

Evo Morales

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Evo Morales, in full **Juan Evo Morales Ayma**, (born October 26, 1959, Isallavi, Bolivia), Bolivian labour leader who served as [president](#) of [Bolivia](#) (2006–). A member of the [Aymara indigenous](#) group, Morales was Bolivia's first Indian president.

Born in a mining village in Bolivia's western [Oruro](#) department, Morales herded llamas when he was a boy. After attending [high school](#) and serving in the Bolivian military, he emigrated with his family to the Chapare region in eastern Bolivia, where the family farmed. Among the crops they grew was [coca](#), which is used in the production of [cocaine](#) but is also a traditional crop in the region.

In the early 1980s Morales became active in the regional coca-growers union, and in 1985 he was elected the group's general secretary. Three years later he was elected executive secretary of a federation of various coca-growers unions. In the mid-1990s, when the Bolivian government was suppressing coca production with assistance from the United States, Morales helped found a national political party—the leftist [Movement Toward Socialism](#) (Spanish: Movimiento al Socialismo; MAS)—at the same time serving as titular leader of the federation representing coca growers.

Morales won a seat in the House of Deputies (the lower house of the Bolivian legislature) in 1997 and was the MAS candidate for president in 2002, only narrowly losing to [Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada](#). During the presidential campaign, Morales called for the expulsion from Bolivia of U.S. [Drug Enforcement Administration](#) agents (his campaign was [bolstered](#) by the U.S. ambassador's comment that aid to Bolivia would be reconsidered if Morales was elected). In the following years, Morales remained active in national affairs, helping force the resignation of Sánchez de Lozada in 2003 and extracting a [concession](#) from his successor, [Carlos Mesa Gisbert](#), to consider changes to the highly unpopular U.S.-backed campaign to [eradicate](#) illegal coca production.

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As the MAS presidential candidate again in 2005, Morales was elected easily, winning 54 percent of the vote and becoming the country's first Indian president and the first Bolivian president since 1982 to win a majority of the national vote. Sworn in as president in January 2006, he pledged to reduce [poverty](#) among the country's Indian population, ease restrictions on coca farmers, renationalize the country's energy sector, fight corruption, and increase taxes on the wealthy. Morales strongly supported efforts to rewrite the Bolivian constitution to increase the rights of the country's indigenous population, enshrine his policies of nationalization and land redistribution, and allow a president to serve two consecutive terms, though in a referendum in July 2006 the MAS failed to win a majority in the [Constitutional](#) Assembly. Morales then nationalized Bolivia's gas

fields and oil industry, and in November he signed into law a [land reform](#) bill that called for the seizure of unproductive lands from absentee owners and their redistribution to the poor. His reforms faced opposition from the wealthier provinces of Bolivia, four of which overwhelmingly approved regional [autonomy](#) statutes in referenda held in 2008. The Morales government dismissed the referenda as illegal. Tensions escalated, and demonstrations, some of which turned violent, increased throughout the country. A recall referendum on Morales's leadership was held in [August](#) 2008, and two-thirds of the voters supported the continuance of his presidency.

The constitution that Morales had [envisioned](#) and planned for nearly three years was approved by voters in a national referendum held in January 2009. It allowed him to seek a second consecutive five-year term (previously the constitution [limited](#) the president to a single term) and gave him the power to dissolve Congress. Other changes to the constitution furthered indigenous rights, strengthened state control over the country's natural resources, and enforced a limit on the size of private landholdings. Its passing, however, further aggravated tensions between the country's indigenous majority and wealthier Bolivians from the gas-rich eastern provinces, who strongly opposed its ratification. In April 2009 Morales signed a law authorizing early presidential and legislative elections, set to take place that December. With the continued support of the Indian majority, Morales easily won a second five-year presidential term. Moreover, in the [concurrent](#) legislative elections, the MAS won control of both houses of Congress.

In April 2013 Bolivia's constitutional court ruled that because Morales's first term as president had preceded the constitutional reform that prevented the chief executive from serving more than two consecutive terms, he would be allowed to run for a third term in 2014. In that event, Morales claimed a clear victory in the first round of elections, with exit polls giving him more than 60 percent of the vote. Especially notable was his strong performance in wealthier regions, which had traditionally sided with the opposition.

By 2015 the [robust](#) Bolivian economy had begun to slow significantly, largely in response to [declining](#) world petroleum and [natural gas](#) prices, and some of Morales's critics blamed him for having failed to diversify the country's natural gas-dependent economy. Morales also found himself at the centre of a corruption scandal when it was revealed that a woman with whom he once had been romantically involved had obtained a prominent position in 2013 with a Chinese company that received some \$500 million in no-bid contracts from the Bolivian government. Morales stridently denied having engaged in any impropriety. Nevertheless, that scandal and the sagging economy put a dent in Morales's popularity, and in a referendum held in February 2016 Bolivians rejected (by a vote of about 51 percent to 49 percent) a constitutional change that would have allowed Morales to run for another term as president in 2019.

Morales appeared to be resigned to the results, but in September 2017 the MAS asked the constitutional court to remove term limits for the presidency, and in November the court did just that. In December 2018 the Supreme Electoral Court

upheld that decision, prompting widespread street protests but paving the way for Morales to run for reelection in 2019.