

The Paramilitary Massacre in Bolivia

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Bolivian President Evo Morales' expulsion of US Ambassador Philip Goldberg on September 10 for alleged coup plotting sparked the latest diplomatic crisis in the Americas. But the diplomatic fallout has overshadowed the internal dynamics that led to the massacre of some 30 campesinos with perhaps as many as 40 more disappeared in El Porvenir, Pando, near Bolivia's northeastern border with Brazil. The massacre coincided with the 35th anniversary of the violent overthrow of socialist president Salvador Allende in Chile.

The massacre in El Porvenir was the worst in Bolivia since right-wing President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada presided over the slaughter of more than 70 unarmed protestors in October 2003. This time, however, the violence was not orchestrated by the central government, but by regional officials: departmental prefects in league with civic committees. Administratively organized similar to France, Bolivia is divided into nine departments, each run by a prefect, while civic committees are made up of a handful of unelected, local, commercial-landed elites who preside over one of the most unequal distributions of land and wealth in the world. These public- and private-sector authorities, in turn, are allied with cypto-fascist paramilitary youth gangs armed with baseball bats, clubs, chains, guns, and in the case of the massacre at El Porvenir, official vehicles. These groups have made Bolivia's eastern lowlands ungovernable for the Morales administration.

It may be helpful for U.S. readers to consider Bolivia's eastern lowlands as analogous to Dixie. In the 1950s and 60s, working with governors and mayors of states and localities, white supremacist paramilitary groups terrorized African Americans. The campaign of terror was intended to preserve a status quo that benefited a tiny class of wealthy white landowners, against which the federal government—under Eisenhower and Kennedy—hesitated to act.

Imagine, though, that African Americans had comprised an overwhelming majority of the U.S. population, that Kennedy was Black, and that he had come to power on the back of serial insurrections led by African Americans. Imagine that, in response, white supremacists not only massacred Blacks, but also blockaded roads, blew up oil pipelines, and burned and looted federal government offices and installations.

The limits of the analogy with the Jim Crow south are significant, but another analogy—from a century earlier, the 1850s and 60s—transcends them. The southern secessionist movement sought to preserve the republic of slavery and extend it through the west to the Pacific. The movement mobilized a mass following and mounted an armed challenge to the federal government. Such analogies help convey the virulence of what one commentator has labeled a “revolt of the rich,” as well as the scope of the challenge posed by a wealthy white minority to a government backed by a majority of workers and campesinos of Indian descent, a government without historical precedent.

Massive support for the central government was ratified as recently as August 10 in the recall referendum in which Morales increased his overall share of the vote to 67%—up from 54% when he was elected president in late 2005. Morales improved his standing in his strongholds—the cities and countryside of the western highlands and valleys, as well as the coca-growing regions in the Yungas and the Chapare. But more importantly, he made inroads in the heart of opposition country in Beni, Pando, and Tarija, where he won an additional 20% compared to 2005. In Pando, nearly half the population voted in favor of Morales. No Bolivian president has ever had such broad appeal across the nation.

On the heels of victory, Morales spoke of dialogue and reconciliation with the opposition. But opposition prefects, led by Rubén Costas from Santa Cruz, and empowered by their substantial gains in the same recall vote, announced their intention to implement the “statutes” approved in “autonomy referendums” in May and June 2008. The “autonomy referendums” were de facto voting exercises, lacking any legal standing in Bolivia, were not recognized by any foreign government, and were not overseen by international observers. Yet opposition prefects claimed a mandate to install their own police, tax collection services, and departmental legislature. The implementation of this mandate could only come about through the use of force.

Then came September 11. Death squads armed with sub-machine guns massacred unarmed Morales supporters on their way to a mass meeting in El Porvenir. The meeting had been called to discuss possible responses to increasingly violent attacks on government supporters. The central government was slow to react and hesitant when it finally did. It could not safeguard the property and lives of its supporters or defend its own offices and functionaries; it could not even offer humanitarian aid to survivors, many of whom, fearing for their lives, hid in the mountains. In a televised interview, the presidential delegate in Pando, Nancy Texeira, asked in a halting voice choked by pain and sadness, “Why doesn’t the government in La Paz do anything? We have been abandoned here.”

