

ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

The Morales revolution is part of a longer historical process, says former UN diplomat **Margaret Anstee**

On my first field trip as head of the UN mission to Bolivia in 1960, I accompanied the minister for rural affairs to a remote Aymara village to distribute new land titles authorised under the recent agrarian reform law. This was an outcome of the 1952 revolution by bourgeois revolutionaries, aimed at incorporating the indigenous majority into all aspects of national life. Other measures included universal suffrage, education and health for all, and nationalisation of the mines.

We were greeted by a colourful procession, led by the *jilakata* (village chief) bearing his silver embossed staff of command, followed by homespun henchmen, *cholitas* twirling flamboyant bell skirts, their bowler hats at the requisite coquettish angle, and a motley group of musicians playing haunting music on a variety of Andean instruments. To my horror, the *jilakata* fell to his knees and kissed my hand. He had never seen a white woman before. Such a scene would never occur today. It was already an anachronism then.

Dame Margaret in her Bolivian room on the Welsh Marches

Progress is not simply a miracle achieved over the past 10 years

The UN supported the reforms through a rural development programme (Acción Andina) based on four pilot projects. The villagers were asked to state their priorities, of which education was the first everywhere. They built their own schools and sometimes even paid the teacher. The programme also embraced preventive health care, built around the coca leaf practices of the *yatiri* (traditional healers); the farming of newly acquired plots of land, and training in basic technical skills. The results were promising, but before the project could be extended to the whole country it was halted by a military coup, backed by some US elements, in November 1964. Eighteen years of military dictatorship followed, during which the pace of indigenous incorporation slowed and suspicion and hostility between the classes increased.

When democracy was restored in 1982, a fragile elected government inherited a shattered economy, riddled with drug trafficking and galloping inflation. I was sent by the secretary-general to help restore the situation. That was the time of the Washington Consensus and International Monetary Fund structural reforms. Unless Bolivia

conformed to these conditions it could expect no external aid and, in 1985, the next government had to introduce a swingeing programme of reforms. Inflation stopped and some sectors profited, but rural indigenous people and peasant farmers did not. They survived through subsistence farming but the evident inequality heightened the deeply rooted sense of grievance and discrimination.

In 1993, Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada became president and introduced far-reaching reforms, among them decentralisation of authority and resources through the law of popular participation (1994). I had retired from the UN and was living in an Andean community in a house I had built on Lake Titicaca. As unpaid adviser to the government, I was closely involved in the process and saw the transformational effects locally.

Paradoxically, Sánchez de

Lozada sowed the seeds of his own political demise. It was popular participation that enabled Evo Morales to muster widespread indigenous support and oust the president early in his second incumbency, becoming president himself in 2006. There were other factors, such as the widespread coverage of cellular phones that vastly improved communications between regions and helped synchronise indigenous opposition movements that brought the country to a standstill.

Bolivia's social structures today are immensely different from those I observed in 1960. The middle class has swollen; most recent observers attribute this to Morales' policies, but again there were contributory factors. The main one was the rapid rise in commodity prices; for the first time in decades, Bolivia had a budget surplus, providing resources to finance ambitious programmes. But Bolivia's economy remains heavily dependent on commodities, so the current decline in their prices raises the question of future sustainability. A paper by Emmerich Davies and Tulia Falletti of the University of Pennsylvania, presented to the Red de Economía Política de América Latina, a research network, in Uruguay in July 2015, argues that "profound institutional reforms were designed and implemented before the election of Evo Morales". The authors also suggest the process has declined since the recent "left turn" in Bolivian politics.

Thus, progress in the situation is not simply a miracle achieved over the past 10 years but dates back to the 1952 revolution. It has not been a smooth process, interrupted by the 1964 military coup, the 18 years of dictatorship, the growth of narco-trafficking and the adverse social impact of structural adjustment in 1985. Favourable developments have included a rise in commodity prices and increasing migration from rural areas to urban centres, where social mobility is easier.

Rather than a revolution of the past decade, we are witnessing an evolution over more than half a century. ■

Dame Margaret Anstee was the first female under-secretary-general of the UN and former adviser to the Bolivian government

