

Bolivia: Right-wing rebellion spurs left offensive

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Violent attacks on police officers, roadblocks, civic stoppages enforced by armed fascist youth groups and threats to cut off meat supplies and take over gas fields have all been part of what left-wing Bolivian President Evo Morales has denounced as an attempted “civil coup” by “desperate people” following his August 10 recall referendum victory.

However, the wave of protests appears to be quickly losing steam as social movements get organised to push for the approval of the draft constitution drawn up by an elected constituent assembly to “refound Bolivia”.

The August 10 vote on the president, vice-president and eight out of nine prefects (governors) registered a historic 68% vote for Morales, an increase of 14% on the vote that brought him to power in December 2005.

While the opposition prefects of four eastern departments were also ratified with votes ranging from 56% to 68% (as well as the election of an opposition prefect in Chuquisaca in June), they lost an important ally with the revocation of the opposition prefect of Cochabamba, Manfred Reyes.

In these same departments, Morales’ vote experienced an important increase, including winning more than 50% of the vote in some of them.

While announcing in his victory speech his intention to continue nationalising natural resources in his victory speech, Morales also called a meeting of all the prefects to try to reach a national agreement.

Such an agreement could help bring together the opposing projects of the new constitution (supported by the social and indigenous movements) and the autonomy statutes (promoted by the eastern regions in order to maintain control by the eastern-based oligarchy over natural resources and land in these resource-rich departments).

Regional rebellion

Talks quickly collapsed as the prefects called a civic stoppage in five departments — the eastern departments of Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando and Tarija, plus Chuquisaca — for August 19 in opposition to government plans to divert part of the national direct tax on hydrocarbons (IDH) towards its proposed pension plan.

In direct defiance of the central government, Santa Cruz prefect Ruben Costas announced on August 15 that Morales would not be allowed to set foot in his department — adding that he also would no longer accept a police commander who was neither from Santa Cruz nor

approved by Costas, as part of moving towards de facto autonomy for the department.

The night of the referendum, Costas had announced he would call elections for a departmental legislative assembly — something for which there is no basis in law.

“The people of Santa Cruz should rest assured that we will stop any minister arriving in Santa Cruz, because they are not welcome”, announced David Sejas, president of the fascist Crucenista Youth Union (UJC), whose followers, armed with sticks and shields, chanted as Costas spoke “Evo criminal, Linera poofter” (referring to Vice-President Alvaro Garcia Linera).

Later that day, UJC members violently attacked the departmental head of police.

In the days afterward, attacks increased as youth screamed at police officers to “go back to your country, you shitty *collas*”, causing discontent among the officers, predominately from Bolivia’s largely indigenous west.

On the day of the stoppage, clashes occurred in the middle and outer rings of Santa Cruz city, where popular resistance repelled UJC militants who attempted to impose the stoppage by force.

Restricted mainly to the inner urban areas, and outright rejected in the countryside, participation in the stoppage was low.

The following day, secretary for autonomy in the Santa Cruz prefecture, Carlos Dabdoud, dismissed the possibility of dialogue to merge the two projects, as it was “impossible” to have a “unitary autonomous state”.

Desiring to turn Bolivia into a “confederation of states is no sin”, he stated.

Behind these protests is the fear of the Santa Cruz oligarchy that the Morales government will push forward with its national project for change, now with the backing of the 68% won in the referendum.

At the same time, some voices from the opposition camp are beginning to warn that these actions could backfire.

“The political effects of a radicalised position are not yet visible, but they could be tremendously adverse for Santa Cruz”, warned right-wing Podemos senator Carlos Bohrt, according to Bolpress on August 18.

The day after the stoppage, only three of the five opposition departments went ahead with the announced roadblocks. In Chuquisaca, the prefect preferred to avoid confrontations with local peasant organisations, while the prefect of Tarija moderated his tone as criticism against him grew.

‘Power of the people’

In contrast, Morales reminded the opposition prefects, according to the August 19 *Pagina 12*, “we are no longer just a simple government, but rather the power of the people”, adding that it was necessary to move towards a vote on the new constitution approved by the

constituent assembly last December.

“The debate [on the referendum] must not last beyond next week”, Morales argued. “If it’s through a law, it’s a law. If it’s by decree, it’s a decree. The new constitution has to be approved and we will ensure it is approved.”

The massive vote for Morales has raised hopes for passing the controversial text, which the opposition has fiercely opposed — arguing it did not have two-thirds support within the assembly.

One of the main reasons for the opposition of the project is that fact that the new constitution would entrench state control over natural resources, open the way for radical land reform and dramatically extend rights to Bolivia’s historically excluded indigenous majority.

An August 20 Reuters article quoted Morales as saying that he was willing to continue dialogue over regional autonomy and the issue of the IDH, but that “if some groups do not want to understand the overwhelming sentiment of Bolivian people, the thoughts and suffering of the majorities, then surely they will continue to reduce more and more in numbers and become more violent. We have an obligation to ensure order so that there is respect between Bolivians.”

That same day, the head of the national police force, General Miguel Gernio, stated that he shared the “anger” that many in the police force were feeling in regards to the recent spate of attacks against them, adding “we will not allow more outrages upon our institution and much less attacks on ... police officers”.

Opposing moves towards the “disintegration” of the national police force, Gernio said he was worried that as a product of the loss of values and nationalist principals, Bolivians were allowing particular interests to dominate over and above the demands of the majority of Bolivians, who want peace and respect for the law.

Following a meeting between Morales and various social movement leaders to discuss the issue of the new constitution and potential candidates for the prefectures of La Paz and Cochabamba, up for election after the recall of the existing prefects, it was announced that the social movements would meet in Cochabamba next weekend to discuss how and when the new constitution will be approved.

The various indigenous and peasant organisations also stated they would be “closing ranks to defend the government, the unity of the country and the process of change”.

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