comparisons with leftist Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

"May 1 marked a turning point, a shift to the left," said Florida International University Professor Eduardo Gamarra, a Bolivian native, in a telephone interview from Miami.

"It's a brilliant political strategy," Gamarra said, adding that with the assembly, Morales hopes to rewrite the constitution to codify his socialist principles -- barriers to free trade, state ownership of natural resources and land, and extra rights for the country's long-excluded indigenous majority -- and remove a ban on presidential reelection.

ELECTED ON A PROMISE

Morales inherited perhaps Bolivia's best fiscal balance in 30 years, thanks to a tax increase imposed by Congress on gas companies last year and to strong Chinese demand for Bolivian minerals and agricultural products, said Juan Cariaga, who served as finance minister in the 1980s.

South America's poorest country has its highest level of foreign exchange reserves, a rare trade surplus, the smallest budget deficit in memory, minimal inflation and an overall growth rate of 4 percent.

But Morales was elected in December on a promise to make far-reaching changes because 64 percent of Bolivians -- most of them Indians -- still earn \$2 a day or less and have long felt excluded by the descendants of Spaniards who traditionally ruled the country.

Morales' election marked the end of a tumultuous three-year period that saw two presidents forced out of office amid street protests, sparked principally by popular demands for state ownership of the natural-gas industry.

"Evo's doing what the people want," said Zoilo Yanapa, a restaurant owner in the capital city of La Paz. "He's returning our sovereignty and making others respect us."

But large landholders in the state of Santa Cruz vehemently oppose the land-redistribution program, especially because the definition of "idle" land is open to broad interpretations in the case of cattle pasture lands and crop lands left fallow to rejuvenate.

Hugo Salvatierra, minister of rural development, told foreign reporters last month that many big landholders had obtained their land illegally, don't pay their full taxes and keep their farm workers in a state of semi-slavery. As a result, he added, the government will not compensate landholders for taking their property.

The government's plan "is a continuation and deepening of the 1953 land reform," Salvatierra said, referring to an epochal event in this country's turbulent history -- a measure that has been stalled for decades on legal and bureaucratic grounds. "We want to reestablish the primary role of the state. Land belongs to the state."

Silvestre Saisari, a leader of the peasant Landless Movement, said 15,000 families in the eastern state of Santa Cruz alone don't have a plot to call their own.

They include such people as Yolanda Marino, who sells snacks from a roadside shack to motorists waiting to cross the one-lane bridge in Puerto Ibañez, outside the city of Santa Cruz.

"My dream is to have some land, a house and get a better life," Marino said as she barbecued chicken on a grill.

AN EMPHATIC DENIAL

"Productive farmers," Salvatierra said, don't have to worry about government intervention, adding, "I want to deny reports that we'll bring people from the west and give them land in the east."

The province and city of Santa Cruz, with its lush and open spaces, has become a magnet for migrants from La Paz and other parts of the cold and mountainous west.

None of the land in the initial distribution program was taken from private farmers. But they are nervous that their land will be next. "My fear is that the government will arbitrarily take productive land," said Marcelo Estenssoro, a Bolivian sitting in the shade of a grapefruit tree on his 2,500-acre cattle ranch in Cuatro Cañadas.

"We're afraid that the government will do something it shouldn't do."