

Right-wing revolt threatens Bolivia

"The imperialist project is to carve up Bolivia and carve up South America"

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Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Global Research, April 28, 2008

Green Left Weekly 28 April 2008

"Bolivia is on the verge of exploding", Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez warned on April 21.

Speaking on the eve of an extraordinary summit of the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA — the alliance made of Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Dominica) that was partly called to discuss the situation in Bolivia, Chavez stated the landlocked Andean country was "once again under fire — for daring to dream of retaking the path of dignity, liberty and real independence".

"The empire wants to put a brake on the integration of South America", Chavez argued, and has chosen Bolivia as its immediate target. "Today the cause of Bolivia is the cause of the dignified people of Latin America who fight for unity and liberty."

Chavez said that, "We are and will continue to be with Bolivia and we extend our hand and our heart" to the Bolivian people.

Illegal referendum

At the heart of the latest round of tensions in Bolivia are the plans by the elite in the eastern department of Santa Cruz (a stronghold of Bolivia's oligarchy) to push ahead with a referendum on "autonomy" scheduled for May 4.

Despite the referendum being declared illegal by the national electoral court, the Santa Cruz electoral court has stated it will press ahead with the vote, which many fear is aimed at fracturing the country.

The right-wing campaign of destabilisation against the indigenous-led government of President Evo Morales — which the referendum is one component of — has intensified in the last few weeks.

"Leaving clear the success of the bunkering-down by the business sectors in Santa Cruz", wrote Pablo Stefanoni on April 19 in the Argentine daily Clarin, "Morales yesterday had to pull out his vice minister for land, Alejandro Almaraz, from the Bolivian Chaco".

"Days before, the functionary tried without luck to enter the hacienda of the US citizen Ronald Larsen in order to verify compliance of his land in regards to its economic and social function, but was received with stones and armed picket lines, and had to take refuge in military quarters."

Stefanoni also reported that the president of the Chamber of Exporters of the East, Ramiro

Monje, threatened that “after May 4, another economic model will begin to function”.

Sectors of large agribusiness have been on a war footing against the government following recent moves to restrict exports of certain food products — in order to tackle food shortages provoked by agribusiness.

While loosening some of the restrictions, Morales threatened to nationalise companies that “are provoking a bosses lockout” by enforcing a holiday on May 4.

Defending unity

An April 24 ABI news service article reported that the commander of the Bolivian Naval Force, Vice Admiral Jose Luis Cavas Villegas, said that “we are the people in arms, in order to defend the internal security of our population, the Armed Forces are with the people ... behind the [national flag], we will defend unity all our lives”.

Through the build-up of tensions, the position of the government, the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS — Morales’s party) and the social movements aligned with the government has oscillated between threatening to stop the referendum going ahead to dismissing it as simply an opinion poll.

For now, it seems rallies will be held on May 4 in favour of “national unity” in all capital cities — except in Santa Cruz, in order to avoid confrontations. Nevertheless, the opposition have established “civil guards” to defend the polling booths in the department, just in case.

Since Morales inauguration in January 2006, the economic and political elites whose power has been threatened by the rise of Bolivia’s first indigenous government — despite the impoverished indigenous people making up around two thirds of the population — have entrenched themselves in the east of Bolivia.

‘Democratic and cultural revolution’

As the Morales government has continued to take steps forward in his self-proclaimed “democratic and cultural revolution” — through the nationalisation of gas, the convocation of a constituent assembly to “re-found” Bolivia and the implementation of important social programs aimed at tackling poverty and centuries of oppression — the elite have stepped up their campaign of destabilisation.

In particular, the government’s land reform, which has redistributed hundreds of thousands of hectares of land owned by the state or large landowners to poor campesinos (peasants), has aroused opposition. Key leaders of the push for “autonomy” in Santa Cruz are also large landowners.

Behind the calls for autonomy are economic interests hoping to give greater power to the opposition-controlled department governments on questions of control over natural resources and productive land, the majority of which is located in the east.

Bolivia sits on top of the second largest gas reserves in South America, after Venezuela.

By pushing for autonomy the elite hopes to weaken and bring down the popular Morales government. However, their campaign is also part of laying the groundwork for a plan B —

the break up of Bolivia through the creation of an independent state in the east, taking with them the majority Bolivia's natural resources.

Under this banner, they have also sought, successfully, to unite large sections of the predominately white population of the east against the central government. Tapping into a long held sentiment for autonomy, and whipping up racism and fears of an "indigenous revenge", they have been able to mobilise large numbers in the east around the "autonomy" demand.

A recent poll by Equipos Mora showed that in Santa Cruz, 84% of the population say they will vote in the referendum, with 76% in favour of the autonomy statutes.

Solidarity

Pointing to the declaration of solidarity and support for the people of Bolivia, approved in the ALBA summit, Chavez stated that it expressed "the will ... of millions of Bolivians, Nicaraguans, Cubans and Venezuelans."

During the summit, Chavez proposed the creation of a defence council and military force of the ALBA countries, "because our enemy is the same, the empire".

The declaration states that the nations in ALBA "reject the destabilisation plans that aim to attack the peace and unity of Bolivia". It stated ALBA nations would not recognise "any juridical figure that aims to break away from the Bolivian national state and violates the territorial integrity of Bolivia".

"The imperialist project", Morales said, "is to try and carve up Bolivia and with that carve up South America, because it has converted itself into the epicentre of the great changes that are advancing on the world scale".

"I believe in the consciousness of the people and the wisdom of our social forces and of the indigenous movement, and above all of the patriots that are fighting for the dignity and sovereignty of our people."

To add your name to an international statement in solidarity with Bolivia, visit <http://todosconbolivia.org>. Federico Fuentes is editor of <http://boliviarising.blogspot.com>.

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