

**Speech to the Joint Session of Congress of Bolivia by
Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter**

**By
Jimmy Carter
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Carter and staff from the Center's Americas Program visited Bolivia in mid-December to meet with political party leaders, and legislators to explore democratic ideals and their role in the Center's information initiative. The Carter Center soon will begin supporting efforts by the government to pass, implement, and enforce an access to information law.

La Paz, Dec. 18, 2003

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Members of the Senate, members of the House, distinguished guests. Thank you, Senator Vaca Díez, for the wonderful introduction and for inviting me to speak to this year's final session of Bolivia's Congress. I am pleased to visit your country, to meet with your people, and to enjoy your nation's amazing beauty and hospitality.

I came here to learn the views of Bolivians on the current political situation, to demonstrate my support and concern, and to discuss the possible role of The Carter Center in further enhancing democracy. We have had the opportunity to consult with many of your political leaders and have received a warm welcome from them and from all Bolivians.

I wish to express my deepest regret for the violence that you have experienced this year, violence that is abhorrent to all peace loving people. I lament the loss of life and extend my condolences to the loved ones of those killed and injured. An impartial investigation of these tragic events can serve to bring healing to the families and the country.

However, the investigations and trials must be nonpartisan and fair. In considering past political actions, the expert assistance you have requested from international experts can bring international and domestic legitimacy and confidence to the proceedings.

Bolivia has entered a very special period in her history. You have enjoyed democracy with its benefits and its faults for more than two decades, and you have demonstrated that even in times of greatest conflict, democracy is your preferred method to resolve problems. But now you face a crossroads in your journey and only you can choose the path you will follow. Will it be a new Bolivia, unshackled from the constraints of the past, or a Bolivia still trapped by social and economic divisions?

As I have listened intently to voices from across the spectrum of Bolivian thought and ideology, two things have struck me. First, I have a profound sense that there is far more that unites you than divides you. You are united in the belief that change in Bolivia is both necessary and positive. All have agreed that a new covenant must be forged between the government and the governed, between the state and the

society.

Second, there is wide consensus that the future of democracy in Bolivia is dependent on its ability to include all citizens in a more equal and participatory manner. Although your leaders have described democracy in different terms and have differed about the obstacles that lie in its path, they agree that a democracy based on social inclusion is the key to the future of Bolivia.

In my many years of experience working on issues of democracy and human rights, I have learned that it is healthy to have competing ideas on policies and visions for the country, but there must be a clear consensus on the rules of the game used to choose among these alternatives. A society free of conflict does not exist, but what can exist is one in which solutions to difficult public problems are found through debate and compromise, without resort to violence. Democracy provides the tools to manage these inevitable conflicts peacefully.

As president of the United States, I worked to promote democracy and human rights, and I have been gratified to see the acceptance of democracy throughout Latin America. But I have been disappointed, as have many of you, to see that it has not solved the problems of poverty and inequality. This remains a challenge for all of us.

Clearly, some of the reasons for democracy's poor showing in Latin America are the corrosive effects of corruption, a lack of state capacity to deliver needed services efficiently, and an inability or unwillingness to serve all citizens equally. We have seen a lack of independence and public legitimacy in some of our countries' judiciaries, a failure to uphold the rule of law, and neglect of human rights. Impunity for serious crimes cannot, and should not, be tolerated.

Although democracy has struggled to meet its ideals, I still believe in its power to change the circumstances in which individuals live. You have the opportunity now, through an informed debate, to reach a new consensus on the rules of your democracy and how it will function to satisfy your dreams.

A constitution is the bedrock of these rules, but it alone is not enough. I have heard the call for a constituent assembly to write a new constitution. This process must be deliberate, inclusive, and reflective. As you consider this step, I urge you to look at the recent experiences of other countries and to learn from their successes and mistakes. I hope you will take the time needed to develop a broad consensus on the process of forming a constituent assembly, drafting the constitution, and most importantly, the opportunity for citizens to debate these changes. I also caution you not to consider a new constitution as a panacea that can solve all of Bolivia's problems.

