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Some Latin American politicians grounded in Catholic social teaching

by Barbara Fraser by Catholic News Service

LIMA, Peru (CNS) -- After Latin America's bishops established their "preferential option for the poor" in a conference in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968, the church became a training ground for active Catholics throughout the region.

Although some were involved with leftist movements that fought rightist governments in the 1970s and 1980s, more and more Catholics are gaining political clout at the ballot box.

The rise of presidents who are controversial in some circles but who campaigned on platforms of fighting poverty and social inequality -- such as Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and most recently retired Bishop Fernando Lugo in Paraguay -- is putting Catholic activists in many government offices.

"The liberation movement had a tremendous impact on the Catholic left in Latin America and was very influential," said Jesuit Father Thomas Reese, a senior research fellow at Georgetown University's Woodstock Theological Center in Washington.

"Catholic social teaching has always been pro-poor," Father Reese said. Many people who are now involved in politics "got their feet wet in the Catholic Church. They learned political skills there."

In Paraguay Bishop Lugo, who became known as the "bishop of the poor," won the April presidential election after campaigning against corruption and for greater equality for the country's indigenous people and poor peasant farmers.

The Vatican initially opposed his campaign, and the day after the election Bishop Lugo asked forgiveness

of the church "if my attitude and my disobedience caused pain."

"That was a real olive branch from him to the Vatican," Father Reese said.

Three days later, Archbishop Orlando Antonini, the papal nuncio to Paraguay, visited the president-elect to congratulate him and present him with a pen that was a gift from Pope Benedict XVI. Vatican officials have said they will analyze the case "calmly"; clergy are not supposed to serve in political office.

The apparent detente could allow the Vatican to laicize Bishop Lugo or "just ignore him" until his term is over, Father Reese said.

In neighboring Bolivia, newspaper headlines have sometimes reported sharp words between Morales and church officials over issues such as religious education in the schools and, more recently, the church's role in facilitating dialogue to break the political stalemate between the government and opposition leaders.

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Nevertheless, the country's bishops have been supportive of government efforts to ensure greater equality for the country's indigenous people.

Some lower-level Bolivian officials say their experience in church ministry prepared them for public life. In the chilly, wind-swept mining town of Oruro, more than two miles above sea level, regional government leader Alberto Luis Aguilar, a former seminarian who spent 17 years in the church's social ministry office, says that work helped him understand the needs of the region's poor miners and peasant farmers.

Because church ministry "brings you very close to the people, it has been a training ground for leaders," he said.

And while Morales does not have a strong link to the Catholic Church, his vice minister of foreign relations, Hugo Fernandez, is a former Jesuit priest.

"I think (Morales) relies on people like that not just because of ideology, but because they are reliable, idealistic and honest" and not "the typical pure technocrat," said Jesuit Father Jeffrey Klaiber, a historian who has written extensively about the church in Latin America and who studied with Fernandez.

Another former Jesuit, Eduardo Stein, ended a four-year term as vice president of Guatemala in January.

In Central America, base communities were a training ground for many Catholics during years when leftist groups were trying to break the political grip of small landholding elites. The blurring of lines between some armed leftist groups and base communities led to a backlash against liberation theology, although "very few" people in that movement "favored the use of violence," Father Reese said.

Since the Central American civil wars ended, Catholic activists in the region have had a mixed relationship with politics, said U.S. Jesuit Father Dean Brackley, who teaches theology at the University of Central America in San Salvador.

In El Salvador, the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, which laid down arms and became a political party, has been gaining political ground.

"There are a lot of Catholics and Christians in that party, and they were influenced by the church of the poor" in a country where the legacy of murdered Archbishop Oscar Romero still "looms large," Father Brackley said.

In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas also had strong ties to Catholic activists, but many supporters became disenchanted after the party came to power and became entangled in corruption scandals.

Nicaragua has recently been campaigning behind the scenes to take over in June the rotating role of chairing the U.N. General Assembly. The person the government is suggesting for the task is Maryknoll Father Miguel D'Escoto, who served as Nicaraguan foreign minister, 1979-1990.

The Sandinista president from that era, Daniel Ortega, was elected again in 2006, but because of the charges of corruption and political cronyism from his earlier administration "there is grave discontent" with him, Father Brackley said.

Splits between activists and the political leaders they once supported are not surprising, he said, because idealistic politicians who campaign on platforms of reducing poverty and inequality often find that they have little maneuvering room once they are in office.

"The constraints on a government that would like to change things are very great," he said.

In an interview with the British Broadcasting Corp. a few months after he took office, Bolivia's Morales said he felt "padlocked" in the presidential palace because he could not make the changes he felt were needed as quickly as he had expected.

Critics say that newer Latin American leaders like Morales or Ecuador's Correa, who also makes no secret of his progressive Catholic past, want to turn back the clock on policies that have led to record economic growth rates in the region.

But Catholics like Bishop Lugo and Aguilar, the Bolivian regional government leader, say the benefits still have not reached the poor. They have sought public office in an effort to create more equal societies.

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