President Mesa Rearranges Cabinet

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by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Bolivia

Published: 2005-02-11

Mounting political pressure led Bolivian President Carlos Mesa to rearrange his Cabinet in early February, raising hopes in some political sectors that his presidency will survive the current political crisis. Protests against government-mandated price hikes for fuel oil combined with a building autonomist movement in the eastern part of the country has put the administration in its most precarious state since Mesa took office in 2003 (see NotiSur, 2005-01-28).

Seven of 15 posts remain the same

In a Feb. 3 Cabinet reshuffle, Mesa accepted resignations from all 15 of his ministers and reappointed seven of them. He kept key leaders in his Foreign Affairs, Interior, Defense, and Treasury Ministries, while eight ministries got new chiefs. Mesa announced the Cabinet shuffle in a nationally broadcast address where he also defended his leadership. "The government's balance is a positive one," he said, adding that the convergence of social protests necessitated "a renovating vision."

Mesa ratified, or reappointed, Foreign Affairs Minister Juan Ignacio Siles, Presidency Minister Jose Galindo, Interior Minister Saul Lara, Defense Minister Gonzalo Arredondo, Finance Minister Luis Jemio, Education Minister Maria Soledad Quiroga, and Hydrocarbons Minister Guillermo Torres. The new appointees were Walter Kreiler, in economic development; Audalia Zurita, labor; Victor Barrios, campesino affairs; Erwin Aguilera, sustainable development; Maria Teresa Paz, health; Gloria Ardaya, in popular participation; Rene Gomez, in public works; and Pedro Ticona, in indigenous affairs.

Mesa created a new Cabinet post with the Ministry of Mining and Metallurgy, headed by Jorge Espinoza. Espinoza is a leader of the mining cooperative movement in the Andean region. There are three major tasks facing the "renovated" administration, says Mesa. First is to allow departments to choose their own governors, currently appointed by the president; second, to give way to departmental autonomy, most likely through a popular referendum; and third, to prepare for a Constituent Assembly, which may convene in August, to rewrite the Constitution.

Meanwhile, design and implementation of a new hydrocarbons law that voters told Congress to put together (see NotiSur, 2004-07-30) have bogged down. Bolivian daily El Diario reported Feb. 2 that a Chinese extraction corporation, Shengli Oilfield International Oil Exploit Company, which had promised to invest US$1.5 billion in Bolivia, had threatened to leave the country since the conditions necessary to work had not materialized because of the delay on the hydrocarbons law. The company reversed that statement the next day, however, after meeting with Hydrocarbons Ministry officials.

The upcoming Constituent Assembly has become a major controversy, with various groups calling for the presidential delegate to the assembly, Ricardo Paz, to step down. The Movimiento al
Socialismo (MAS), led by indigenous leader Evo Morales, wants Paz replaced and has been calling on Mesa to fulfill the October Agenda. That agenda includes giving greater control of Bolivian resources to wider portions of the population and movements against privatization of utilities.

Santa Cruz groups are seeking greater representation in the assembly. The wealthiest of Bolivia's departments, Santa Cruz has been pushing hardest in the autonomy movement. How long can he last? Mesa, a historian and journalist turned politician, has held a shaky grip on power since taking office 15 months ago, after street protests led by indigenous and students groups toppled his predecessor, Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (1993-1997, 2002-2003), known by the nickname Goni.

Dozens died and hundreds were wounded in the October 2003 clashes with police and the armed forces. In contrast to the bloody and repressive tactics that Sanchez de Lozada's security forces used on the protestors of Black October (see NotiSur, 2004-10-29), Mesa has decided on threats of political hara-kiri as his method of self-defense. Mesa has said he will resign if social unrest continues to hamper his governing ability. With few modern Bolivian presidents having reached the end of their allotted terms, the central question on Mesa's fate may not be whether he gets to step down peacefully in 2007, but how much longer he can hold on.

The longest period of continuous rule in Bolivia was the seven-year dictatorship of Hugo Banzer (1971-1978). Political allies say the new Cabinet will strengthen Mesa's rule, although conservative analysts criticize him for yielding too much to social-protest movements.

Autonomists in Santa Cruz have been criticized for committing "sedition" by left-wing critics like Luis A. Gomez of the NarcoNews bulletin, who calls the movement one of wealthy whites who want to maintain an inequitable distribution of land, wealth, and resources. The armed forces have made statements affirming that they would remain centralized and unified even if autonomist reforms passed.

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