

# Constructing Legitimacy

## The Rise of Evo Morales

In 2005, Evo Morales became one of the first democratically elected indigenous presidents in Latin America. Winning more than 50 percent of the national vote and beating his main opponent by more than 20 percent, Morales' election marked the highest margin of victory in Bolivian electoral history. According to one political analyst, the victory put Morales on the road to becoming "the president with the most legitimacy since the transition to democracy". The 2010 presidential elections recently cemented his legitimacy after securing a re-election bid by winning 64 percent of the vote.

Morales' meteoric ascent has prompted wide scholarly debate. Yet, within this debate, one factor has been given circumstantial attention at best: *Evo Morales is peasant producer of coca—a cocalero.*

In other words, the political origins of Bolivia's arguably most popular president stems from the defense of an internationally criminalised good linked to terrorism, drug-trafficking, corruption, violence and whose cultivation is for the most part considered illegal within the national territory—an actuality that makes cocaleros criminals by extension.



Evo "indigenous"  
*Oppressed*



Evo "cocalero"  
*Peasant*



Evo "syndicalist"  
*Working class*

My research presents the political ascent of Morales and his party (MAS) as a case of **identity formation** to show how an unprecedented actor (the cocalero) managed to form a movement in defense of a controversial and de-legitimised livelihood, penetrate the political system and establish a political party that has reached the highest level of political office.

### 1980s

The political identity of "cocaleros" becomes the collective identity uniting the cocaleros of the Chapare—a region colonized by Bolivians of diverse backgrounds.

### 1990s

This collective identity expands to include members of the Bolivian syndicalist system as the cocaleros enhance their unions' political power *vis a vis* other unions. Their identity as "syndicalists" allows the cocaleros to gain new members and allies for their movement.

### 2000s

The cocalero movement—now the MAS political party—promote the identity of "indigenous" to make alliances with indigenous movements, mobilize support and enhance their electoral appeal for the at the national level.

By forming political identities, movements establish the boundaries over which actors must decide where to step—i.e. decide whether they are one of "us" or one of "them"—if and when the time comes. In Bolivia, the time came in the 2005 election.

### "Us"

- Cocalero (peasant)
- Syndicalist (working class)
- Indigenous (oppressed)

### "Them"

- War on drugs (United States, elites)
- Neoliberals (United States, elites)
- Imperialists (United States, elites)

We are common Bolivians, we have been marginalised, we seek empowerment

They are the oppressors, they threaten our sovereignty, they cannot continue to rule us

Evo Morales is a producer of coca, but to average Bolivians that simply means that he is one of them—whether that means indigenous, peasant, syndicalist or simply excluded.