

Bolivia: Unprecedented Alliance Defeats Right-Wing Assault

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Global Research, October 30, 2008

[The Bullett](#) 30 October 2008

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Theme: [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

LA PAZ: After three months of intense class struggle, there can be no doubt that the U.S.-backed right-wing opposition to the government of President Evo Morales has suffered three important defeats. The right's offensive to topple Morales, which climaxed with the September 11-12 "civic coup" attempt, has been decisively rolled back by the combined action of the government and social movements.

The government secured a historic vote in its favour with more than 67% endorsing Morales' mandate in a referendum in August that also revoked the mandate of two opposition prefects. Another opposition prefect was arrested for his role in the coup. And now Morales has secured a referendum for the new draft Constitution to "refound Bolivia" on the basis of justice for the indigenous majority.

More importantly, a strengthened Morales government now counts on an unprecedented alliance of indigenous, peasants' and workers' organizations determined to defend their government and the Morales-led "democratic and cultural revolution."

Third wave of struggle

With the turn of the century, Bolivia's social movements — united behind Bolivia's powerful indigenous peasant movement — began to rise up in opposition to neoliberalism and indigenous oppression, overthrowing two presidents and paving the way for the victory of the Morales-led Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) in early general elections in 2005.

On assuming the presidency, Morales moved to nationalize Bolivia's gas reserves and convoke a constituent assembly to draft a new Constitution — the two central demands of the mass movement.

A concerted campaign led by reactionary forces grouped around the prefects of the "half moon" — the eastern departments of Pando, Beni, Santa Cruz and Tarija — to wear down government support in order to pave the way for Morales' downfall, succeeded in stopping the advance of this process for most of 2007.

Mistakes by the government and a relative demobilization of the movements also contributed.

With their ability to mobilize an important social base against the government in the east around defense of "regional autonomy" and to stall the constituent assembly around the demand for a two-thirds majority vote on the new Constitution, these forces spread their

support outside of the half moon to the central departments of Cochabamba, where violent clashes occurred in January 2007, and then Chuquisaca.

Racist attacks against indigenous people and the assembly delegates in Chiquisaca's capital Sucre forced the assembly to reconvene, first in a military barrack and afterwards in a different state — without the opposition — to approve the final text.

Bolivia appeared to be approaching the abyss, as regional and ethnic tensions deeply divided the country.

Victory at the ballot box

Believing that the time was right to move to get rid of Morales, the right-wing Podemos party (which controls the Senate) approved a law for recall referendums on Morales and the prefects.

This was also partly an attempt by Podemos to seize the initiative within the opposition from the half moon opposition prefects.

The opposition prefects, now grouped together in the National Democratic Coalition (CONALDE), initially opposed the referendums. However, following a series of meetings with U.S. ambassador Phillip Goldberg, they agreed to accept the challenge.

A June by-election resulted in an anti-MAS prefect replacing the MAS predecessor in Chuquisaca, further lifting the right's hopes.

But the results of the August 10 vote demonstrated a totally different reality. Morales' mandate was endorsed with an historic 67.4% of the vote.

Morales also won in Pando, tied in Tarija and got over 40% in Beni and Santa Cruz, with the opposition's support base isolated to the main cities, encircled by MAS-aligned rural areas.

In the majority of rural electorates Morales scored over 90%, while in poor urban areas like El Alto in the west and Plan 3000 in Santa Cruz his support was above 80%.

Opposition prefects were also recalled in Cochabamba and La Paz.

Together with social programs that had begun to change the lives of millions, the deep connection felt with a president "just like us" that exists among the indigenous and poor urban sectors helps explain this result.

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