

Bolivia: Tensions rising as vote looms

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Tensions and uncertainties continue to rise as what some are calling a bout of “referendumitis” sweeps through Bolivia.

On July 23 — one day after the right-wing opposition to Bolivia’s first indigenous president, Evo Morales, demanded a referendum on the controversial issue of the nation’s capital — the sole magistrate remaining on the Constitutional Tribunal called into question the constitutionality of the recall referendums set for August 10 that will determine the fate of Morales and eight out of nine of the sitting prefects (governors).

The majority of prefects are from the opposition.

The government, along with the National Electoral Court, declared the decision invalid. With the resignation of four other judges, and Congress unable to agree upon successors, the decision was made without reaching the three-member quorum.

Since May 4, four unconstitutional autonomy referendums have been held in the eastern departments (states) of Santa Cruz, Pando, Beni and Tarija — strongholds of the opposition. The referendums aimed to legitimise the claims of the elites for control over natural resources and land in the east, as well as their push to modify the draft constitution. The draft was written up by the democratically elected constituent assembly and handed over last December to be approved in a national referendum.

The opposition announced victories of “over 80%” in the polls, while the government highlighted the fraud and mass abstention on voting days that were marred by racist attacks against indigenous people.

US role

On July 23, US State Department official Thomas Shannon arrived late for his 5am meeting in the presidential palace for talks to try to sooth rising tensions between the two countries. Morales had announced in front of a massive peasant march in Potosi that he would present proof of how Washington “was campaigning against me, against my government and therefore against the social movements”.

Morales stated that money from “the gringos” in USAID, a US government-funded body supposedly for promoting democracy that is helping fund the opposition in Bolivia, was being used to divide people. Last month, the coca growers (whose union Morales still heads) together with municipal councils run by Morales’ Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) expelled USAID from the Chapare region.

Rising anti-imperialist sentiments were also on display at the massive demonstrations that

surrounded the US Embassy in June, following the decision to grant ex-minister of defence Carlos Sanchez Beltran asylum in the US. Bolivia has been asking for his extradition, along with that of former president Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, to face charges for their involvement in “Black October” — the massacre of around 70 people during the uprising that toppled Sanchez de Lozada in 2003.

US ambassador in Bolivia, Philip Goldberg, was called to Washington to discuss the tensions between the two nations, while Morales fired the head of the police for the repression meted out to those protesting outside the embassy.

Meanwhile, the attempts by the US and Colombia to “prove” support from the left-wing Venezuelan and Ecuadorian governments for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have been expanded to include Bolivia. Bolivian newspaper *La Razon* claims the laptops allegedly rescued from a bombed FARC camp in Ecuador now also have turned up emails linking the FARC to MAS senator Antonio Peredo.

Peredo denounced this as part of a “perverse” campaign to try and link Morales to the FARC.

Referendums

This is just part of the backdrop to the August 10 recall referendums, initially rejected by the opposition-controlled senate in January, then approved in May and then rejected once again in June by the National Democratic Council (CONALDE) that groups together the right-wing pro-autonomy prefects of the east.

Following a new arrival on their team in the form of newly elected opposition prefect of Chuquisaca, Sabina Cuellar, CONALDE announced that they would participate in the referendums.

Only Cochabamba prefect Manfred Reyes, who last year challenged Morales to test his support at the polls but is now reneging on his ultimatum, is opposing the electoral battle. As an opposition prefect in the heartland of MAS’s support base, Reyes knows his position is one of the most at risk.

CONALDE also announced plans to begin protests the day after the referendums if the government did not agree to a referendum on the issue of the capital. This issue was at the centre of recent violent confrontations in Sucre, Bolivia’s historic capital in the country’s centre where the constituent assembly that drew up the current draft was convened.

The controversy over the capital dates back to the civil war in 1899 that saw state powers shift to La Paz in the west. Resentment over the lack of development in Sucre have also been stoked by opposition forces, who raised the issue of the capital in an attempt to stop the constituent assembly and spread their support base from the east.

The third plank of CONALDE’s announced offensive is mobilisations against government moves to use 60% of money collected from the Direct Tax on Hydrocarbons (IDH), previously destined for the departments, to fund a universal pension for those over 60.

This opposition comes despite the fact that gas revenue to the departments has more than doubled over the last two-and-a-half years as a result of the government’s gas nationalisation policies.

While the remnants of the discredited traditional parties have formed an unstable “National Coalition for No to Evo”, some political commentators have noticed a curious anomaly: while participating in the referendum, much of the opposition is afraid to openly campaign for a vote against Morales and lend support to the allegations that they aim to “bring down the Indian”.

Writing in the July 20 Argentinian daily *Clarín*, Pablo Stefanoni reported that Jose Pomacusi, ex-director of the virulent anti-Morales TV station Unitel stated his position was, “we don’t need to change Evo, Evo has to change”.

Pomacusi argued that the best scenario would be a Morales victory by a small margin, denying him any blank cheque. Others have expressed fears that without an obvious opposition figure to replace Morales, the country could become even more unstable.

Mobilisations

While the opposition forces are yet to mobilise in the streets around the referendum campaigns, they have begun an intensive publicity campaign attacking the government’s record. Meanwhile, more and more social organisations are coming behind the campaign to vote in favour of Morales, taking to the streets across the country. In some places, right-wing youth have violently attacked pro-Morales campaigners.

Many in MAS are saying that a big victory for Morales could pave the way to an overwhelming victory in the referendum on the new constitution, which enshrines some of the key planks of the self-proclaimed “cultural and democratic” revolution led by Morales, such as a plurinational state and state control over natural resources.

In the east, many see a defeat for Morales in those regions, regardless of whether he wins nationally, as a mandate to implement the autonomy statutes “approved” in the illegal referendums.

In his speech in Potosi, Morales stated his confidence in the support of “all the social forces of the country to defeat the neoliberals and traitors to the homeland”.

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