4-11-2008

Bolivia's Eastern Provinces Prepare Unauthorized Autonomy Plebiscites

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Authorities in the four eastern departments of Bolivia Beni, Pando, Santa Cruz, and Tarija are moving forward with electoral referendums to call for autonomy from the federal government. President Evo Morales’ administration does not recognize the autonomy referendums as valid, leading to a stalemate between opposition groups backing the anti-federal measures and the Morales administration.

Morales also faced a major setback in March when the Corte Nacional Electoral (CNE) postponed a national referendum to accept the draft Constitution approved by a majority of Bolivia’s Asamblea Constituyente in December (see NotiSur, 2007-12-14). The CNE also decided to postpone autonomy referendums in the nation’s nine departments, but the leaders of the four eastern departments rejected that order, leading to the current political crisis.

Wealthier provinces push vote even after court rejection

The four departments, known as the media luna (half moon) because of the crescent-like shape they form across the Bolivian east, are home to the strongest opposition to the Morales government and the lion’s share of the nation’s economic wealth, particularly natural-gas deposits and agroindustry. A conflict in Santa Cruz regarding control of fees airlines paid the country’s most important airport led to a tug of war in November, with autonomist protestors and federal troops alternately taking control of the facility (see NotiSur, 2007-11-16).

The leaders of the half moon intend to hold the autonomy referendums on May 4. If the referendums pass, they say it would invest ultimate authority in the governors of each department. Different media outlets use various descriptive phrases for the autonomy-seeking opposition groups, among them separatists, autonomists, or civicos (civic groups). One key issue under dispute is the distribution of the Impuesto Directo a los Hidrocarburos (IDH), a major source of governmental revenues, particularly since Morales increased the taxes and royalties on petroleum corporations operating in Bolivia (see NotiSur, 2006-11-17 and 2007-05-18).

The federal government cut the funds that had gone to departmental governments to fund its Renta Dignidad program, a monthly stipend for senior citizens. The departmental governors rejected the move, since it took away one of their key points of power and severely reduced their budgets. In the first week of April, the government offered to partially restore the IDH funds, but the offer was not enough to restart dialogue between the federal government and the separatist leaders.

The half-moon governors pushed their referendums even after a CNE decision in early March that the new draft of the Constitucion Poltica del Estado (CPE) could not go to voters on May 4 and neither could the referendums on autonomy. The CNE, the country’s top electoral authority, said
there was not enough time to prepare for the vote, even though the Asamblea Constituyente had approved the draft early in December. "There are not technical, operative, or legal conditions that would permit [the voting] to be carried out," said CNE president Jose Luis Exeni on March 7. "We cannot do something that, in practice, is impossible to carry out." Morales has attempted to counter departmental leaders by arguing that there should be autonomous regions for 36 indigenous groups in the country.

But the CNE also postponed that effort. BBC correspondent Daniel Schweimler said the decision was probably the worst defeat Morales had suffered in his efforts to reform the Bolivian government since coming to power two years earlier. The Constitution-rewriting process has dragged on slowly ever since Morales failed to win a two-thirds majority in the assembly (see NotiSur, 2006-08-04), permitting the opposition numerous opportunities to slow down reforms sought by Morales' Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS).

Exeni added that the referendum effort failed to meet a constitutional requirement that it be held at least 90 days after being approved by Congress. The draft CPE would grant greater powers, and a bigger share of Bolivia's land and resources, to the country's indigenous groups who make up the majority of the population but have long been marginalized by the country's European-descended elite.

But opponents in the half-moon states say it would unfairly privilege indigenous groups over the rest of the population. Morales has said the new CPE would "guarantee the refounding of Bolivia, a refounding of Bolivia in democracy, that would guarantee the unity of the Bolivian people, the dignity, the equality of Bolivians."

**OAS will not monitor separatist votes**

The half-moon governors defied the CNE decision, calling their referendums and autonomy process "irrevocable," even as Exeni called it "illegal." They launched protest marches, with Santa Cruz Gov. Ruben Costas saying in an April 3 speech, "This May 4, we are going to turn them into dust, this May 4 the true revolution begins. That revolution will essentially have a social doctrine, and we will show them how to make democratic, humanistic socialism." "I don't know whether on May 4 the name of the primary authority of this department will be governor, department president, or simply prefect," said Costas.

On April 2, social groups mobilized to protest the separatist referendums, with civic leaders in the southern cities of Yacuiba and Bermejo in Tarija department opposing. Jose Quelca, civic leader from Yacuiba, said, "We are taking radical measures, blocking the roads and closing the border because the people reject the autonomy statutes that do not recognize the popular vote."

Bermejo leader Jose Yujra said that the departmental leaders were attempting to consolidate dictatorial powers by bringing power to "the fingers of provincial authorities." Minister of the Presidency Juan Ramon Quintana said on April 3, "We should stop the referendum because it is a hard strike on national unity. We should not permit a group of adventurers who want to break the vertebral column of our home territory. All that we have to do under the framework of democracy and the Constitution...is defend national unity."
The Organization of American States (OAS) has refused to send electoral observers to monitor the May 4 vote, said a representative on April 3. Dante Caputo, head of the OAS regional mission in Bolivia, said after meeting with Costas that only the executive power of the nation could convocate and invite OAS observers. "The commission of OAS observers, in electoral materials, can be called for only by the Foreign Relations Ministries of nations, it is the only procedure that sends an observer mission." He added, "We cannot go to a province, to a state, or to a department to observe an election because local authorities ask us to, that goes against the internal norms of the Organization of American States."

 Dialogue stalls
 Mediators could not get the two sides to dialogue in the first days of April. The Conferencia Episcopal Boliviana (CEB) attempted to get the government and the autonomist leaders to compromise, and regional nations including Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela also offered to mediate, but to little avail.

 On April 9, at the 86th assembly of the CEB in Cochabamba, a spokesperson said, "We are very worried about the distancing between regions, social classes, ethnicities, [and] ideological polarization." The assembly said the failure to achieve dialogue could bring "unforeseen consequences of pain and death."

 "Before the situation that is worsening dangerously...the authorities responsible for leading the country should convocate a dialogue to achieve a social pact with ample consensus," said a CEB statement. But ample consensus was nowhere to be found in the half-moon departments. Bolivian newspapers announced that the president of the Comite Civico de Santa Cruz, Branko Marinkovic, and the prefects of Santa Cruz, Beni y Pando Costas, Ernesto Suarez, and Leopoldo Fernandez, respectively

 -- End --