

Bolivia Looking Forward: New Constitution Passed, Celebrations Hit the Streets

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Thousands celebrating in Plaza Murillo. Photo: B. Dangl
After Bolivia's new constitution was passed in a national referendum on Sunday, thousands gathered in La Paz to celebrate. Standing on the balcony of the presidential palace, President Evo Morales addressed a raucous crowd: "Here begins a new Bolivia. Here we begin to reach true equality."

Polls conducted by Televisión Boliviana announced that the document passed with 61.97% support from some 3.8 million voters. According to the poll, 36.52% of voters voted against the constitution, and 1.51% cast blank and null votes. The departments where the constitution passed included La Paz, Cochabamba, Oruro, Potosí, Tarija, and Pando. It was rejected in Santa Cruz, Beni, and Chuquisaca.

The constitution, which was written in a constituent assembly that first convened in August of 2006, grants unprecedented rights to Bolivia's indigenous majority, establishes broader access to basic services, education and healthcare and expands the role of the state in the management of natural resources and the economy.

When the news spread throughout La Paz that the constitution had been passed in the referendum, fireworks, cheers and horns sounded off sporadically. By 8:30, thousands had already gathered in the Plaza Murillo. The crowd cheered "Evo! Evo! Evo!" until Morales, Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera and other leading figures in the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) government, crowded out onto the balcony of the presidential palace.

"I would like to take this opportunity to recognize all of the brothers and sisters of Bolivia, all of the compañeros and compañeras, all of the citizens that through their vote, through their democratic participation, decided to refound Bolivia," Morales said. "From 2005 to 2009 we have gone from triumph to triumph, while the neoliberals, the traitors have been constantly broken down thanks to the consciousness of the Bolivian people."

He shook his fist in the air, the applause died down. "And I want you to know something, the colonial state ends here. Internal colonialism and external colonialism ends here. Sisters and brothers, neoliberalism ends here too."

At various points in the speech Morales, and others on the balcony, held up copies of the new constitution. Morales continued, "And now, thanks to the consciousness of the Bolivian people, the natural resources are recuperated for life, and no government, no new president can...give our natural resources away to transnational companies."

A Weakened Right

Though news reports and analysts have suggested that the passage of the new constitution will exacerbate divisions in the country, some of the political tension may be directed into the electoral realm as general elections are now scheduled to take place in December of this year. In addition, the constitution's passage is another sign of the weakness of the Bolivian right, and their lack of a clear political agenda and mandate to confront the MAS's popularity. The recent passage of the constitution is likely to divide and further debilitate the right.

Even Manfred Reyes Villa, an opponent of Morales and ex-governor of Cochabamba, told Joshua Partlow of the Washington Post that, "Today, there is not a serious opposition in the country." When the right-wing led violence in the department of Pando in September of 2008 left some 20 people dead and many others wounded, the right lost much of its legitimacy and support. "With Pando, the regional opposition just collapsed," George Gray Molina, an ex-United Nations official in Bolivia, and a current research fellow at Oxford University, told Partlow. "I think they lost authority and legitimacy even among their own grass roots."

Celebrations

Fireworks shot off at the end of Morales' speech in the Plaza Murillo, sending scared pigeons flying. Live folk music played on stage as the crowd danced and the TV crews packed up and left. The wind blew around giant balloon figures of hands the color of the Bolivian flag holding the new constitution.

As the night wore on, more people began dancing to the bands in the street than to those on the stage. At midnight, when the police asked the thousands gathered to leave the plaza, the crowd took off marching down the street, taking the fiesta to central La Paz, cheering nearly every Latin American revolutionary cheer, pounding drums and sharing beer. After marching down a number of blocks on the empty streets, the crowd hunkered down for a street party at the base of a statue of the Latin American liberator, Simón Bolívar. The celebration, which included Bolivians, Argentines, Brazilians, French, British, North Americans and more, went on into the early hours of the morning.

Oscar Rocababo, a Bolivian sociologist working on his Master's degree in La Paz, was elated about the victory in the referendum. "The passage of this constitution is like the cherry on top of the ice cream, the culmination of many years of struggle."

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