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President Carlos Mesa Resigns

by LADB Staff
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The head of Bolivia's Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) Eduardo Rodriguez Veltze has assumed the presidency after President Carlos Mesa resigned following massive street protests that isolated the capital. President Mesa left the presidency after more than a month of protests for the nationalization of the country's massive hydrocarbons reserves and for a Constituent Assembly to rewrite the Constitution had made his government, in his words, "a tragic irony."

Mesa's resignation opened the door for the president of the Senate, Hormando Vaca Diez, to take his post, but Mesa, along with thousands of protestors amassed in the streets as Congress met, asked him not to accept the position.

The next in line was Mario Cossio, head of the House, who also refused the seat under popular pressure. After days of pressure and the killing of a 52-year-old miner, Vaca Diez stepped aside, as did House president Cossio. CSJ Chief Justice Rodriguez took the presidency and said that he would speed up new presidential elections. His main role is transitional, although whoever wins the election, the date of which has not yet been determined, will have to address the demands of the indigenous movement calling for greater domestic control of the nation's natural resources.

**Crisis temporarily averted**

The succession of power from Mesa to Rodriguez calmed protests, at least temporarily, but the root demands of the protest movement are still unfulfilled, and a strong potential for further unrest and crisis remains. Although Rodriguez quickly negotiated a "truce" with social groups that had led the blockades in La Paz and Sucre, protestors took to the streets of La Paz the first day of the week after Rodriguez took power.

Predictions of revolution, civil war, and racial conflict preceded Rodriguez's ascension to power. There were also rumors of a military coup, but the armed forces made public statements that they would protect democracy and seemed to adhere to that discipline. When two lower-ranking army officers, Lt. Cols. Julio Cesar Galindo Mendizabal and Julio Herrera Pedrazas, called on Mesa to resign in a May 25 television news interview, they were quickly removed. Their military records, which included incidents of drunkenness, domestic abuse, and arrests, were given to the press as a step to further distance their stance from the official military line.

2005 has been marked by long blockades and protests, primarily by indigenous groups demanding greater control of Bolivia's vast natural-gas resources and greater involvement in governing Bolivia (see NotiSur, 2005-02-11, 2005-01-28). Cities began running out of food and fuel as highway blockades around the country paralyzed transport routes, especially in La Paz. Many residents began to move around by bicycle instead of car. After the blockade, businesses complained of losses.
in the tens of millions of dollars, while news outlets complained that the protests had undone years of progress toward stabilizing Bolivia's economic conditions.

Newspapers reported incidents of class and racial conflict between protestors and passersby, with crowds in La Paz attacking people dressed in ties and suit jackets, allegedly assaulting those who were perceived as "whites." Violence overtook the streets for days on end as miners and police lobbed dynamite and tear gas at each other. Bolivia's new president pledged on June 10 to call early elections and take other steps to calm a country paralyzed by the weeks of opposition protests that forced his US-backed predecessor to resign.

Tensions relaxed somewhat after Abel Mamani, head of the Federacion de Juntas Vecinales de El Alto (Fejuve) and a key protest leader, declared a truce while he consulted with other leaders on whether to lift more than 70 highway blockades that have isolated major cities across Bolivia. Hoping to quell the fury of tens of thousands of indigenous poor, Rodriguez declared he would work with lawmakers on key reforms to heal growing rifts in South America's poorest nation.

"Bolivia deserves better days," Rodriguez, 49, told lawmakers. "I'm convinced that one of my tasks will be to begin an electoral process to renew and continue building a democratic system that is more just." Under Bolivia's Constitution, Rodriguez must call presidential elections within 180 days.

Evo Morales, a senator and head of the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) party, said early national elections are key to defusing the country's political and social crises. The tension eased after Morales also declared a truce and said he would consult other protest leaders on whether to lift highway blockades. Morales sounded a conciliatory note to Rodriguez even as hard-liners kept up barricades in the poor satellite city of El Alto that adjoins La Paz and was an epicenter of the protests.

"One must understand that he is the new president and he has expressed a commitment to listen to our demands," Morales said. "His election is easing the tensions and we are going to accept a truce."

Some businesses reopened in first signs of normal street life returning to La Paz, a still-crippled city of 1 million people that continued to feel the hurt of gasoline and food shortages along with a transport strike idling most traffic.

In Santa Cruz, eastern Bolivia, campesinos lifted the first highway blockade even as demonstrators still occupied oil installations they seized during the crisis. Rodriguez, who studied public administration at Harvard in the US, is a respected judge who plans to return to the bench after his term. He met his colleagues at the court headquarters in Sucre on June 10 before preparations to head to the Government Palace in La Paz to begin his term.

