

Indigenous influence on politics offends Bolivia's white minority

President Evo Morales' effort to introduce indigenous Bolivian values and symbolism into official Bolivian life has been denounced by some as racial politics.

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TAMBO ACACHILA, Bolivia - The sun-browned, indigenous farmers of this village have survived in the dry moonscape of Bolivia's highlands by sharing what little they've grown in the rocky soil.

When one family is starving, the mayor walks the village's dusty streets collecting potatoes, prickly pear and coca leaf to help out. When a neighbor dies, everyone pitches in to pay for a funeral in the town's sad little cemetery. When a decision is to be reached, the sides are argued until everyone agrees.

The age-old system has kept thousands of similar towns alive for centuries. Now, President Evo Morales, who became Bolivia's first indigenous head of state last January, is holding up those values of common ownership and consensus decision-making as a model for this impoverished country -- and angering its white minority, which accuses him of playing racial politics in his self-proclaimed indigenous revolution.

"This is a very dangerous strategy, and it has a racist component," said Daniel Castro, spokesman for the Pro Santa Cruz Committee, a civic group that represents the country's second largest province, which is home to the largest non-indigenous population in Bolivia. ``Their official policy is to place one race over another, and it's very worrying."

Morales, an Aymara Indian who grew up in a similar village in a nearby province, has moved quickly to introduce indigenous people and themes to official Bolivian life.

During his first week in office, he chose a Cabinet made up largely of indigenous and union leaders, including the indigenous head of a maids' union who was named justice minister.

His speeches are full of phrases from the Aymara and Quechua languages, which more than 34 percent of Bolivians speak. He's refused to wear a suit and tie at official functions, opting for a casual brown jacket adorned with indigenous designs.

MUSIC OF CHANGE

Even the playing of the national anthem at ceremonies has been revamped. At the opening of a constituent assembly earlier this month at which delegates are to rewrite the country's constitution, thousands waited in the blazing sun while a choir sang the anthem in Spanish, Aymara, Quechua and Guaraní, another Indian language.

Angélica Salazar, the mayor of Tambo Acachila, praises Morales' steps.

"The difference now with this government is Evo is a peasant like us," Salazar said in a mix of Spanish and Quechua, a language that traces its roots to the ancient Inca. ``He understands how hard our lives are."

For indigenous leaders, Morales' landmark election represented a historic opportunity to include millions of people long shut out of power in this country of 9.4 million, 56 percent of whom identified themselves either as Quechua or Aymara in a 2001 poll.

Although Bolivia claims 36 native communities in all, indigenous Bolivians are often politically unified, frequently intermarry and adopt one another's languages and customs, Bolivian anthropologists said. Quechuas and Aymaras, major civilizations that Spanish colonizers encountered in the 16th century, are the biggest indigenous groups.

What unifies many indigenous Bolivians is the sense that they've been wronged for centuries. Morales often points out in speeches that the indigenous played no part

in the country's founding in 1825 although they made up more than 90 percent of the population then.

Indigenous leaders hope they can remedy those historic ills through the constituent assembly, which has up to a year to do its work.

"We're a country that's pluri-lingual and pluri-cultural, and we want a constitution that recognizes this," said Nélide Faldin, a delegate who is a Chiquitano from eastern Bolivia. "For years we weren't recognized as an ethnicity, and the government didn't recognize our vision."

"They have a neo-liberal vision based around money. We have a socialist vision. The peasants have a more collective vision."

NEW VISION

Morales' foreign minister, Aymaran activist David Choquehuanca, has emerged as the main articulator of the government's indigenous vision, speaking about everything from the cosmic bent of Morales' government to the supernatural qualities of coca leaf, the main ingredient of cocaine and widely chewed by indigenous people for stamina.

"We are a different kind of government," Choquehuanca recently said in an interview with McClatchy Newspapers. "This is a government based on the native principle that we are all the same size, no better or worse. An architect is no better than a farmer, and a person with a college education is no better than a peasant."

DIFFERENCES

Morales frequently spells out what he sees as the differences between indigenous and traditional governments.

"For the leaders of the indigenous communities, their democracy is of consensus," he said during a speech in Sucre, the country's traditional capital. "There are no majorities and minorities. Majorities and minorities are a democracy imposed on our country."

The big question is whether such a model can work on a national scale and for a country that's made up largely of mestizos, people of both European and indigenous heritage but whose culture is decidedly European-based.

With Morales' Movement Toward Socialism party in control of the Congress and the constituent assembly, white minority leaders said they feared that they'd be overrun with ideas about democracy and private property that they found strange at best.

"There's a majority force at work here now, and we will have to see how they use that power and if they'll try to work with us and reach compromise," said Hormando Vaca Diez, the former president of Bolivia's Senate. ``They have their vision of this country and we have ours."