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Bolivia: Deadlock In Congress Delays General Election, President Eduardo Rodriguez Reschedules For December 18

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Bolivian President Eduardo Rodriguez has set a new date, Dec. 18, for general elections after an intractable conflict in the Congress forced the nation's top electoral court to postpone them, without setting a new date. By presidential decree, Rodriguez rescheduled elections and ordered a redistribution of the number of congressional seats accorded to various departments. Rodriguez decrees redistribution of legislative seats Bolivian elections set for Dec. 4 came under threat after a court-ordered redistribution of congressional seats, in response to a 2001 census, met heavy resistance in Congress (see NotiSur, 2005-10-14). A month of fruitless debate went by without any success in gaining a consensus among Congress members. Legislators from departments like La Paz, Oruro, and Beni, which stood to lose representatives, would not accept losses, while Santa Cruz and Cochabamba legislators demanded more. Provinces that stood to lose seats wanted the process to wait until the 2011 elections, while Santa Cruz and Cochabamba demanded an immediate adherence to the Tribunal Constitucional (TC) ruling that the seats be made to reflect the 2001 census. The final failure came on Oct. 28 when the Congress could not come to session because of the lack of a quorum, with five regional caucuses from the Chamber of Deputies boycotting the parliamentary session. The Corte Nacional Electoral (CNE), the nation's top electoral authority, then decided Congress had failed to meet conditions necessary to hold a vote and made the indefinite postponement. In the deadlock leading up to the postponement of elections, the press and some politicians increasingly called on President Rodriguez to provide a King Solomon-type solution to the parliamentary seating crisis. He resolved the crisis by giving the wealthy, eastern province of Santa Cruz one seat fewer than it was demanding. The reappportionment increased Santa Cruz's seats by three and Cochabamba gained one seat. La Paz lost two and Potosi and Oruro lost one seat each. The final tally of seats in the Chamber of Deputies was as follows: La Paz went from 31 to 29 Santa Cruz from 22 to 25 Cochabamba from 18 to 19 Potosi from 15 to 14 Chuquisaca from 11 to 11 Oruro from 10 to 9 Tarija from 9 to 9 Beni from 9 to 9 Pando from 5 to 5 The total number of deputies remains at 130. Rodriguez's decree, he said, resolved the dispute "once and for all." He set elections back 2 weeks and allowed parties an extra 48 hours to revise their lists of candidates for all national and regional offices, lists they would submit to the CNE for legal approval. Santa Cruz representatives maintained silence following the decree, but eventually joined the other departments in saying they would respect it. Santa Cruz has been at the heart of business-led efforts to increase autonomy from the central government (see NotiSur, 2004-11-12). Because no presidential candidate is likely to gain the necessary over-50% majority in the first round of elections, the Congress will probably again decide who will win. That made the fight over seats especially intense. The system of determining the presidency has led to frequent power conflicts through decades of Bolivian politics. Representatives from the east will more likely favor a free-trade, pro-business candidate from Poder Democratico y Social (Podemos) or Unidad Nacional (UN), while representatives from the west will more likely vote for a non-white, socialist candidate from the Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS). Congressional deadlock threatens peace The possibility that elections would not go forward threatened what had been a comparatively stable season in
Bolivian politics, with mass protests generally quieting since Rodriguez took the interim presidency in June. Protests in the capital began to increase and the possibility that Rodriguez would resign in January, as mandated in the Constitution, left the possibility of a power vacuum. The transitional president must quit after six months in office and Rodriguez, head of the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), has repeatedly said he would quit after 180 days and return to his post on the court. Leading presidential candidate and MAS head Evo Morales warned that the "people could rise up against the court." Morales, an Aymara coca farmer, accused the court of conspiring with his political rivals to postpone the elections. Opponents criticized his statements as a call for violence. The other leading candidate, Jorge Quiroga, joined the chorus condemning the Congress for its failure to keep Dec. 4 elections on-track. Quiroga, a Texas-educated industrial engineer on the Podemos ticket, called on President Rodriguez to hand out seats by decree. "They need to get airplanes and get the air force to bring the members of Congress here to get an agreement," Quiroga said. "Beyond being damaging for the election, this is damaging for the country, for the people." Prior to the Oct. 28 CNE decision postponing the vote, spontaneously convened protestors shouted, "You're shameless, you're thieves" outside the Congress building after the press reported that some legislators were impeding the seat-redistribution process and elections. The suspicion was that several Congress members sought to retain their seats under the criteria that the Dec. 4 vote would be illegal and that a general ballot should wait until 2007. "Death to the postponing parliament," and "We want elections," cried protest participants. On Oct. 25 the commandant of the Navy, Adm. Jorge Botello, said that there were people who sought power through "violence," and Gen. Marcelo Antezana claimed that there was an "atmosphere of destabilization" that worried members of the armed forces. Bolivia, South America's poorest country, has seen two presidents driven out of office by street protests in the past two years (see NotiSur, 2003-10-24, 2005-06-17). [Sources: BBC News, 10/13/05; El Comercio (Ecuador), 10/13/05, 10/28/05; Associated Press, 10/23/05, 10/28/05; Bloomberg, 11/01/05; El Comercio (Peru), 11/02/05; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 10/17/05, 10/18/05, 10/21/05, 10/24-26/05, 10/31/05, 11/02/05, 11/03/05; El Mercurio (Chile), 10/28/05, 11/03/05; The Miami Herald, 11/02/05, 11/03/05; La Razon (Bolivia), Los Tiempos (Bolivia), Opinion (Bolivia), 10/13/05, 10/17-21/05, 10/24-28/05, 10/31/05, 11/01-04/05, 11/07/05]