

Bolivian Crisis in the New South America

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The Machine Gun and The Meeting Table: Bolivian Crisis in a New South America

On Monday, September 15, Bolivian president Evo Morales arrived in Santiago, Chile for an emergency meeting of Latin American leaders that convened to seek a resolution to the recent conflict in Bolivia. Upon his arrival, Morales said, "I have come here to explain to the presidents of South America the civic coup d'état by Governors in some Bolivian states in recent days. This is a coup in the past few days by the leaders of some provinces, with the takeover of some institutions, the sacking and robbery of some government institutions and attempts to assault the national police and the armed forces."

Morales was arriving from his country where the smoke was still rising from a week of right-wing government opposition violence that left the nation paralyzed, at least 30 people dead, and businesses, government and human rights buildings destroyed. During the same week, Morales declared US ambassador in Bolivia Philip Goldberg a "persona non grata" for "conspiring against democracy" and for his ties to the Bolivian opposition. The recent conflict in Bolivia and the subsequent meeting of presidents raise the questions: What led to this meltdown? Whose side is the Bolivian military on? And what does the Bolivian crisis and regional reaction tell us about the new power bloc of South American nations?

Massacre in Pando

On September 11, in the tropical Bolivian department of Pando, which borders Brazil and Peru, a thousand pro-Morales men, women and children were heading toward Cobija, the department's capital to protest the right wing governor Leopoldo Fernández and his thugs' takeover of the city and airport.

According to press reports and eye witness accounts, when the protesters arrived at a bridge seven kilometers outside the town of Porvenir, they were ambushed by assassins hired and trained by governor Fernández. Snipers in the tree tops shot down on the unarmed campesinos. Shirley Segovia, a Porvenir resident recalled to Bolpress, "We were killed like pigs, with machine guns, with rifles, with shotguns, with revolvers. The campesinos had only brought their teeth, clubs and sling shots, they didn't bring rifles. After the first shots, some fled to the river Tahuamanu, but they were followed and shot at." Others reported being tortured; days later the death toll rose to 30, with dozens wounded and over a hundred still missing. Roberto Tito, a farmer who was present at the conflict, said "This was a massacre of farmers, this is something that we should not allow."

In 2006, Fernández, who denies orchestrating this violence, was denounced by then Government Minister Alicia Muñoz who said the governor was training at least a hundred paramilitaries as a "citizen's protection" force. These paramilitaries are believed to have

participated in the massacre. Fernández is one of the opposition governors that form part of the National Democratic Council (CONALDE), an organization which includes governors from Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando, Tarija, and Chuquisaca who are organizing for departmental autonomy against the Morales government and his administration's redistribution of land and natural gas wealth, and other socialistic policies.

Leopoldo Fernandez (El Deber)After the massacre, President Morales declared a state of siege in Pando, sent in the military, and by September 15 a tense peace had reportedly returned to the region. Morales also called for the arrest of Fernandez who fled across the border, into rural Brazil. [Update: Fernandez has since been arrested and taken to the Bolivian capital.]

This massacre took place just weeks after an August 10 national recall vote invigorated Morales mandate: he won 67% support nationwide, showing that his staunch, violent opponents are clearly in the minority. In Pando, Morales won 53% of the vote, an increase of 32% from the 21% he received from Pando residents during the presidential election in 2005.

A few key political developments led to this recent increase in regional tension. On August 28, Morales announced a presidential decree establishing a constitutional referendum on December 7. This referendum would apply to the constitution which was re-written and passed in a constituent assembly in December 2007. On September 2 of this year the electoral court said it opposed the referendum because it had to first be passed by Congress and the opposition controlled Senate. The debate revived existing conflicts, and opposition leaders began to block major roads and seized an airport in Cobija on September 5.

The days leading up to the September 11 massacre in Pando were full of anti-government protesters ransacking businesses and human rights organizations across the country. On September 10, an explosion reportedly set off by opposition groups disrupted the flow of gas lines to Brazil from Tarija, Bolivia.

US Ambassadors Expelled

Following these tumultuous events, Morales demanded that US ambassador to Bolivia, Philip Goldberg leave the country. "Without fear of anyone, without fear of the empire, today before you, before the Bolivian people, I declare the ambassador of the United States persona non grata," Morales said. "The ambassador of the United States is conspiring against democracy and wants Bolivia to break apart."

The announcement came after a private meeting Goldberg had with the right wing governor of Santa Cruz on August 25, and a later visit to the opposition governor of Chuquisaca. Throughout Goldberg's time as ambassador, which began in 2006, the Morales government has accused him of orchestrating US funding and support to opposition groups in the eastern part of the country. [See the February 2008, The Progressive Magazine article "Undermining Bolivia" for more information on Washington's destabilization efforts in Bolivia.] Before coming to Bolivia, Goldberg worked as an ambassador in Kosovo from 2004-2006 and consular in Colombia. At a press conference Goldberg held in La Paz before leaving for the US, he said: "I want to say that all the accusations made against me, against my embassy... against my country and against my people are entirely false and unjustified."

Following the US ambassador's expulsion from Bolivia, Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez

announced that the US ambassador in his country had to leave: “He has 72 hours, from this moment, the Yankee ambassador in Caracas, to leave Venezuela.” The US responded by asking the ambassadors of Venezuela and Bolivia to leave the US. This all took place during a tense few months in US-Latin American relations in which the US Navy re-instated its Fourth Fleet in the Caribbean after decades of inactivity, Chavez announced joint exercises with Russia in the Caribbean and Bolivia strengthened its ties with Iran.

