

Subcomandante Marcos and Evo Morales: Examining Authenticity, Sincerity, and Efficacy in
Pro-Indigenous Leadership

Rachael Deveck
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Dr. Britta Crandall

Introduction and Background

Subcomandante Marcos, the masked spokesman and perceived leader of Mexico's EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) and Evo Morales, the first indigenous president of Bolivia are two prominent examples of pro-indigenous leadership in Latin America. Both Marcos and Morales have been praised for their work, but there is also debate surrounding their authenticity and sincerity. This paper will analyze and contrast the authenticity, sincerity, and efficacy of their pro-indigenous leadership. To ascertain authenticity, the paper will analyze the origins of each leader and movement. Sincerity will be determined by the consistent pro-indigenous effort of each leader. Efficacy will be judged on the basis of whether each leader's goals were accomplished. Marcos and Morales each fall short in either authenticity or sincerity, which negatively impacts their efficacy—illustrating how crucial the first two factors are to the third.

When Subcomandante Marcos became spokesman for the EZLN in 2001, the Mexican indigenous situation was, as he put it, “absurd” — 40% of Mexicans lived in poverty, and the effects fell disproportionately on the indigenous people who lacked basic healthcare and education, as well as land, water, and food rights.¹ Moreover, Mexico's indigenous population faced cultural and linguistic discrimination. In Chiapas, where the indigenous population was especially high, the situation was at its worst. In a 2001 interview, Marcos described the problem as one of erasure and lack of dignity, saying that he and the EZLN were fighting, “to win a place again, and establish again the concept of dignity” and “proposing a world in which every world

¹ Robert Joe Stout, "Belief, Work, and Tears," (2009).

has its place... A space where we can live as we like — as human beings with dignity. And nobody has to hide who they are or be ashamed.”²

Discrimination against the indigenous population was a focus of Morales’ discourse too, but he took a more economic tack. Bolivia has a predominantly indigenous population, which faced general discrimination, economic barriers, and environmental and land injustices.³ Around the time when Morales came to power, Bolivia was in the midst of a natural gas crisis; the government privatized gas in the 1990s, leading to protests against cost elevation and resource extraction which peaked in 2003. Morales was heavily involved in these protests and backed nationalization. There was also a US-backed ban on cultivating coca which Morales sought to eliminate on the grounds that coca farming was a traditional indigenous practice and not a drug operation.⁴ As a coca farmer himself, Morales was aware of the impacts of the ban on the indigenous community. Morales was elected President in 2005 on the promise of “economic and political parity for indigenous peoples.”⁵ His plan included land redistribution, social services, lifting of the coca ban, nationalization of gas resources, climate change advocacy — and above all prioritizing the indigenous people of Bolivia.⁶

Authenticity

The authenticity of Morales’ pro-indigenism is indubitable, but in Marcos’ case the answer is far from clear. Morales himself is Aymara, and he grew up in a poor indigenous community in the highlands.⁷ He attended high school before serving in the military for two

² *Zapatista*, (2011).

³ John Crabtree, "Indigenous Empowerment in Evo Morales's Bolivia," (2017).

⁴ Jeff Bowman, "Evo Morales," (2008).

⁵ Bowman, "Evo Morales."

⁶ Bowman, "Evo Morales."; Crabtree, "Indigenous Empowerment in Evo Morales's Bolivia."

⁷ Bowman, "Evo Morales."

years, and then settled down as a coca farmer, like many in his community. As a young adult, he was heavily involved in pro-indigenous protests.⁸ He was a leading voice in the Gas Wars and the fight against the coca ban, explaining to outsiders the effects these resources had on indigenous communities.⁹ That is to say, Morales railed against hardships because he had experienced them firsthand, and he possessed the nuanced cultural knowledge of a born insider. Marcos, on the other hand, was not indigenous. He may have adapted his beliefs to fit the indigenous mold, but he came in with his own classical Marxist theories and a desire to recruit.¹⁰ He arrived in Chiapas as an academic, classical Marxist, and privileged outsider.

Morales' base was decidedly indigenous as well. When he was first elected, with 53% of the vote, it was with the joint backing of nearly every indigenous activist group in Bolivia.¹¹ It is worth noting that Bolivia's indigenous population is quite diverse in terms of experiences and political and economic interests; the fact that MAS had such a diverse base speaks even more highly of how authentically it represented indigeneity.¹²

The EZLN, like MAS, was primarily indigenous. In fact, while the EZLN had outside supporters, the actual members of the movement were nearly all "Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Chol, Tojolabal, Mam and Zoque people."¹³ As further proof that the EZLN was authentic, it was not Marcos' idea. While his philosophy certainly influenced the group, it had already existed for

⁸ Bowman, "Evo Morales."