Rodriguez is expected to quickly open negotiations with political parties on looming elections and key questions such as whether the vice president, lawmakers, and other officials would also be replaced. He also said he would seek to convene a constitutional assembly to discuss providing poor and indigenous groups more say in national politics, examine demands to nationalize Bolivia's oil industry, and study regional aspirations for greater autonomy.
Demonstrators had rejected Vaca Diez and Cossio for the presidency, saying they came from discredited traditional parties that Morales called the "mafia of the oligarchy." Had either accepted the position, he would have been allowed by law to serve out Mesa's term until August 2007.

**Vaca Diez does not step aside until troops kill miner**

The first martyr of the month-long movement was Carlos Coro Mayta, a 52-year-old miner shot by police during a confrontation at a checkpoint in Sucre on June 9. Three other demonstrators were wounded in the shooting. Opposition leaders like Morales said Vaca Diez bore responsibility for Coro's death since he did not decide to step down prior to the shooting. "What's happened in Bolivia is unfortunate," said Morales. "Because of Hormando Vaca Diez, president of the Senate, we've lost the life of a comrade, Carlos Coro. It's unfortunate because, despite everything, the attitude of Hormando Vaca Diez doesn't change."

Legislators, unable to function in the paralyzed capital of La Paz, had moved their deliberations to the traditional capital of Sucre, about 720 km southeast of La Paz, but large-scale protests also met them there.

A "symbolic funeral" in La Paz drew hundreds, possibly thousands, of helmeted mourners for Coro. Carlos Mesa's administration stated that there were no orders to shoot, and he has refused to give such orders, unlike his predecessor, Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (see NotiSur, 2005-03-11).

Vaca Diez, a conservative with the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR), at first did not want to yield the presidency, and analysts like Jim Shultz of the Democracy Center anticipated that he would use the military to crush popular protest. But shortly after Coro's death, the Senate president dourly announced his resignation of the presidential succession under the Constitution and was transported to a military facility. Cossio's resignation allowed Rodriguez to take the reins and engineer a pact between the government and Fejuve.

Protesters began to leave occupied oil fields June 10 and lifted the first roadblocks as the country's new leader moved into the Government Palace. But demonstrators marched in La Paz in a show of strength to make sure the new caretaker president respects pledges to call early elections and consider their demands for an end to widespread inequality and poverty. It was clear from his first day in office that the interim president would have no honeymoon.

As Rodriguez stood in La Paz's Government Palace to receive the presidential sash, firecrackers boomed and thousands of protesters marched only blocks away. Rodriguez promised to study ways to bring together Bolivia's society, polarized between haves and have-nots, between people with more Indian or more European blood, and between long-established ruling elites and powerless poor.

"Let's build the peace together and create a great national-unity accord that will let us confront the great challenges facing our country," said Rodriguez. Protesters clogged La Paz on June 10, but fewer people than had marched in previous days.
Sanet Pardo, one of 1,500 teachers and labor activists on the streets, said the show of strength was a warning to the new president that the opposition wants action. "We are still right here," Pardo said. "We are demanding the nationalization of the oil industry 100%. Until we get an answer we are going to keep marching, because there are no jobs, lots of hunger, and we still don't have answers even with this new clown."

Ex-president Quiroga, Morales potential candidates

Two prominent possible candidates in the upcoming polls are former President Jorge Quiroga Ramirez (2001-2002) and Evo Morales. Quiroga served as interim president between the administration of Hugo Banzer Suarez (see NotiSur, 2001-08-17) and the election of Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (2002-2003). Quiroga, a US-trained engineer of Spanish descent who governed with free-market policies, has not yet said whether he would run.

One poll put him as the front runner, with about 18% of urban respondents saying they would vote for him. He would likely face protests similar to those that drove Sanchez de Lozada and Mesa from power. Morales came in two percentage points behind Sanchez de Lozada in the 2002 polls and has become an international figurehead for opposition politics in Bolivia. Morales is associated with cocalero groups who want to end eradication programs aimed at the traditional coca crop as well as indigenous groups seeking to crack into the mainly white political elite.

Some polls, however, show Morales' popularity in single digits. Many of the more radical groups have repudiated Morales' stance against nationalization of hydrocarbons. Morales had sought a 50% royalty on hydrocarbons, instead of the 32% tax and 18% royalty formula the Congress passed. Royalties are divided equally among departments, while taxes go to the widely mistrusted central government. His failure to embrace the nationalization movement may come back to haunt his electoral aspirations.

Morales had frequently criticized Mesa's free-market policies as not benefiting impoverished Indians and has demanded greater power for the indigenous majority in the government.

Critics have said that his reforms might only isolate Bolivia and cause more harm than good in a country where 64% of the 8.5 million people live below the poverty line. The US made strong efforts to isolate Morales in the last election, and members of former US President Bill Clinton's campaign staff traveled to Bolivia to advise Sanchez de Lozada.

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