

Bolivia: Unprecedented Alliance Defeats Right-Wing Assault

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LA PAZ: After three months of intense class struggle, there can be no doubt that the US-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 US 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.

A coup by any other name

Fearing the government would use this victory to push ahead with a referendum on the draft Constitution, the right wing went to Plan B.

After a series of meetings between the US ambassador, US congresspeople and the half moon prefects, it was agreed to enact a plan to destabilize the east, stirring up violence to the point where either the military would be forced to react, causing deaths and Morales' resignation, or creating the justification for some kind of United Nations intervention to "restore stability."

Small groups of balaclava-wearing thugs took over airports to create an image of a president that could not set foot in half the country, while the prefects openly talked about regional independence.

With violent attacks on indigenous people escalating, fascist youths began to target police officers and soldiers. The aim was to stir up discontent within these institutions.

The plan was ratcheted up as paramilitaries began to appear openly together with armed youths and to take over and loot state institutions, stating that they would now come under the jurisdiction of the prefectures.

Uncertain as to the potential reaction from the people and soldiers, the government wavered on whether to send in troops.

At the same time, the right began to seek out support among high-ranking military officials. On September 5, a meeting was held between US embassy representatives and military figures, including the Santa Cruz-based commander of the army's eighth division, General Marcos Bracamonte.

Bracamonte agreed to not act against the coup plot.

The government finally decided to order the top commander of the Armed Forces Luis Trigo, known to have links with the Santa Cruz oligarchy, to move into Pando to take control of the situation. He responded that he would do nothing until a presidential decree had been signed to ensure that full responsibility for any blood spilt lay with Morales.

Once in Pando, he ordered troops to remain in their barracks and turned off his phone. According to sources in the government, Morales could not communicate with Trigo for four days. Others in the military high command did the same.

An emergency meeting of social movements was held in Cochabamba on September 10 where they resolved to march on Santa Cruz and crush the coup-plotting offensive.

Pando massacre

In order to distract the attention of the social movements focused on Santa Cruz, the coup plotters agreed to create a crisis in Pando.

Paramilitaries ambushed and fired upon unarmed peasants travelling to a meeting of their departmental union federation. At least 20 men, women and children were massacred, with more than 60 still missing.

A wave of revulsion spread throughout society, including among middle-class sectors in the east that the opposition had hoped to mobilize.

The social movements stepped up plans to encircle Santa Cruz. Peasants in the rural areas of Santa Cruz cut off all access to the city.

Amidst generalized revulsion against the actions of the right, and with the social movements on the march, Morales — and the entire ministerial cabinet according to one source — signed the decree to implement marshal law in Pando.

Desire for action also swept through the military, as soldiers demanded to be allowed to go and defend their indigenous brothers. Under direct orders from Morales, new troops were sent to Pando.

After fighting off armed paramilitaries in the airport, they moved in to restore order in the capital Cobija.

Three days later, at an emergency summit of the Union of South American Nations (Unasur), nine countries in the region came out strongly in defence of the Morales government and against any attempt to break up Bolivia.

Lacking international support, and with their plan unravelling, the prefects quickly called for a return to dialogue. The right-wing gangs began to lift their roadblocks and the government regained control of public buildings.

Although many of the social movement marchers wanted to continue until they reached the central plaza of Santa Cruz, on September 23 a decision was taken to end the protest and avoid a potential confrontation and bloodbath, as there were no guarantees for the security of protesters and snipers were rumoured to be present.

Dialogue

The government stated that the dialogue would focus on two controversial issues: regional autonomy and the level of funding to the departments from the Direct Tax on Hydrocarbons.

Meanwhile, the government stepped up its campaign to hunt down those responsible for the Pando massacre and the destruction of state property. Pando prefect Leopoldo Fernandez, accused of ordering the massacre, had gone into hiding. He was found and arrested.

Numerous opposition "civic leaders" find themselves in the same situation.

With no overall agreement reached, dialogue shifted to Congress. Even with the votes of the other two opposition parties, MAS did not have the numbers without support from at least some Podemos deputies to achieve the required two-thirds vote of approval for a referendum on the Constitution.