Over the past several years, Morales has cultivated good relations with the police and armed forces, yet he has been mostly unwilling or unable to use either since the crisis that began in August. Armed opposition forces have overwhelmed both police and military in the lowlands, thus far with impunity. The Bolivian security forces have therefore been humiliated according to their shared institutional code. And yet, as the opposition ups the ante of violence and illegality, the central government becomes increasingly reluctant to monopolize legitimate use of force, and the opposition becomes ever more brazen in persecuting Morales supporters.

This, at least, has been the dynamic in Pando. Opposition prefects in Beni, Santa Cruz, and Tarija have pulled back to some degree from their onslaught, and ostensibly agreed to “dialogue” with the Morales government, but the damage is done. Morales declared martial law in Pando and ordered the arrest of the departmental prefect Leopoldo Fernández on September 12. Many of Morales’ supporters will be asking why he is pursuing dialogue with opposition prefects in Beni, Santa Cruz, and Tarija, when they—and their supporters—could be legitimately brought to trial for their crimes.

The emergency meeting of the South American Union (Unasur) convened in by President Michelle Bachelet in Chile on September 15 is a sign of changing times in the Western hemisphere. Military dictators like Chile’s Augusto Pinochet, Bolivia’s Hugo Banzer, and their bastard offspring, such as Leopoldo Fernández—who got his start in the late 1970s as a

paramilitary operative under successive dictatorships—belong to the past.

This new regional diplomacy exercised through the Organization of American States (OAS), the Rio Group, and now Unasur has successfully confronted diplomatic crises triggered by the U.S. government and its local allies on the right. Although Hugo Chávez's expulsion of the U.S. Ambassador from Venezuela grabbed headlines in the United States, the Bolivian crisis played quite differently in the regional media. Bolivia sells most of its natural gas to Brazil and Argentina, and Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Argentine President Cristina Fernandez denounced the separatist movement in unusually strong terms. The outcome of the Unasur meeting further proved that Morales has robust support from neighboring governments and the major inter-state organizations to which they belong.

Given regional repudiation of secessionist movements in Bolivia and Morales' overwhelming support at home, opposition forces have little chance of toppling Morales and installing a right-wing government. Furthermore, they must contend with formidable and rising resistance within their own departments, not only in the countryside but also in the cities: the northern part of Beni is controlled by indigenous groups that back the Morales government, for example, while peasant supporters of Morales fought pitched street battles against the opposition in Tarija (the capital city of the department with the same name).

The reactionary rampage in the lowlands is the result of a desperate, cornered minority that has been given considerable breathing room by a weak, vacillating central government that nevertheless enjoys massive popular backing. Since it can't take back the central government and is isolated internationally, the opposition's last weapon is to bleed the Morales administration of legitimacy by making the country ungovernable.

The opposition has demonstrated the central government's inability to impose the rule of law amid public-private terror against its supporters—a spectacular triumph for any right-wing movement. Since August's recall referendum, the arc of illegality and violence traced by the opposition has been unmistakable. While no one anticipated the scale of the massacre in El Porvenir, it was all but certain that one would occur.

What if the Bolivian government had tried to prevent this tragedy by sending in the army and riot police before any of its supporters were killed, instead of reacting weakly and hesitantly *ex post facto*? Will the government rise to the occasion in the future, or are there more massacres to come? If the Morales administration is not able to guarantee the lives and property of supporters, some of them may be tempted to take justice into their own hands, in which case the media cliché of pending "civil war," until now a mere figure of rhetoric, could become reality. Regardless of what happens in the future, there is now one more massacre to commemorate on September 11, and the dilemma signaled by Allende's tragic example remains as daunting as ever.

Forrest Hylton is the co-author, with Sinclair Thomson, of Revolutionary Horizons: Past and Present in Bolivian Politics (Verso, 2007) and the author of Evil Hour in Colombia (Verso, 2006). He is a frequent contributor to NACLA and New Left Review.

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