⁹ Bowman, "Evo Morales."

¹⁰ Nick Henck, "Insurgent Marcos: The Political-Philosophical Formation of the Zapatista Subcommander," (Raleigh, NC: Editorial A Contracorriente, 2016).

¹¹ Bowman, "Evo Morales."

¹² Crabtree, "Indigenous Empowerment in Evo Morales's Bolivia."

¹³ Daniela di Piramo, "Political Leadership in Zapatista Mexico: Marcos, Celebrity, and Charismatic Authority," (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010).

several years when he first joined in a lower-ranked position.¹⁴ As a movement, therefore, it certainly had indigenous roots.

Could Marcos authentically represent an indigenous movement if he was not indigenous himself or would he be imposing his own worldview? Scholars disagree on the subject, but their points, though inconclusive, provide valuable insight. Taken together, they leave three key questions to consider. Did the EZLN approve him as its leader? Was Marcos making the decisions, or were the indigenous people choosing a path for themselves? Was he obscuring indigenous voices and co-opting the movement?

The answer to these questions is complicated, and in some cases unclear. The EZLN did not consider Marcos its leader or its political theorist; rather he was a spokesman, a public relations officer chosen because he spoke Spanish.¹⁵ A powerful illustration of that point is his name: *Subcomandante*, or *Subcommander* Marcos. There were various indigenous leaders who theoretically shared the real power; they took the name *Comandante*, or *Commander*. The EZLN “governed by listening,” decisions were largely made by group consensus.¹⁶ It was argued that Marcos merely reported them to the world. However, it was Marcos, the masked icon, who was the EZLN leader in most of the world’s eyes. Marcos spoke in the most interviews, wrote the most manifestos, gave the most speeches, and signed EZLN communiques.¹⁷ Some scholars claim that he carefully cultivated his mystique behind the mask and that, despite his outward renunciation of leadership, he was generating EZLN’s policy from his own Marxist beliefs.¹⁸

¹⁴ di Piramo, “Political Leadership in Zapatista Mexico: Marcos, Celebrity, and Charismatic Authority.”

¹⁵ Desiree A Martin, “Borderlands Saints: Secular Sanctity in Chicano/a and Mexican Culture,” (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Stout, “Belief, Work, and Tears.”

¹⁷ Martin, “Borderlands Saints: Secular Sanctity in Chicano/a and Mexican Culture”; di Piramo, “Political Leadership in Zapatista Mexico: Marcos, Celebrity, and Charismatic Authority.”

¹⁸ Martin, “Borderlands Saints: Secular Sanctity in Chicano/a and Mexican Culture.”

Others strongly disagree, and it is unclear what truth this holds. He was often accused of being a contemporary caudillo and megalomaniac.¹⁹

As Marcos was not indigenous himself, nor was he recognized by EZLN as its leader, any leadership he held beyond the role of spokesperson and head of public relations came from non-indigenous origins and was therefore inauthentic. Any policy that Marcos generated without consulting EZLN members would be inauthentic as well, and would indeed be imposing his own ideas, regardless of whether they were good ones. It is unclear how much power he really held within the movement, as EZLN, the general public, and various scholars disagree. His own private opinion is impossible to ascertain, as is how much his stardom really obscured indigenous voices. By contrast, Morales was secure in his authenticity, with his own indigenous roots and the approval of his leadership by the indigenous population.

Sincerity

Despite his authenticity, it is Morales who comes under greater scrutiny when the question is one of sincerity. Marcos receives criticism in many scholarly articles for his lack of authenticity, but the sincerity of his desire to help is rarely if ever at issue. It appears that regardless of the origin of his socialist and pro-indigenous goals, they were true as stated, because he acted on them consistently. Morales, on the other hand, is criticized by some scholars for choosing nationalism and state-building over indigenism when they were at odds.²⁰ Nothing illustrates the question of sincerity better than the March for Indigenous Dignity in Mexico (MID) and the Eighth Indigenous March in Bolivia (VIII March).

¹⁹ Martin, "Borderlands Saints: Secular Sanctity in Chicano/a and Mexican Culture."; di Piramo, "Political Leadership in Zapatista Mexico: Marcos, Celebrity, and Charismatic Authority."

²⁰ Crabtree, "Indigenous Empowerment in Evo Morales's Bolivia."

