

Bolivia: Fraud, violence and mass resistance marks right-wing push

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A day of violence, fraud and a “grand rebellion” against the Santa Cruz oligarchy.

This is how Bolivian president, Evo Morales Ayma, described the result of the unconstitutional May 4 “autonomy” referendum organised by the authorities in Santa Cruz — which many feared was aimed at dividing Bolivia.

The referendum was the first in a series of proposed referendums to be held in the departments of the so-called Half Moon — Santa Cruz plus Pando, Beni and Tarija, resource-rich departments in Bolivia’s east. The Half Moon remains dominated by the white oligarchy despite the coming to power nationally of Morales, Bolivia’s first indigenous president, on the back of a mass movement against neoliberalism led by the indigenous majority.

Illegal vote

While the National Electoral Court had ruled that the autonomy referendum — which the government had proposed be held simultaneously with a referendum to approve the new constitution — could not go ahead on May 4 due to lack of time and suitable political conditions, the prefecture and civic committee of Santa Cruz, backed by the Santa Cruz Electoral Court, decided to go ahead with what was an illegal referendum.

The referendum revolved around proposed autonomy statutes, drafted by the oligarchy without any discussion, and which less than 15% of *crucenos* (Santa Cruz residents) had read before May 4. The statutes hand enormous power over to the opposition-controlled prefectures, including control over natural resources, distribution of land titles, the right to sign international treaties and its own police force and judicial system.

On the day, the Yes vote received 483,925 votes, representing around 85% of the votes cast, against 85,399 No votes. However, calls by the social movements and the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS — Morales’s party) national government to abstain led non-participation to rise to 39%, or 366,839 registered voters — more than double the usual abstention rate.

This result was obtained in the face of threats and intimidation by bosses who told workers they would loss their jobs if they did not vote and the menacing patrols of the fascist Union Juvenil Cruceñista (UJC) — renowned for carrying out violent, racist attacks on indigenous people.

Oppressed mobilise

However, in the “other Santa Cruz” — such as the popular urban area of Plan Tres Mil and the rural areas of San Julian and Yacapani — organised resistance by the popular civic committee and indigenous *campesino* (peasant) organisations ensured the non-installation of voting tables.

Despite physical attacks by the UJC, which left more than 20 injured and one dead, in these areas abstention was almost total.

Across the country, massive mobilisations were organised by the powerful indigenous *campesino* organisations, together with trade unions and urban popular organisations. A week before, Morales had called for demonstrations in all capital cities, except Santa Cruz in order to avoid violence, behind the banner of national unity.

Underlying these events is an intense class struggle, infused with strong ethnic and regional components. The ruling elites are fighting to restore the political power they have begun to lose.

The election of Morales came on the back of five years of intense social struggle by the combative indigenous and *campesino* movements, which gave birth to an alternative national project based on the demands of nationalisation of gas and a constituent assembly to refound Bolivia.

In December of 2005, unified behind its “political instrument” — MAS — this movement propelled former coca growers’ union leader Morales into the presidential palace.

Since then, Morales has initiated a process of returning Bolivia’s gas to state hands, begun implementing an agrarian reform and organised elections for a constituent assembly that has prepared a new draft constitution to be submitted to a national referendum.

For the oligarchy, particularly those with interests tied to the gas transnationals and agribusiness, these changes are intolerable.

Forced to retreat to its trenches in the east, the elite has run a propaganda line that combines rallying against “La Paz centralism”, tapping into the long held sentiments of a “cruceño identity” and outright racism to regroup and mobilise a section of the white population of the east against the government — whose stronghold is in the impoverished and largely indigenous west. This campaign is receiving heavy funding from the US government.

While it can not be ruled out that the oligarchy could use these social base to move to divide Bolivia through secession, its main plan at the moment is to put a halt on the process unfolding since Morales’ election — aiming to wear down popular support for the government by forcing concessions from the government at the negotiating table and paving the way towards ultimately getting rid of him, via a coup or elections.

Post-referendum struggle

In this context, the results of the May 4 referendum were clearly not a victory for the oligarchy. Forced to rely on fraud and intimidation, the right was unable to get the resounding vote they would have required to turn the results of their illegal referendum into a legitimate mandate.

Yet nor was it a complete defeat — the large Yes vote showed that an important section of Santa Cruz continues to back the oligarchy.

For the popular movements, the important resistance of the “other Santa Cruz” represents a new phase in their struggle.< This was reflected in the high abstention and the emergence of an important middle-class layer grouped around Santa Cruz Somos Todos, who, although not part of the MAS project, called for a No vote and support autonomy within the framework of the new constitution.

The actions of the counterrevolution have pushed those forces in favour of change towards greater unity. This was demonstrated in the May Day rallies where, importantly, the Bolivian Workers’ Central (COB), which had until now been very critical of the government, was on the main stage promoting a united front.

The oligarchy, claiming victory from the May 4 vote, will undoubtedly be calling for a return to the negotiating table to force concessions out of the government to water down the new constitution and insert its autonomy statutes.

However, these two projects are incompatible. The government needs to shift the debate back to the draft constitution by calling the referendum for its approval as soon as possible — as the social movements are demanding.

Any autonomy must be within the framework of what has been democratically decided by the constituent assembly. In this way, the movements can counterpose their autonomy based on social justice and solidarity to that of the Santa Cruz elites and win support among the Santa Cruz population.

Moreover, the government needs to continue to implement its economic program of nationalisations — such as those announced on May 1, which included recuperating majority control of four gas transnationals and total control over ENTEL, Bolivia’s largest telecommunications company.

These moves can demonstrate the role of a strong national state and build the confidence and dignity of the popular movements and middle classes to continue pushing the democratic revolution forward.

These nationalisations, along with agrarian reform and wealth redistribution, are not only crucial to give further momentum to the popular movements — together with a strong campaign to win the hearts and minds of soldiers and officials in the armed forces, it is a vital to strengthen the nationalist wing of the military against those right-wing elements conspiring to overthrow Morales.

In a sign of the battles to come in the near future, on May 8, Cuban newspaper *Granma* reported that the Senate, controlled by the right, had passed a motion Morales has been pushing since last year to hold a recall referendum for the presidency as well as the nine regional governors.

To ensure that the result of May 4 can become a real victory for the popular forces, it is necessary to continue to develop the unity that has been built over the last few weeks to continue the mobilisation of the masses and deepen the revolutionary process through decisive economic and political measures.

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