On September 15 in Santiago, Chile, the nine presidents within the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), including Argentina, Ecuador, Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, Chile – even Colombia, a close US ally – met to come to a resolution on the Bolivian crisis. This organization is one of the newest in a series of regional networks that are making increasingly collaborative political and economic decisions throughout South America. All of the leaders backed Morales, condemned the opposition’s violent tactics and emphasized that they won’t recognize separatists in the country.

Bolivian Military Alliances

Though the threat of a “civic coup d’etat” Morales spoke about in Santiago still looms, the Bolivian military is unlikely to back the government opposition. I asked Kathryn Ledebur, a human rights specialist and director of the Andean Information Network in Cochabamba, Bolivia if the military might side with the opposition to overthrow Morales. Ledebur said, “No way, they are in a tough bind, and CONALDE is trying to set Morales up, drive a wedge between him and the military. But in spite of their frustrations, they [the military] have received more materially and in terms of a positive discourse from the Morales government than any other civilian one, and that makes a huge difference.”

Bolivian Ministers of Defense & Government (ABI) “CONALDE has intentionally created a messy catch 22 for the Morales administration, a tense, provocative violent situation, in some cases targeting the security forces,” Ledebur explained. “If Morales orders repression, or there are clear cut violent acts by the security forces, his legitimacy as a socially conscious president erodes. But if the security forces don’t [act], as they didn’t for a long time, the vandalism escalates, and the military and police get humiliated and attacked – which in the long term erodes what, at least for the armed forces, had been a mutually beneficial marriage of convenience, with friction along the way.”

This past June the Andean Information Network released a report analyzing the Bolivian Armed Forces’ growing mission in the country under Morales. According to this report, part of the military’s support stems from the fact that Morales has given the military popular and lucrative jobs such as “enforcing customs regulations and confiscating contraband at the borders, including authorization to arrest offenders.” The AIN report explains that “traditionally military officers look forward to border postings as ‘the most profitable part’ of their careers.” In addition, “under the Morales government, the armed forces are in charge of baking subsidized bread (the regular price has gone up 270 percent in the past year), as well as passing out bonuses to schoolchildren and senior citizens.” Improved wages among some officials and better equipment have also kept the military on Morales’ side.

The AIN report also stated that the Bolivian military institution “will continue to categorically reject aggressive regional autonomy initiatives or threats of secession as risks to both national sovereignty and the budget they receive from the national government.” As one high ranking officer explained to AIN, “The only way the military would even remotely consider a coup, is if they took away most of our budget; at the core, we’re really a bunch of

bureaucrats.”

US Influence in a Changing South America

The current crisis in Bolivia and the ongoing diplomatic drama between the US and Latin America says a lot about the future of the region and its cooperative handling of economic and political questions. In an interview via email, Raúl Zibechi, a Uruguayan journalist, professor and political analyst who writes regularly for the Americas Program, said he believes the expulsion of US ambassadors, and the regional leaders’ response to the conflict in Bolivia, “is the manifestation of the fact that the USA can no longer impose its will on Latin America, and very concretely in South America.” He says there are two reasons for this change: “the birth of a regional power that seeks to be a global player, such as Brazil, a capitalist power but with different interests from the USA, and the existence of governments born of the heat of the resistance of social movements in countries that are large producers of hydrocarbons, as in Venezuela, Bolivia and perhaps Ecuador.”

Zibechi emphasized Bolivia’s importance as the leading supplier of gas to Argentina and Brazil, and how this contributes to the support Morales receives from these nations. “Brazil has big stakes in much of Bolivia and it already announced that it would not permit a destabilization of the country,” Zibechi explained. “The key alliance in the region is between Brazil and Argentina. They have problems, but in this topic they are very united.”

Back in Santiago, Chile, after six hours of talks between the nine South American presidents, the UNASUR group issued a statement which expressed their “their full and firm support for the constitutional government of President Evo Morales, whose mandate was ratified by a big majority.” In the statement, the leaders “warn that our respective government energetically reject and will not recognize any situation that attempts a civil coup and the rupture of institutional order and which could compromise the territorial integrity of the Republic of Bolivia.” They also decided to send a commission to Bolivia to investigate the killings in Pando.

Though working to overthrow leftist governments is unfortunately nothing new in South America, region-wide cooperation between left-leaning governments, without the presence of the US, is new. As Morales and other regional leaders forge ahead with progressive policies, there may be no turning back for this changing continent – regardless of the challenges posed by the Bolivian opposition. The geopolitical map of the hemisphere is being redrawn, in large part by the new alliances between South American nations, and the region’s increased resistance to Washington’s political and economic interference.

The economic and agricultural powerhouse of Brazil is a key part of this new regional defiance and independence. “In Brazil, the right wing in the parliament questions very strongly the [US Navy’s] Fourth Fleet because they say it is to control the new oil fields in Brazil,” Zibechi explained. “In Brazil, things don’t depend just on Lula being in the government. Brazil has autonomous politics that go beyond who governs... Because of this, imperial policy is to overthrow Chavez and Evo before there are changes in these countries that are so profound that they no longer depend on who is governing.”

In Bolivia, much still depends on what happens on the ground, outside of the presidential meetings and negotiations. The opposition has lifted their road blockades for now, and meetings between the government and representatives from the opposition continue. Meanwhile, many of Bolivia’s social organizations and unions have pledged their support for

Morales and against the right wing. On September 15 thousands of workers, families and students marched in La Paz, the nation's capital, against the massacre in Pando and the right's violence. "We are against the massacre of campesinos which has taken place in Pando," Edgar Patanta, the leader of the Regional Workers' Center, told ABI, "We will not permit the repetition of these acts. We will defend democracy and life as we have in the past."

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