The MID was arranged by EZLN to demand the signing of the San Andrés accords, granting rights and sovereignty to the indigenous peoples of Chiapas. Over 10,000,000 people participated in the massive protest, many traveling by caravan for two weeks from Chiapas to Mexico City, and others holding localized sister protests along the way.²¹ Marcos' role in all of this was to generate publicity for the event, and he carried it out enthusiastically, with lengthy preparations and powerful speeches upon the departure and arrival of the marchers.²² He was with the marchers for the whole journey. It is also worth noting that two prominent examples of him stepping aside for indigenous leaders—following through on his stated beliefs—occurred during the process of the MID. At the Third Indigenous Conference, which took place in the middle of the MID, about 1500 indigenous people representing 43 of 56 tribes and nations gathered to formulate their demands.²³ Rather than Marcos speaking, participants met in four groups and each group generated a list of demands which the whole conference voted on at the end.²⁴ Demands were approved by consensus only.²⁵ At the end of the MID, Marcos refrained from participating in government negotiations, deferring to indigenous leader Comandanta Esther.²⁶ Together these two examples illustrate Marcos' sincerity, because they show the consistency between his actions and his messages.

The VIII March is a rather different example because it was organized against rather than for Morales' party. Since taking office, Morales had implemented a new constitution that delivered on many of his promises, such as the addition of indigenous languages to schools and

²¹ *Zapatista*, (2011).

²² *Zapatista*, (2011).

²³ Mike Antoniades, "The Zapatista Caravan for Dignity," (2001).

²⁴ Antoniades, "The Zapatista Caravan for Dignity."

²⁵ Antoniades, "The Zapatista Caravan for Dignity."

²⁶ di Piramo, "Political Leadership in Zapatista Mexico: Marcos, Celebrity, and Charismatic Authority."

the acknowledgement of Bolivia as a country made up of indigenous nations.²⁷ Once Morales implemented the constitution, however, he used it for his own ends, declaring himself eligible for a third presidential term, since it was only his second under the 2009 constitution.²⁸ At times he skirted the constitution, as in the case of the TIPNIS crisis, which led to the VIII March.

The Isiboro Sécre Indigenous Territory and National Park (TIPNIS) was a protected area belonging to the Yuracaré, Moxeño, and T'simane peoples. In 2011 Morales' government attempted to begin constructing a highway through the park in order to expand the mining industry, connect the lowlands with the highlands, and improve national access to Brazil.²⁹ However, the local indigenous groups saw the highway as a threat to their way of life. Morales did not consult the groups before beginning construction, or keep them updated on his plans, both of which were required under the 2009 constitution.³⁰ In response, indigenous groups organized the VIII March in August 2011, in which 2500 protestors marched 375 miles against Morales' highway.³¹ Morales responded to the VIII March with government violence against the protestors.³² He also called the protestors "savages" and claimed they were being manipulated by outsiders, suggesting that they were too weak to know what they wanted.³³ When he ordered a suspension for negotiations, he also suspended other economic activities within TIPNIS that the indigenous groups depended on.³⁴ In the end, Morales went ahead with construction of the highway without the mandatory consultation process.³⁵

²⁷ Bowman, "Evo Morales."; Crabtree, "Indigenous Empowerment in Evo Morales's Bolivia."

²⁸ Crabtree, "Indigenous Empowerment in Evo Morales's Bolivia."

²⁹ Crabtree, "Indigenous Empowerment in Evo Morales's Bolivia."; Daniela Sanchez-Lopez, "Reshaping notions of citizenship: the TIPNIS indigenous movement in Bolivia." (2015).

³⁰ Sanchez-Lopez, "Reshaping notions of citizenship: the TIPNIS indigenous movement in Bolivia."

³¹ Sanchez-Lopez, "Reshaping notions of citizenship: the TIPNIS indigenous movement in Bolivia."

³² Sanchez-Lopez, "Reshaping notions of citizenship: the TIPNIS indigenous movement in Bolivia."

³³ Sanchez-Lopez, "Reshaping notions of citizenship: the TIPNIS indigenous movement in Bolivia."

³⁴ Sanchez-Lopez, "Reshaping notions of citizenship: the TIPNIS indigenous movement in Bolivia."

³⁵ Sanchez-Lopez, "Reshaping notions of citizenship: the TIPNIS indigenous movement in Bolivia."

Morales' practice of implementing rhetoric but not enforcing policy throws his sincerity into question. Even more so, directly violating his own constitution to go against the desires of an indigenous group he claimed to champion illustrates the inconsistency of his words with his actions. On the other hand, some scholars have pointed out that the TIPNIS crisis represented a conflict between two sectors of Bolivia's diverse indigenous population, the tribes of TIPNIS and the peasant farmers.³⁶ The peasants, many of whom were coca farmers like Morales, supported the highway which would allow them to expand their trade; the tribal groups living in TIPNIS were worried about resource extraction and environmental consequences.³⁷ Since both factions were initially part of his base, Morales had to choose between the two. His support of the policy that connected to his own background, and which he thought would benefit more of the country, could be seen as consistent with his stated priorities. However, his use of violence, economic suppression, and anti-indigenous rhetoric against the protestors went directly against promises, as did his manipulation of the constitution for a power grab. Overall, Morales' sincerity appears questionable at best, as represented by the inconsistency of his actions with his words. In contrast, Marcos' sincerity is clear.

