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OPINION | THE AMERICAS

## *Morales Made Bolivia a Narco State*

How many Mexicans know the role that Evo has played in the coca business?



By Mary Anastasia O'Grady

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When former Bolivian President Evo Morales arrived in Mexico City last week seeking asylum, Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard greeted him at the airport. Associated Press photographer Eduardo Verdugo caught the moment on film, with Mr. Ebrard smiling down on the shorter Mr. Morales and gently cradling the side of the Bolivian's face in his hand.

The South American socialist, who had ruled Bolivia like a tyrant for 14 uninterrupted years, fled his country after the army told him earlier this month that it would not use force against demonstrators protesting a fraudulent election. Mexico rushed to paint Mr. Morales as the victim of a coup, and Mr. Ebrard's gesture of affection in front of the cameras seemed designed to enhance public sympathy.

Yet how many Mexicans know that Mr. Morales is also secretary-general of the Bolivian federation of coca growers, one of the largest producers and distributors of cocaine in the Western Hemisphere? And how many know that Mr. Morales trampled the rights of the lowland indigenous people in the Amazon when they opposed the expansion of the coca business?

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador is on a mission to write the "Evo" narrative. Mexicans deserve the truth.

Mr. Morales ruled Bolivia not as a social democrat but as an authoritarian. Much like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, in the early years of his tenure he used his popularity and a commodity boom to destroy his country's democratic institutions.

But Mr. Morales's popularity declined when commodity prices tumbled, the economy slowed, and the government ran low on money. In a 2016 referendum on whether he should be allowed to run for a fourth term, Bolivians voted no.

He ran in this year's Oct. 20 election anyway. When Bolivians rejected his candidacy, he simply declared himself the winner. But on Nov. 10 the Organization of American States said its audit of the election results turned up evidence of fraud. When the national police sided with the demonstrators and the military suggested Mr. Morales step aside for the good of the country, he announced his resignation.

Mexico is spinning a different tale. But then that's how Evo rose to power in the first place, under the cover of propaganda. Credit goes to the genius of Bolivian socialists, who recognized that they could use the fruits of unadulterated capitalism and the power of populism to impose a Marxist hierarchy.

In the 1980s, with the U.S. war on drugs reaching deep into South America, the coca lobby needed political help. It had deep pockets and many long-marginalized indigenous people, including but not limited to coca growers, on its side.

By teaming up with the *cocaleros*, the Bolivian disciples of Fidel Castro were able to abandon their armed struggle against the government. “They replaced it with a strategy that combined political action, social movements and drug trafficking into a single organization,” Hugo Achá, a research fellow at the Center for a Secure Free Society in Washington, told me in a telephone interview last week. This was the genesis of the Movement Toward Socialism, Mr. Morales’s party, Mr. Achá said.

Mr. Morales began his career in the coca union as its sports secretary in 1981 and gradually moved up the ladder. By 1996 he was head of the coca-growers federation.

In 1997 he launched his political career as a congressman. As the Spanish daily *El País* explained on Nov. 12, since then, “one of his main objectives—the same one he maintained during his tenure as president—was the defense, protection and industrialization of the coca leaf.” As Bolivian president he remained chief of the coca-growers federation and was re-elected to the latter post last year.

Officially Mr. Morales advocated for coca on the grounds that cultivating and chewing the leaf are ancient practices among native Bolivians. But there’s neither money nor power in selling the leaves to locals. For that the *cocaleros* have to export the raw product or, even better, make cocaine at home to sell abroad.

As president, Mr. Morales led a boom in the Bolivian cocaine business. Police brutalized the Amazon’s indigenous population in 2011 when it marched against his plan to open new coca-growing areas on their protected ancestral lands.

For a time he backed off. But in 2016, not long after he lost the referendum on re-election, he pushed through a law removing protection of the lands and predicted that highways would be built there. The message was that indigenous rights were meaningless.

Mr. Morales made Bolivia into a full-blown narco state. The strategy was so successful, according to Mr. Achá, that the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known as FARC, are working to replicate it in that country.

Mexicans might ask why, when their democracy is fighting for its life against drug-trafficking organizations, Mr. López Obrador makes a hero out of one of the biggest capos in the Americas.

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