

Published: 08.06.2006

Bolivia set to write new constitution

President hopes to reinvent state, involve majority

By Dan Keane

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SUCRE, Bolivia — President Evo Morales' drive to reinvent Bolivia takes a big step today with the opening of a convention to write a new constitution aimed at ending the centuries-old supremacy of the European-descended minority.

Morales, a leftist elected in December as Bolivia's first Indian president, envisions the nationally elected Constituent Assembly as nothing less than the "refounding" of the country on a new deal for the Indian majority.

The divisions of class, race, geography and culture that will frame the debate were brought into sharp relief Thursday night as the 255 delegates elected last month were sworn in.

On one side of the aisle sat the delegates from Morales' leftist party, many wearing the fluorescent-colored knit caps of the Aymara Indians or the bowlers and white straw hats favored by rural women.

On the conservative benches, the skin tone was visibly paler, and business suits dominated.

At one point, the conservatives, many from eastern provinces that want to keep more of their wealth from being consumed by socialist programs, stood up chanting "Autonomy!"

Morales' loyalists responded with "Revolution!"

After pleas for order, both sides settled down and sang the national anthem.

Both sides bring demands

The assembly has up to a year to work on a new charter.

Bolivia's current constitution was adopted in 1967 under Rene Barrientos Ortuno, who rose to power in a military coup and was then elected president. Its last modification came in 1994, when President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada drove changes to the electoral process, including expanding presidential terms from four years to five.

Morales' Movement Toward Socialism party holds a thin majority in the assembly, but not the two-thirds needed to control the assembly outright. Even so, the party hopes to use the assembly to reshape the Bolivian state to give more power to the long-neglected Indian majority.

Other themes will be the autonomy demands of four wealthier lowland provinces where opposition to Morales, an Aymara Indian, runs high. Morales will try to insert more state controls to give poor Bolivians a bigger role in the country's free-market economy.

Some participants hoped the assembly could bring the two sides closer.

"The idea is that through the right proposals, we can build this bridge," said Samuel Doria Medina of the center-right National Unity Party.

But many were doubtful that after centuries of neglect, the two Bolivias could become one so easily.

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