Efficacy

As discussed for the question of authenticity, Marcos' stated goals were to increase public awareness of and support for the EZLN, as well as to be the group's spokesperson and make its ideas and demands heard. His inflated popularity and the extensive scholarly debate surrounding his activism suggest that he succeeded in raising attention, although some of it was directed more at him than at EZLN. In extensive writings and interviews, he repeatedly

³⁶ Crabtree, "Indigenous Empowerment in Evo Morales's Bolivia."

³⁷ Crabtree, "Indigenous Empowerment in Evo Morales's Bolivia."

enumerated the Zapatista beliefs and demands. A set of three newspaper surveys conducted at the beginning and end of the March for Indigenous Dignity showed a significant increase in awareness of and interest in the EZLN cause.³⁸ They also show overall support for the EZLN cause in Mexico's general population.³⁹ While EZLN's overall success is debatable, the fact that the movement still exists today without Marcos is an indicator of both its strength and his success in promoting the cause. In 2019, the president of Mexico reopened negotiations over the San Andrés Accords with EZLN, showing they are still respected as a force in Mexico.⁴⁰ Marcos has retired from the movement, successfully passing the podium to indigenous leaders to speak for themselves. Overall, despite the detrimental impact of his cult status, Marcos was highly effective in his role, and the EZLN, though it has not succeeded in all of its goals, has been somewhat effective too.

Morales had a far more sweeping goal as president than Marcos as spokesman, namely to achieve "economic and political parity for indigenous peoples."⁴¹ After taking office, Morales delivered on many of his promises, such as nationalization of resources, international indigenous and climate advocacy, relaxation of the coca ban, addition of indigenous languages to schools, and acknowledgement of Bolivia as a country made up of indigenous nations.⁴² However, with his poor handling of the TIPNIS Crisis, Morales created a divide in indigenous solidarity and actually harmed a large part of his voting base. Despite these issues, which negatively impacted Morales' efficacy as a pan-indigenous leader, the living standards of Bolivia's indigenous

³⁸ di Piramo, "Political Leadership in Zapatista Mexico: Marcos, Celebrity, and Charismatic Authority."

³⁹ di Piramo, "Political Leadership in Zapatista Mexico: Marcos, Celebrity, and Charismatic Authority."

⁴⁰ Hilary Klein, "A Spark of Hope: The Ongoing Lessons of the Zapatista Revolution 25 Years On," 2019.

⁴¹ Bowman, "Evo Morales."

⁴² Bowman, "Evo Morales."; Crabtree, "Indigenous Empowerment in Evo Morales's Bolivia."

population improved greatly under his rule.⁴³ With a net positive contribution, it can be said that Morales was relatively effective, although not all of his stated goals or those of his constituents were achieved.

Conclusion

As illustrated by the cases of Mexican rebel Subcomandante Marcos and Bolivian president Evo Morales, authenticity, and sincerity both impact the efficacy of a movement. In Marcos' case, his university education and superstar status caused him to somewhat obscure the indigenous voices he intended to uplift. However, he was saved by his sincerity; the consistent effort he put into his goals resulted in overall success. Morales' understanding of indigenous needs and large indigenous base helped him effectively gain power and greatly improve overall indigenous status in Bolivia. However, his questionable sincerity, or the inconsistencies between his words and his actions, harmed a number of his indigenous constituents, as well as fracturing the national indigenous movement. Clearly, authenticity and sincerity are two key elements in an effective movement and should be taken into account in forming any pro-indigenous movement.

In the longer term, Marcos' movement has been the more successful one. He himself has stepped out of the limelight and returned to private life, but the EZLN is still going strong without him. This speaks to the authenticity and sincerity of the movement itself. Morales on the other hand, was unceremoniously dropped from power after his attempts to become a dictator. No new indigenous leaders have taken over from him, and the indigenous factions he splintered remain uncoordinated. A movement is unable to survive long term without both aspects. The top factor in Morales' fall was his insincerity, which derived primarily from his ego and desire for

⁴³ Bowman, "Evo Morales."; Crabtree, "Indigenous Empowerment in Evo Morales's Bolivia."

power. While there are arguments that Marcos too was power hungry, he was at least willing to step back at the right time. Without authentic, broad support, a movement is only as good as its leaders, and if they are egotistical and power-hungry, then the movement will quickly fail.

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