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Political Violence in Bolivia

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Political violence in different forms has persisted for the past few months in Bolivia, leaving injured at urban protests, dead at highway blockades, and claiming the life of the mayor of an isolated Aymara Indian community during a mob riot. Although the current violence is occurring at a lesser level than the uprising that took dozens of lives and led to the downfall of the president last autumn (see NotiSur, 2003-10-24), it is taking place against a backdrop of state weakness that has international observers concerned for the future of Bolivian democracy.

Protests ebb and surge, leaving injured

Student and labor protests in major Bolivian cities in late April and early May led to face-offs with police that left several injured, even though the groups failed to mobilize a national strike. Demonstrators in La Paz, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz took to the streets, calling for the continued exemption of small businesses from taxation, greater government support for public education, and retirement benefits for miners.

University students swarmed the streets of La Paz, facing a harsh crackdown from police even though Interior Minister Alfonso Ferrufino had made statements that he would follow a policy of caution when it came to controlling the protests. The police stormed university grounds late April 22 to put down the student demonstrators, leaving at least five injured.

Reporters said the police used plastic bullets and tear gas to attack protestors as the demonstrations grew. The students were demanding a US$18 million increase in the university budget, compared to the government offer of a US$1.7 million increase. But that demand appears to be the one with the least popular support in Bolivia, where the minimum salary stands at US$50 dollars a month, and the fiscal deficit amounted to US$450 million dollars last year.

Tens of thousands of street vendors and taxi, bus, and truck drivers also took to the streets to square off against police. The trade unions of vendors and transport drivers came together to defend the current tax regime, which exempts small businesses.

The owners of public transport vehicles were also protesting the policy on gasoline prices, which have risen along with the international cost of oil. Miners used the threat of blowing themselves up to get monthly pension payments of US$60.

Former mineworkers Julio Saravia Oporto, 55, Francisco Franco, 54, and the widow of another worker, Ana Bazagoitia, 58, occupied the offices of the Federacion Sindical de Trabajadores Mineros de Bolivia (FSTMB) on April 24 and said they would follow the example of Ernesto Picachuri, a
miner who blew himself up in the Congress building earlier this year (see NotiSur, 2004-04-16). They had dynamite strapped to their bodies and were connected by a fuse. For 20 hours, the three sat calmly with the detonators in their hands. The police set up a 100-meter perimeter around the union offices and kept their distance on the central Avenida Prado.

The standoff ended after negotiations between unionists and the government resulted in an agreement to provide a lifetime monthly pension of US$60 to all former workers who could not retire when reforms of the retirement system raised the age at which they could receive pensions.

Some 8,700 workers lost their pensions during a wave of privatizations in the past decade, when the age that workers could retire was raised from 55 to 65. The US$60 amount is less than the US$101 disability pension that Saravia Oporto received monthly beginning in 1991 after a car accident. The check his only source of income was halted in 2001 without warning or explanation.

With the dynamite in hand, "We felt the power and we remembered the strength of the miners who resisted the most ferocious dictatorships" that Bolivia has endured, said a wheelchair-bound Saravia Oporto in a conversation with Inter Press Service.

Dozens of miners later attacked the La Paz offices of the state Corporacion Minera de Bolivia (COMIBOL) with at least three dynamite cartridges in the first week of June. The explosions damaged windows, equipment, and some structures at the COMIBOL headquarters, but caused no deaths or injuries, said police. Miners complained that the government had not helped them regain the positions they lost at the Caracoles mine some 250 km south of La Paz, positions subsequently occupied by replacement mineworkers.

**General strike fails to materialize**

Though major labor groups like the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB) and Aymara Indian groups backed protests in the first week of May, they failed to reach the level of a general strike. Organizers had hoped to paralyze the capital and block the two major highways leading to it, but only managed to march through downtown La Paz and divert traffic there.

President Carlos Mesa declared May 3 a holiday to diminish the strike's potential impact, although the stated reason was that doing so compensated for Labor Day (May 1) falling on a Saturday.

"The public's response has been a clear rejection," Foreign Minister Juan Ignacio Siles told reporters. "A strike only creates uncertainty and a lack of confidence in the country's future. People want to work in peace and tranquility. The extremists don't have much support."

Analysts said the opposition forces enjoyed far less support during this spring's demonstrations than they did during the demonstrations that toppled President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (1993-1997, 2002-2003) in October 2003. Two killed in highway blockade clash Yet highway blockades cut off the main route between Bolivia and Peru for three weeks in June.
Aymara campesinos blocked the route, which runs along the southern side of Lake Titicaca near Guaqui, 91 km east of La Paz, with rocks starting in late May. Authorities were unable to reopen the road until a government mission forged an agreement with indigenous leaders. The agreement set an agenda for dialogue on matters of land, agrarian development, medical insurance, improvement of education, highway repairs, as well as on indemnification payments for campesinos who were injured and truck drivers who suffered damages during the blockade.

Confirming the end of the blockade, the executive secretary of the Federacion Sindical de Trabajadores Campesinos Tupac Katari, Rufo Calle, said the group additionally wanted to discuss "the large themes like hydrocarbons and the immunity for US soldiers." The US has pressured countries, including Bolivia, to grant immunity to US soldiers for prosecution for human rights violations (see NotiSur, 2003-07-11).

