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Bolivian Congress Rejects Presidents Resignation

by LADB Staff
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Bolivian President Carlos Mesa gained an unprecedented victory in Congress by handing in a resignation that the body unanimously rejected two days after he delivered it. Whether his gambit to hold on to power by threatening to step away from it would overcome a series of road blockades that have paralyzed the country for weeks was not immediately clear. Indigenous groups continued to block highways even after protestors took to the streets to support Mesa and Congress refused his resignation. Mesa says protests make Bolivia ungovernable Mesa's resignation surprised many, although he had promised earlier to do so if the national paralysis continued.

Since January, protestors seeking a massive increase in the taxes charged to corporations extracting natural gas, an end to privatized delivery of potable water, and a Constituent Assembly to rewrite the Constitution have frozen Bolivia's urban centers and highways. A mass rejection of increases in diesel prices forced Mesa to retreat and rearrange his Cabinet, while protests by eastern provinces seeking political autonomy from the federal government further weakened him (see NotiSur, 2005-02-11, 2005-01-28).

In an emotional 40-minute televised address on March 7, Mesa announced his intent to resign and addressed opposition leaders by name. In his speech, Mesa singled out Evo Morales, head of the Movimiento A Socialismo (MAS), and Abel Mamani, head of the Federacion de Juntas Vecinales (Fejuve), a group based in El Alto, a city on the outskirts of La Paz and scene of radical protests against privatized water service. He also addressed the autonomists of the eastern departments, saying that they were creating artificial differences between east and west, undermining Bolivian unity (see NotiSur, 2004-11-12).

To businesspeople who criticized him for not doing enough for the economy, he pointed to his efforts to reduce the fiscal deficit from 9% to 5.5% and his work toward negotiating a free trade agreement (FTA) with the US (see NotiSur, 2004-12-17), among other things. "I cannot continue to govern with threats that strangle the country," Mesa wrote, a reference to plans announced by opposition leader Morales to stage a nationwide blockade of roads. He said that the blockades would quickly isolate Bolivia's largest cities, and officials said shortages of food, fuel, and other essential items would be inevitable.

Newspaper photos have shown truckers forced to sell their cargo on the side of the highways where they were stopped, while local news reports have examined the possibility that agriculture would "collapse," if summer crops were unable to reach markets.

"I am not disposed to kill, and I should tell you something very clearly I am not going to use the armed forces or the police to remove blockades. Stay calm, there will be no Bolivian deaths on my back, because I am a man of my word. So feel comfortable and blockade away," Mesa told
opposition forces in his address. Speaking to Morales, he said, "To you, the production of chickens doesn't matter, it doesn't matter to you if you block the production of soy."

If Mesa had stepped down, his successor would likely have been Senate president Hormado Vaca Diez, a figure bitterly opposed by leftist Bolivian movements. Another possibility was that Mesa could have imitated the 1985 move by President Hernan Siles Zuazo (1982-1985), who called elections when he resigned before the end of his term, even though the Constitution did not grant him that authority. Many observers say such elections would favor Morales, who came in a close second to Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (1993-1997, 2002-2003) in the last election.

**Opposition calls resignation blackmail**

Morales called the threat to resign "blackmail" and said that the ascent of Vaca Diez would be unacceptable. "We would never permit that. Vaca Diez answers to the oligarchs of Santa Cruz." Santa Cruz is the center of the pro-autonomy movement. Morales also said the threat of resignation was a message of racial hatred. Morales represents indigenous peoples and coca growers who object to the eradication of the crop.

In recent weeks, he has been looking into setting up MAS organizations in Peru, Chile, and Argentina. When Mesa announced his resignation, MAS and other opposition forces were in the process of mobilizing a protest against a congressional decision in the first week of March to increase tax royalties on gas-extracting companies from 15% to 32%. MAS is demanding a rate of 50% and says that would more accurately reflect the will of voters who passed a referendum on hydrocarbons last year (see NotiSur, 2004-07-30).

Abel Mamani said that his group had not called for Mesa's resignation. "All that El Alto is doing is demanding its right to have access to potable water and basic services. I don't know why the president mentioned me as if I was responsible for his resignation." Fejuve is calling for the removal of the French-owned Aguas de Illimani, which provides water to the city.

In his speech, Mesa challenged Mamani, saying, "Don Abel Mamani, will you pay when Aguas de Illimani sues us for US$50 million?" Mamani said Fejuve would also not accept a Vaca Diez presidency. "I don't think the city of El Alto would accept the rise to power of the political parties who share responsibility for the massacres in El Alto [in October 2003]."

**First strong congressional and street backing for Mesa**

As an independent, Mesa has no party organization to back him, and the resignation threat seemed to mobilize a core of support for the president. Protests against blockades emerged in various sites around the country, and Mesa called on Bolivians to mobilize further against blockades after Congress rejected his resignation. "I have an approval rating in the country that, at a national level, exceeds 60%," boasted Mesa in his televised address. "And it's not for my pretty face."

The night he announced his resignation, thousands came to the Plaza Murillo outside the heavily guarded presidential palace to demonstrate support for Mesa. He appeared on the balcony above
the plaza around midnight bearing a tricolor Bolivian flag to greet the spontaneous gathering. The resignation threat brought Mesa international backing in addition to mobilizing local support.

Leaders from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Paraguay, Uruguay, and the US all offered support for his presidency. As Congress members gathered the day after Mesa's announcement, it became clear that the body would overwhelmingly reject his resignation. Various parties began work on a pact for governability, though Evo Morales and indigenous leader Felipe Quispe said they would not sign the pact and would intensify their protests on March 9. The unanimous vote in Congress for Mesa to remain in office was the first time in 16 months that the executive and the legislature had been in agreement.

Mesa and Vaca Diez said they would work "shoulder to shoulder." Indigenous leaders vow to keep up blockades Whether the effects of Mesa's personal passion play last beyond the Easter season is the most important question in Bolivian politics right now. The historian and television-journalist-turned-president offered to give up his presidency to redeem a nation divided by demands for greater autonomy for wealthy and greater investment for the poor. While autonomist protests went silent during the week of Mesa's resignation, many sites of indigenous protest stayed noisy and labor unions vowed to continue their protests against the government. In a show of unity with indigenous groups, union supporters stepped up roadblocks across the country. They disrupted traffic and renewed fears of further instability in South America's poorest nation.

On March 9, angry campesinos burned tires and blocked roads with boulders in the Chapare region of central Bolivia, stalling traffic on one of the country's main highways. The week before Mesa resigned, highway blockades took place on the roads between Cochabamba and Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz and Yacuiba, Sucre and Potosi, Sucre and Ouro, Sucre and Cochabamba, along with protests in El Alto and Yapacani.

**Arrests and anti-blockade demonstrations begin**

Although, in his speech, Mesa said he would not send soldiers or police to clear the roads, March 10 newspaper reports featured images of riot police removing buses blocking a highway in Santa Cruz. The mayor was reported to have deployed the police there, and several drivers were detained. In another departure from Mesa’s resignation address, the government asked authorities to arrest people impeding the free movement of traffic.

President Mesa called on Bolivians to pour onto the streets to show their opposition to the roadblocks and protests. These demonstrations were planned for March 10.

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