The National Coalition for Change (CONCALCAM), which unites more than 30 peasant, indigenous, worker and social organisations, together with the Bolivian Workers Central in a historic unity pact, decided to organize a march on Congress to ensure the approval of the law.

As a result of negotiations, the mobilization of the social movements and the overwhelming public support for the law's approval, Congress voted on October 20 to hold a referendum in January.

As well as agreeing to minor modifications to around 100 of the 411 articles in the draft, the government agreed to take Morales' current presidential term into account under the new Constitution. This means Morales will not be able to stand for re-election in 2014 if he wins the proposed December 2009 presidential elections.

The new Constitution will limit presidents to a maximum of two terms in office.

A separate referendum will be held to determine whether large landholdings will be limited to 5,000 or 10,000 hectares.

The land reform proposed in the Constitution will not be retroactive, but continued ownership of land will depend on landowners using the land productively.

The CONALCAM supported the decisions, arguing that they demonstrated the willingness of the government to negotiate, and announced that it will immediately begin to campaign for a "Yes" vote.

On the other hand, while the parliamentary right have stated they will also campaign in favour of the new Constitution that until recently they described as approved by a "constituent assembly stained in blood", the opposition prefects have announced they will campaign for a "No" vote.

An important political space has opened up in the east, where broad parts of society that until now have not felt part of MAS's project, now openly reject the right-wing prefects who hoped to drag them into a civil war.

How MAS can reach out to these sections and consolidate its national hegemony is a crucial question in the next period. MAS is attempting to use the issue of regional autonomy, previously used by the right, to win these sections over to an autonomy based on solidarity and national unity.

Importantly, the Morales government now also counts on the revitalized social movements, which, together with their government, successfully neutralized the fascist coup attempt.

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'The people will decide'

"For the social movements and the Bolivian people, the approval of the new constitution is key to reversing the centuries of discrimination," Julio Salazar, executive secretary of the Six Federations of Coca Growers from the Tropics of Cochabamba, told *Green Left Weekly*.

Sitting in his office, the walls covered with posters of Bolivian President Evo Morales, who also presides over the six federations, Salazar explained that "no matter what happens, no matter what they say, no matter what it costs, the new Constitution has to be approved."

"The social movements are going to mobilize in order to ensure this happens."

Together with a bus load of cocaleros, we arrived in Caracollo on October 13 to begin the 200 km march on Congress to force that body to agree to a referendum on the new constitution that was drafted by an elected constituent assembly.

At 2:00 am in the morning of October 21, Morales signed the historic law of convocation for the referendum, while more than 100,000 protesters — with whom he had spent the last eleven hours awaiting Congress's decision — cheered and shouted for joy.

Bolivians will now go to the polls on January 25 to vote on the draft Constitution — demanded since the peasant mobilizations of the early 1990s — that will dramatically increase the rights of the historically excluded indigenous majority, expand state control over natural resources and land, and give a measure of autonomy to departments, municipalities and indigenous peoples within the framework of a united plurinational state.

Once approved, new elections will be held in December 2009 for President, Vice President, Congress, and departmental prefects.

Conversing at the start of the march, Salazar pointed to the crowd and explained: "Before they used to say 'it's just the peasants, the cocaleros, that are marching.' This time, other sectors are uniting with us: health workers, teachers, university students, neighbourhood committees, professionals are all participating in the march."

Pedro Montes, head of the Bolivian Workers Central (COB), which joined forces with the National Coalition for Change (CONALCAM) to organize the march, told GLW that the protest was a demonstration of the type of unity that was required to ensure "the refounding of Bolivia."

"Our recent national gathering voted to be part of this march. All our regional centrals and affiliated unions will be participating."

Asked what would happen if some union leaders decided not to participate, Montes replied that "the rank and file will go over the top of them."

"The people have wakened up," said Leonilda Zurita, leader of the National Federation of Peasant Women of Bolivia—Bartolina Sisa (FNMCB-BS).

"Today, our president comes from the people, a people that have become the government. With or without Evo, this process will continue."

"It is the people that will decide, at the ballot box and not with arms as the oligarchs wanted.... The choice is clear: continue the process of change or return to neoliberalism."

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