

LATIN AMERICA - Indigenous People Demand More Central Role in the World Social Forum (Diego Cevallos, IPS)

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IPS - Indigenous leaders from Latin America are overjoyed at the inauguration of Aymara Indian Evo Morales as Bolivia's new president, which they are celebrating as a victory of their own. They are now hoping that the achievement will help catapult them into a more central role at the sixth World Social Forum (WSF), which opens Tuesday in Venezuela.

"Only a limited number of indigenous people have taken part so far in the World Social Forum, and their debates have not reached the grassroots level, which is a shortcoming, because we owe our activism to our communities," said Ecuadorian indigenous leader Rosa Alvarado, one of the heads of the Coordinating Body for the Indigenous Organisations of the Amazon Basin (COICA), which is made up of groups from Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela.

The WSF in Venezuela, which runs through Sunday, is the sixth annual gathering of civil society organisations from around the world. The first WSF was held in the southern Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in 2001.

This year the WSF is being held on three different continents: in Caracas; in Bamako, Mali, where the gathering ended Monday; and in Karachi, Pakistan in late March.

Although delegates from indigenous organisations have taken part in previous World Social Forums, they have attended in small numbers and have always played a peripheral role.

"We have been marginal and marginalised actors (at the WSF), but we hope that will change, and that we will now be taken into consideration and heard," Manuel Castro, spokesman for the powerful Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), told IPS.

According to surveys carried out at earlier editions of the WSF by the Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analysis (IBASE), most of the participants are young people who do not belong to any political party and who study or have studied at university.

Alvarado told IPS that the presence of indigenous activists at the WSF will have a real influence only if their actions there reflect the views of their communities and the resolutions that are adopted actually get back to the grassroots level.

Castro, meanwhile, said the sixth WSF will be an important venue for debate and protest, although he argued that the discussions and debates should begin to move towards the design of "solid, concrete action plans."

Both activists said Sunday's inauguration of Morales as Bolivia's first indigenous president will help place indigenous concerns and problems in a more central spot on the WSF agenda in Venezuela.

A similar stance was expressed by Mexican activist Alberto Gómez, coordinator of the global organisation Vía Campesina for Canada, Mexico and the United States. "We now find ourselves at an important crossroads due to Morales's triumph, and we hope indigenous concerns will find a place among the most important issues considered at the Forum," he told IPS.

"As indigenous campesinos (small farmers), we have been just another actor in the Forum, but that has to change, and now is the time for that change," said Gómez, who is also one of the leaders of the National Union of Autonomous Regional Farmers' Organisations in Mexico.

Over the past 15 years, the influence and power of indigenous organisations in Latin America have grown exponentially.

Popular movements spearheaded by indigenous associations toppled governments in Bolivia and Ecuador. And in Mexico, the barely-armed indigenous guerrilla Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) became an important new actor in the political process.

Now, for the first time in modern history, Latin America has a fully indigenous president, Morales, in South America's poorest country, Bolivia, where 60 percent of the population of nearly nine million people belongs to indigenous groups.

But although their political influence has grown significantly in recent years, the overwhelming majority of the roughly 40 million indigenous people in Latin America live in dire poverty.

A World Bank study released in May 2005, "Indigenous Peoples, Poverty and Human Development in Latin America: 1994-2004", noted that in the five Latin American countries with the largest indigenous populations - Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru - simply being born indigenous virtually amounts to a condemnation to a life of poverty.

Indigenous organisations in the region are fighting hard to modify the situation of poverty and discrimination, while pushing for recognition of their social and cultural traditions and their right to keep their cultures alive.

"We hope Evo Morales will do a good job, because we feel very proud of him," and his performance as president could mark a major step forward for the struggles of indigenous people in the region, said Alvarado.

For his part, Castro said that if Morales fails, it would be a "disgrace" for native ethnic groups in Latin America.

"There is a risk that no major changes will be brought about in Bolivia, which would be a tough blow," he warned.

But if Morales is successful in modifying conditions for the poor in Bolivia, his example "could encourage other countries with large indigenous populations, like Ecuador, to elect indigenous presidents," he added.

Several indigenous leaders from Latin America attended Morales' inaugural ceremony in La Paz on Sunday, personally invited by Bolivia's new president. Afterwards, they packed their bags to head to the WSF in Venezuela.