

# Former maid now fighting injustice from the top

## Bolivia's new justice minister has firsthand view

BY FIONA SMITH  
The Associated Press

LA PAZ, Bolivia — At age 13, Casimira Rodriguez left her hardscrabble rural home, hoping to escape poverty by taking a job as a housemaid in the city.

What she got instead was a nightmare of virtual slavery, and a firsthand view of the injustice many poor Bolivians experience.

Barely an adolescent herself, Rodriguez cooked, cleaned and looked after the children for an extended family of 14 people. She was not paid and was allowed out only to buy groceries down the street, she says.

After two years, Rodriguez escaped and brought her case for wages owed before a rural court.

The judge asked her to be patient. A quarter-century later, she's still waiting.

It's possible Rodriguez might finally get some satisfaction.

She is Bolivia's new justice minister, intent on overhauling one of Latin America's most overburdened, corrupt and inefficient judicial systems.

The 40-year-old former domestic workers union leader and Quechua Indian has no law degree or legal training. She would be a striking figure in any government: She wears her hair in traditional Indian braids and layers of velvet skirts under fitted cotton blouses.

Nearly three months after taking office, she has yet to offer a plan for overhauling Bolivia's judiciary.

Her detractors say she lacks the necessary experience — a maid for 18 years, she earned a high school degree at night and has studied anthropology in col-



Rodriguez

lege while running the union. The National Association of Bolivian Lawyers, which represents Bolivia's 30,000 attorneys, has demanded her resignation.

Evo Morales, the left-leaning president who appointed her, says he has no intention of letting that happen.

Rodriguez is unfazed. She says she hopes to humanize and build trust in the judiciary while strengthening traditional Indian justice systems that depend on community elders rather than courts.

"I know the laws and all their articles, but life has forced us to also live injustice, and we can feel the pain and thirst for justice of every Bolivian sister and

brother," Rodriguez said.

Bolivian police regularly demand bribes from crime victims before pursuing their cases. The country's criminal courts refuse to hear 96 percent of the cases that come before them, and those that do go forward often end up delayed to the point that the courts lose their credibility, the Washington-based nonprofit Partners of the Americas said in a 2005 study.

A full 64 percent of Bolivians have little or no faith in their justice system, according to a February survey by the Apoyo Opinion y Mercado firm, which says the figure was as high as 84 percent just two years ago.

That indicates some faith that Morales, who named Rodriguez to the justice post, may improve matters.

But it is a daunting task.

For one, a jury system introduced in the past decade isn't working very well.

It doesn't help that Bolivia spends 1 percent of its national budget on the judiciary — one of the lowest allocations in Latin America, according to the Organization of American States.

"The vast majority of (legal) conflicts don't reach the system," said Cristian Riego, academic director of the OAS's Justice Center of the Americas. Those who suffer most are indigenous people

and workers in the informal economy.

Rodriguez says she'll fight to increase spending for the judiciary and make it work for the poor, who account for more than 60 percent of Bolivians.

She also wants greater respect for traditional Indian justice systems, where community elders hear cases and decide on sentences.

"Community justice is so different from the ordinary justice system," Rodriguez said, "because you don't spend money and even though it's not legally recognized, it resolves cases in hours, or at the most in a week and doesn't add to the quarrel."

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