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**Respect Bolivia's Democracy
The African World
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There is a struggle underway in Bolivia which has been largely overlooked or misrepresented in the mainstream circles in the USA. For the first time ever in Bolivia, the majority of the population exercises its rights as fully recognized citizens through electoral and civic participation. Efforts to battle poverty and illiteracy, the largest societal ills, are underway. Indian families, who for centuries suffered the consequences of racist policies, including economic deprivation, and physical violence, (much like African Americans, Latinos, Asians and Native Americans in the USA) are finally respected and recovering their dignity.

While one would have hoped for enthusiasm here at home, the response to Bolivia's efforts within establishment political circles in the USA has been less than welcoming. Under the leadership of Evo Morales, that country's first Indian president, Bolivia is pursuing a national economic development plan to uplift all of its citizens. According to a 2005 United Nation Development Programme report, at least six out of ten Bolivians have incomes below the poverty line, and wealth polarization is very significant between those at the bottom, and the rich elite which has traditionally dominated Bolivian society. The infant mortality rate fares no better and is one of the worst in the region. Faced with this reality, the Bolivian government understands that rectifying its historical inequalities is no small feat, but nevertheless, a necessary one for the nation to advance.

In North America in the late 1800's, the Confederate States of America seceded from the United States of America and waged a bloody civil war against the North. Wealthy landowners plotted to keep the wealth of the South to themselves and out of the hands of Northern industrialists who were developing the nation at a rapid pace. While the

retention of economic and political power by Southern elites was the real issue at hand, racist arguments and slavery (the basis for their wealth) were used to justify their treasonous actions to the world.

Today, an analogous secessionist movement is underway in Bolivia's wealthiest region, Santa Cruz. After a referendum vote recently ratified Evo Morales as Bolivia's democratically elected president by an overwhelming majority, there should be no more support given to such illegal measures. This province holds abundant natural resources and much of Bolivia's wealth is derived from its natural gas, farmland, iron ore, water and forests. As their constitution reads, these riches should be used for the development of the entire society, not for the benefit of a few.

Currently, democracy is on the line as a small sector of opposition actors known to use racist violence against the poor, have called for the overthrow of the president and for secession. They have done so by utilizing the national media which has mobilized the most radical right-wing sectors to take to the streets and engage in civil disobedience. Unfortunately, these actions have been all but civil, including the instigation of violence. Although the Bush Administration has chosen to stand by those calling to secede and in so doing support the most racist and backward elements of Bolivian society, it is the hope of fair and genuinely democratic-minded people that Bolivia's right to sovereignty and respect for its constitution will be honored by the United States.

Secession, and the balkanization of Bolivia would be a disaster for the people of Bolivia (and the region), just as such processes have been disasters in Eastern and Central Europe, Africa and Central Asia. The nation-state is tasked with helping to redistribute the wealth of a country. In those countries with enlightened leaders, such redistribution pays attention to historic injustices that must be repaired. For this reason, we in the USA should be very careful before responding favorably to abstract calls for democracy that actually hide the ambitions of the wealthy elites. After all, in our own history the Confederate States of America claimed that they were fighting a war against Northern alleged aggression and oppression. Most histories, however, tell a very different story.

We in the USA should respect Bolivia's right to self-determination and refrain from unhelpful interference. Just as the struggle against secession in North America between 1861-65 was an internal matter for the people of the USA to settle, so too is it for the people of Bolivia today.

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