

Bolivia: Recall referendums open new struggle

By [Federico Fuentes](#)

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A new period of uncertainty has opened in Bolivia with the initiation of recall referendums for the president and prefects of Bolivia's nine departments by the opposition-controlled Senate.

The law, first introduced into the House of Deputies by the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) government in December, had been gathering dust due to the refusal of the right-wing opposition to approve it in the Senate. The sudden move this month to pass the law has left many wondering why the opposition would take a decision that will have Bolivia go to the polls on August 10.

The idea behind the law is to let the people resolve through the ballot box the "catastrophic deadlock" between the government of President Evo Morales, backed by the social movements, and the opposition, spearhead by the elites from the eastern region who are tied to gas multinationals and agribusiness interests.

Elite manoeuvres

MAS and the social movements have been campaigning to approve the new constitution, finally handed down by the elected constituent assembly in December, that needs to be ratified by a national referendum. The new constitution would dramatically broaden recognition of indigenous rights within a new "plurinational" state, as well as increase state control over natural resources.

Seeking to defend their economic and political interests, the elites based in the eastern Santa Cruz department have counterposed a proposal for increased autonomy for the eastern regions — where the opposition control the prefectures and where most of Bolivia's natural resources and more than 60% of GDP originate from.

On May 4, Santa Cruz authorities held a referendum, declared unconstitutional by the national Supreme Court, on a proposed "autonomy" statute that would hand enormous power over to the prefectures — including control over natural resources, distribution of land titles and even the right to sign international treaties.

While claiming victory, with 85% support for the "Yes" vote, high abstention — called for by the Morales government and social movements — meant that the "Yes" vote represented just over 50% of the Santa Cruz electorate.

Since then, the four prefects of the "half moon" (the four eastern departments) have rejected Morales's call for negotiations, forming a united bloc that will negotiate after autonomy referendums are held in the rest of the half moon in June.

Recall referendums

These sectors received the Senate's decision on recall referendums as a cold shower. "A grave error", "a political stupidity" and "a disservice to autonomies" were just some of the comments from those quarters.

The opposition control six prefects and MAS two, with one up for election on June 29 following the resignation of the Sucre prefect elected on the MAS ticket.

The president and prefects have to receive a vote in favour of their recall that is higher both numerically and percentage to that obtained in the December 2005 general elections. So while the opposition will have to surpass 53.74% of votes (1,544,374 votes all up) to remove Morales, the prefects are more vulnerable — as none got over 50%, they could be recalled by a minority vote.

The most precarious case is that of opposition La Paz prefect, Jose Luis Paredes, who received only 38% of the vote in 2005 and who will have to obtain 62% to avoid recall.

Many believe the vote in favour of recall referendums was a move by Podemos, the largest opposition party in the Senate, aimed at retaking the initiative within the opposition from the Santa Cruz autonomists. Part of the thinking is also the hope of being able to stop the referendum to approve the new constitution, as the law on referendums only allows one per constitutional period.

MAS senator Felix Rojas, quoted in Bolpress on May 13, argued that Podemos miscalculated and that "errors in politics are made to pay". He said it would also be possible to move ahead with the referendum on the new constitution in conjunction with the recall referendums.

Responding to these events, the proclaimed "governor" of Santa Cruz, Ruben Costas announced on May 14 the formation of a provisional legislative assembly of the "autonomous government of Santa Cruz".

"Following the political earthquake caused by the approval of the recall referendums ... Santa Cruz had to once again put on the agenda the issue of autonomy and to do this it needed a radical dramatisation", a Santa Cruz journalist told the May 15 Argentine daily Clarin.

"They can call it what they want, it is only symbolic. For us what counts is the constitution", was the response of Vice-President Alvaro Garcia Linera. MAS Senator Antonio Peredo called for charges of sedition to be laid against the Santa Cruz leaders.

Meanwhile, excitement is rising in the presidential palace at the possibility of removing at least two opposition prefects — La Paz and Cochabamba, heartlands of MAS' base among the indigenous poor — with further opportunities in Pando and Tarija in the half moon, which have strong peasant movements and where MAS mayors control the departmental capitals.

The recent mobilisations in defence of national unity and the new nationalisations of oil and telecommunications announced on May 1, has not only seen Morales's support increase but helped create greater unity among the popular sectors.

A concerted campaign of mass mobilisation that builds on this increased unity could ensure

an important victory for Morales through the recall referendums — turning it into a vote to ratify Morales's project for change.

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Articles by: [Federico Fuentes](#)

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