In a country such as yours, there are many needs and a shortage of resources to meet them all, so these competing demands must be weighed against each other in light of what is possible. There will need to be some sacrifices and some compromises. When the Bolivian people decide how to market natural gas and other resources, it is imperative that the process be completely transparent. All public expenditures of the income from the gas should be audited and the public informed. My hope is that Bolivia, Chile, and Peru together will find a way to provide Bolivia with direct access to the sea. If and when discussions are initiated between your

country and the others, The Carter Center and many others will be eager to assist in finding an agreement.

I realize that the issue of coca production is very important to you. An objective study of domestic needs by international and national organizations, possible change in acreage used for coca cultivation, and control of illegal plantings, should be a common goal. I have found that the president and all party leaders agree on these basic premises.

I have heard many of your various demands, some of which will take time to satisfy and some of which appear irreconcilable. The expectations are high, the challenges are great, and not everyone can be satisfied. I have met with President Mesa and I believe he will be honest with you and will tell you what is possible, to explain what is feasible and what is not. Bolivians will not always be happy with what they hear from him, but history has shown that the promise of easy solutions leads to misplaced hope and broken trust.

You, as elected leaders of Bolivia, have a responsibility to be honest with the people and to act in their collective interests, while the people have a responsibility to provide space for you to act conscientiously and then to hold you accountable to your promises. This pact between citizen and government should be held sacred.

For the first time in its history, Bolivia enjoys a Congress comprising leaders from all parts of society, a truly representative institution that reflects the diversity of Bolivian society. Although it is more difficult to govern in a multi-party system, the multitude of voices in Congress should be encouraged. Congress is a place for dialogue and disagreement, where hard decisions that have the legitimacy of this inclusive process are made.

It is very important that the process of governance be transparent. Secrecy encourages distrust and provides a safe haven for dishonest opportunists. I have spoken of the values of democracy, but these cannot be enjoyed when citizens are kept in the dark as to the decisions being made in their name.

Bolivia is about to embark on broad political reform and a possible referendum. Without full information, citizens cannot and will not engage in these efforts and their hope for a more participatory democracy will soon fade. A free flow of information serves to rebuild trust between citizens and government. It provides citizens an instrument for holding government accountable and helps them to engage more fully in setting priorities and in policy debate. Increasingly, in developed and developing nations around the world, people are seeing access to information as a multi-dimensional tool that can serve to meet different objectives. Transparency provides citizens a mechanism for fighting corruption, it promotes development, and allows persons to exercise their fundamental human rights.

The Carter Center, an organization that my wife Rosalynn and I started over 20 years ago, has begun an access to information initiative in Bolivia. We have agreed to work with Presidential Delegate Lupe Cajías and civil society to sensitize people to the value of this right, and to provide technical assistance to this Congress on drafting an access to information law that meets international standards and fosters informed public debate.

We have seen in other countries how lawmakers and civil society have reestablished broken relationships as they drafted and implemented this law, and we are looking forward to seeing the same in Bolivia. In collaboration with government and civil society, we will remain engaged after the law is passed to support its full implementation and effective enforcement. The Carter Center looks forward to working with Bolivia on this important initiative, and to witnessing the flourishing of rights, responsibilities and democracy.

As my friend Kofi Annan said to you just one month ago in this very place, you do not have to face your challenges alone. Although we are in Bolivia for only a few days, we will remain with you in your struggle to build a peaceful and prosperous future.

I pledge to take the message to foreign governments, including my own, that Bolivia needs both financial support and the time to determine your own priorities and vision for the future, with minimum interference from abroad. Donor governments and multinational banks need to be generous, giving you maximum flexibility to shape your own future.

This is a time for hope, for tolerance, and for a new spirit of cooperation to emerge, and The Carter Center stands ready to assist.

I wish you all a joyful holiday season, and a healthy and peaceful New Year.