On June 2, Army soldiers fought campesinos blocking a highway in eastern Bolivia in a clash that killed one soldier and one civilian, authorities reported. Deputy Interior Minister Saul Lara said the dead were an army lieutenant and a campesino. He said five civilians, seven other soldiers, and five police officers were wounded in the fighting on the road between the towns of Quiquibey and Yucumo in the Amazon department of Beni, about 500 km northeast of La Paz.

Scores of campesinos had blocked the road for several days protesting the government's refusal to build a gas pipeline to provide energy to the region. Government officials say the pipeline does not make economic sense because of the small size of the regional market.

Mayor lynched in Ayo Ayo A group of political opponents lynched and incinerated Mayor Benjamin Altamirano on the main square of the highlands community of Ayo Ayo, 81 km southwest of La Paz on June 14. A mob attacked the mayor, whom the federal government had previously cleared of charges of corruption, with poles and stones, tying him to an electric post on the town's main square and setting him on fire, according to reports of the attack.

The 45-year-old mayor of the Aymara community, whose 7,000 indigenous inhabitants are scattered in 11 hamlets, had called for protection from the government for two months prior to his killing. He had governed since January 2001 and had been accused of embezzling some US$631,000, but the courts dismissed the charges and ordered him reinstated as mayor, after he had been suspended from his post during legal proceedings.

At the foot of the post where police recovered his burnt and tortured body, a sign read, "This death is the result of the negligence of the Public Ministry [the Public Prosecutor's Office] and the Finance Ministry." The lynching triggered an outcry from Bolivia's political leaders and government officials. "What happened [in Ayo Ayo] goes against the natural order," said Carlos Alarcon, deputy justice minister. "These are crimes that must be punished."

A town councilor was expected to be charged in connection with the murder, and police were hunting further suspects. Interior Minister Ferrufino said in a report he gave on the lynching to a parliamentary commission, "The Bolivian state lost control in many parts of the territory of
the republic several years ago....The police, with the officers it counts among its forces, may be absolutely insufficient to offer security to all the municipalities of the country."

Reports after the lynching said Ayo Ayo had become even more isolated and ungovernable following the riot. The death of Altamirano mirrors the mob killing of a Peruvian mayor in the town of Ilave near the Bolivian border in April of this year (see NotiSur, 2004-05-07).

Peru's Interior Minister Fernando Rospigliosi was forced to resign after the Congress censured him for failing to respond adequately to requests for protection from the mayor, who had also been accused of corruption. Another commonality is the ethnic makeup of Ilave and Ayo Ayo, which both consist of Aymaran indigenous, the most populous native group in the region.

Critics of the lynchings have described them as "distortions" of traditional Aymaran justice, by which a public official considered inept or corrupt may be humiliated by being paraded around on a donkey or by a public whipping.

International anxiety for democratic stability

Several observers have expressed grave concerns for Bolivia's ability to maintain its democracy in the current context. A June report by the Center for Global Development (CGD), a Washington, DC, think tank, says Bolivia is one of the dozens of "weak" and "failed" states around the world alongside Afghanistan, Haiti, Somalia, Zimbabwe, and Indonesia that are on the verge of collapse and require urgent US attention. Bolivia is virtually bankrupt and depends on handouts from foreign governments to pay its bills.

Popular opposition to different gas-export plans, according to many analysts, has prevented the country from using its gas reserves to alleviate its fiscal woes. The country will soon be voting on President Mesa's hydrocarbons referendum, scheduled for July 18. The referendum will seek to gradually raise the royalties that transnational companies pay on natural-gas exports from the current rate of 18% to as much as 50%. Bolivia has the second-largest gas reserves in South America, after Venezuela.

The hydrocarbons vote promises to be a crucial test of Mesa's credibility with Bolivians, especially since he has gone through three hydrocarbons ministers since coming to office in October 2003 (see NotiSur 2004-03-26). Reports state that Mesa enjoys strong popularity in opinion polls, even though he does not have allies in Congress. He has called on the population to help him confront "radical minorities...with dialogue and without bullets."

Rumors of plans for a military coup d'état have also been circulating, with warnings coming from human rights groups and the Roman Catholic Church. Tensions arose over a legal ruling overturning the acquittal of four soldiers in the shooting deaths of two civilians during street protests in February 2003. After the Constitutional Court overturned a decision by military justice finding the soldiers not guilty, top military brass ordered troops to remain in their barracks and visited President Mesa in campaign uniforms to protest the decision.
Benjamin Miguel, the constitutionalist lawyer pressing the soldiers' prosecution, said, "It's wrong for them to dress in campaign uniform, that just alarms and threatens public opinion. And the troops should not be made to remain in the barracks." The unease in the military has created a touchy institutional environment, coming on top of coup rumors, political analyst Maria Teresa Zegada commented. The attitude of the armed forces "is a threat to the democratic system. The tension between the government and the military could heighten the risk of a rupture of the institutional order," she said.

On April 22, the US Embassy in La Paz was forced to deny that John Taylor, US Treasury undersecretary for international affairs, had suggested that Mesa cut his term short and call early elections before year-end.

A Peruvian daily, La Republica, printed a supposed dialogue between Mesa and Taylor, who were both in Buenos Aires that week. Gary Fuller, press information officer for the US Embassy in La Paz, told a local radio station that his country "firmly supports the constitutional and democratic process" and the Mesa administration "to the end of its tenure in August 2007."

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