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Bolivian Government Attempts to Work Out Deal with Opposition

by LADB Staff
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The government of Bolivian President Evo Morales has been conducting discussions with opposition leaders who say they want greater autonomy from the federal government. Tensions have been high as autonomist leaders including civic groups, regional governors, and opposition-party congressmembers have called for resistance to the Morales government and its proposed constitutional reforms (see NotiSur, 2007-12-14).

The possibility of an agreement between the two sides appeared shaky as Morales celebrated the second anniversary of his rise to the presidency and the country prepared to vote on the proposed new Constitution.

Constitutional divisions
After formally receiving the new draft Constitution in mid-December, Morales told crowds of supporters in La Paz, "The people will never again be marginalized." Some political leaders in Bolivia say the new Constitution is illegal because it was drawn up during an opposition boycott of parliament. "Not all Bolivians have taken part in its drafting," said opposition Deputy Lourdes Millares.

The new Constitution will not go into effect unless it is passed in two referendums. Morales, a socialist elected in December 2005, is Bolivia's first indigenous president. He made rewriting the Constitution a key part of his reform agenda to give the indigenous majority greater political power, but the issue has deepened regional and ethnic divisions in the country.

Morales also wants to put through a land-reform program. Four of Bolivia's governors declared autonomy in December after Morales's allies adopted the draft Constitution. The four departments backing autonomy, Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando, and Tarija, are home to about 35% of the country's 9.5 million people. The provinces include the country's vital natural-gas reserves and are home to important agribusiness.

Morales says the regions that are declaring autonomy are trying to split the country. "We're not going to let anyone divide Bolivia," he told supporters on Dec. 15. Meanwhile in Santa Cruz, a rally was held to mark the autonomy move, which local leaders plan to put to their own referendum. "We're going to celebrate the birth of autonomous regions," said Santa Cruz politician Robert Gutierrez. The region backed a statute on Dec. 13 under which it would keep two-thirds of its tax revenues.

Pro-autonomy supporters object to the new Constitution, which would allow consecutive five-year presidential terms, increase indigenous rights, and redistribute wealth to the poorer highland areas of Bolivia. Reconciliation compromise on draft constitution Divided Bolivia took a tentative step.
toward reconciliation as Morales and the autonomy-seeking opposition governors agreed to seek a compromise.

The two sides agreed Jan. 15 to form a commission to find a solution to their political impasse, but the four governors stopped short of signing a "grand national accord" presented by Morales near midnight at the end of the marathon meeting, preferring to wait and see whether further talks would be fruitful. "There is willingness and tolerance, but it is not enough to resolve the conflicts," said Ruben Costas, governor of Santa Cruz state, who is spearheading the autonomy drive in his home department, a center of anti-Morales opposition. In a sign of progress, the Associated Press reported that both sides had all but forgotten a bitter fight over relocating Bolivia's capital that only months before seemed ready to tear the country apart (see NotiSur, 2007-09-07).

The quiet colonial city of Sucre, where Bolivia was founded in 1825 and where the nation's highest courts meet, has long sought the return of the executive and legislative branches it lost in a brief 1899 civil war to La Paz, now a bustling modern capital. The capital fight became a rallying cry for the political opposition in 2007, and it served as a bargaining chip against Morales' majority in the Constituent Assembly that convened in Sucre. Street protests in favor of the move tied up the assembly for months, with three people killed in rioting there in November and the assembly unable to meet for months.

But the capital question was swept clean off the bargaining table in mid-January when Morales and eight state governors refused to let lobbyists for Sucre's capital enter the room. Morales and opposition governors are now free to do the work Sucre's quixotic capital quest had prevented the assembly from doing last year: resolving the differences regarding the Constitution's most contested points before the document heads to voters. "The only reason that Sucre's demand for the capital had any leverage was because the opposition to Evo decided strategically to use it as a device to blow up the Constituent Assembly process," said Jim Shultz, director of the nonprofit Democracy Center, which monitors Bolivian politics.

**National unity pact drafted**

On Jan. 8, Morales and regional governors agreed to draw up a pact of national unity to prevent the country from splitting apart. Morales and the governors said they wanted to settle their differences regarding the draft constitution and revenues from natural-gas exports.

Provincial governors in the lowland eastern provinces are concerned about how gas revenues are shared with the central government. They also want to see a revised version of the draft constitution. "The people want us to stay together," Morales said after 10 hours of negotiations that ran into the early morning of Jan. 8. "Let's work together to resolve our differences." Gov. Costas said, "We all want peace and unity. What's important is that there's a willingness to dialogue." Morales at two years: reforms "irreversible" Morales defended his first two years in office in a speech to Congress on Jan. 22, saying his government's reforms are irreversible. He said there was room for everyone in what he called his "democratic and cultural revolution," but only if Bolivians were united.

"There's no turning back on the path we started upon two years ago," Morales said in a televised address. But he avoided mentioning the sometimes violent opposition to his reforms. And he
largely ignored the feud with provinces demanding autonomy. In his speech, Morales cited the
nationalization of the energy industry as a key success. The president lauded the setting up of a
Constituent Assembly, even though its draft Constitution was approved by parliament without
the presence of any opposition members. During the speech, which lasted for several hours, the
president also praised advancement in literacy rates and health, while criticizing slow progress in
building houses and roads.

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