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Guest Author

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Bolivia's Constituent Assembly Stalled

by Guest
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[The following article by Martin Garat is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It appeared in the Nov. 16, 2006, edition of Latinamerica Press.]

Disagreements between ruling party and opposition have brought a constitutional overhaul in Bolivia to a standstill. Little, if any progress has been made in the four months since the 255-member Constituent Assembly (Asamblea Constituyente) began talks to rewrite Bolivia's Constitution (see NotiSur, 2006-08-04). Representatives have until next August to present a proposal, which must then be approved through a nationwide referendum. Members of the ruling Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) party, which holds 137 seats in the assembly, have butted heads with the party's chief rival, the right-wing Poder Democratico y Social (Podemos) party, since sessions began Aug. 6. Podemos holds 58 seats in the assembly, while the rest of the seats are split among various political parties.

"The delay in the assembly's work is owed to the MAS' failure to fulfill the law," accuses Oscar Urenda Aguilera, a Podemos deputy, referring to the law that establishes that the new constitution must be approved by two-thirds of the assembly. MAS proposed that the new document be approved by a simple majority, or 50% plus one vote, and that only the final text require a two-thirds approval. This scheme would allow MAS to offer a draft without needing approval from the other 15 political parties represented in the assembly.

On Aug. 31, the MAS imposed a simple majority in a tumultuous session that ended the next day with physical and verbal assaults between ruling party and opposition members. The opposition harshly criticized the decision and was backed by members from eastern Bolivia, where the majority of the country's economic power is concentrated and the right wing has greater power than the MAS.

A country divided

Civic leaders in the eastern departments of Beni, Pando, Santa Cruz, and Tarija called for a general strike for Sept. 8 to protest the MAS' control in the assembly. Social organizations in western Bolivia, a MAS stronghold, mobilized in support of the government. Resolving political conflicts amid popular mobilizations is a relatively new phenomenon, says political analyst Cesar Rojas. "During the 20th century Bolivia lived between the polling stations and rifles, which is to say between democracy and dictatorship. But since 2000, policies are formed between parliament and the streets, with strikes, blockades, and marches. The forces out on the streets condition political negotiations," he says. Since the assembly session that ended with punches thrown, the body's progress has been at a standstill. Instead of dealing with the most conflictive issues, the assembly members have dedicated themselves to approving minor changes and debate regulations. Even if the voting issue can be resolved, the assembly has already suffered a serious setback.
According to Rojas, the root of the conflict is the displacement of wealth and power that is taking place in Bolivia. "The government of Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (1993-1997, 2001-2003) was linked to the high classes and eastern Bolivia. The government of President Evo Morales who took office Jan. 22 is linked to the poor classes in western Bolivia, and he is going to redistribute the economic surpluses from the sale of natural gas from the bottom up," he said.

**Private property**

Podemos deputy Urenda Aguilera says as long as private property is respected, the right is not going to veto MAS' progressive proposals. "We don't oppose the nationalization of natural resources, but we do [oppose the] disregard for private property and the use of the land," he said. Bernabe Paredes, a MAS deputy, said the opposition's fears have arisen because Podemos supporters are the country's big landowners, adding that MAS is not about to propose radical changes in the new Constitution. "It has nothing to do with taking away land but, instead, redistributing what is poorly distributed," he said. "The MAS is going to respect private business in its constitutional proposal, but we have to share the natural resources among everyone."

The right's refusal to discuss land and private-property possession and the debate regarding the simple majority versus two-thirds majority requirement have created an air of mistrust in the Constituent Assembly. Assembly members from various political parties have complained about external interference, from eastern Bolivian civic leaders to social organizations from the western part of the country.

Assembly members ask to be left alone to work in peace, but Rojas says this is a mistake. "The assembly members are representatives of sectors that are in the midst of a strong collision in the country. It's preferable that they resolve their conflicts in the assembly and not in the street, because the alternative to political negotiation is a clash," says Rojas, predicting a long year of strikes, blockades, and marches in Bolivia.

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