

In Bolivia, Speaking Up For Native Languages

Government Push Is Plagued by Controversy

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LA PAZ, [Bolivia](#) -- Andrea Mamani stood in front of her students the other day and started the afternoon lesson by pointing to her head.

The 22 students, aspiring public health-care professionals in white lab coats, responded in ragged unison: "P'iqi."

She pointed to her arm. "Ampara," they answered.

Mamani was teaching them Aymara, an indigenous language spoken mainly in the rural highlands of Bolivia and Peru. The students in her class, most of them urbanites, had scant previous knowledge of the language. But they are pioneers in a training program that President Evo Morales -- the country's first indigenous president -- hopes will become standard for all government employees.

The Bolivian government estimates that 37 percent of the population speaks a native language that predates the arrival of Spanish colonists in the 16th century. Officials hope that language-training programs in public schools and government offices will raise that percentage -- but not just for the sake of scholarship. In the words of an Education Ministry informational pamphlet distributed in La Paz this month, promoting those languages is part of a broad effort "to decolonize the mindset and the Bolivian state."

For Morales, the attempt to elevate languages such as Aymara and Quechua is emblematic of his government's indigenous-based social agenda: It is enormously ambitious, plagued by conflict and difficult to implement.

After announcing last year that all government employees would have to undergo indigenous language training, Morales's administration sought to require it of public school children as well, no matter where they lived. The proposal riled many in the parts of Bolivia that have little connection to indigenous communities, areas such as the eastern lowlands, where words spoken in Quechua and Aymara are often heard as threats to a way of life.

"Evo wants to make Quechua and Aymara the official languages of Bolivia, instead of Spanish," said Fernando Suarez, 43, a taxi driver in Santa Cruz, echoing a common fear in a region that seeks greater independence from Morales's government. "That might be fine for the highlands where they actually speak those languages, but not here."

Government officials say they are not trying to replace Spanish. But they argue that promoting Quechua, Aymara, Guaraní and other native languages should be a priority for a country where more than half of the people identified themselves as indigenous in the most recent census.

"These languages used to be studied only in rural contexts, but now they are being introduced to urban contexts as well, throughout the entire educational system, from

primary schools to the universities," said Juan José Quiroz, an Education Ministry official who oversees indigenous language programs.

The government's promotion of that agenda has been, at times, abrasive. Félix Patzi, a former minister of education and culture, last year labeled Bolivians who did not speak an indigenous language "an embarrassment." He sent letters telling school administrators that the government would not recognize their institutions unless they guaranteed indigenous language instruction this academic year. He also proposed replacing Roman Catholic instruction in public schools with a controversial "history of religions" class that would place more focus on traditional indigenous beliefs.

After initially supporting Patzi, Morales backed down on the new religion course. He also has appeared to relax his insistence on the indigenous language requirement; officials said last week that the training would not be obligatory for students this year.

Also last week, Morales fired several members of his cabinet, including Patzi, associated with the controversy over the government's agenda.

Meanwhile, the president's approval rating has slid from nearly 80 percent shortly after he was inaugurated a year ago to about 59 percent, according to a poll in La Razon, a La Paz newspaper. In the past month, street protests have raged and demands for autonomy in various districts have grown louder as a constituent assembly, elected to rewrite the constitution, remains deadlocked.

"The initial crack in his popularity" was "all about the education proposals," said Jim Shultz, a political analyst in Cochabamba, referring to Morales. "They resonated with this symbolic fear that non-indigenous people have in this country, which questions whether Evo really understands their needs and perspectives."

Though Morales's tone might be softening for the moment, he has not abandoned indigenous-friendly reforms. Universities report that enrollment in indigenous language programs is up since he took power, and the Education Ministry continues to open new centers where the languages are taught.

Last year, a student at San Pablo Catholic University in Bolivia wrote his graduate thesis in Aymara -- a first for the country. His professors conducted their oral questioning of the thesis in Aymara during a public ceremony on the shores of Lake Titicaca.

Education officials say the reemergence of Bolivia's indigenous languages is part of a regional trend. Interest in indigenous communities and traditions has grown in the past 20 years throughout South America.

"In the 1980s, people here didn't want to speak Quechua or Aymara," said Adrián Montalvo, who helps set education policy for native language programs. "Those languages were limited only to the community and family spheres, and it was considered shameful to speak them elsewhere. But now people speak them much more freely."

Donato Gómez Bacarreza, an expert in Andean languages and head of the language program at La Paz's San Andrés University, said his instructors have recently begun giving classes, at the government's request, to members of the national Congress. He also said people in the business community, including local bankers and Japanese auto executives, have signed up for Aymara and Quechua classes to better connect to Bolivia's native people. He and other linguists have been struggling for decades to resuscitate the languages, and he said he now sees a clear payoff.

"What we are fighting for is our cultural identity," he said.

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