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Voters in Bolivia's Santa Cruz Province Approve Autonomy

by LADB Staff
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Bolivia's President Evo Morales faces significant political challenges after the opposition-controlled department of Santa Cruz voted to claim autonomy from the federal government. The Morales administration did not recognize the May 4 Santa Cruz referendum as legitimate and his supporters boycotted the vote. The results of the vote overwhelmingly favored independent powers for the wealthier, easternmost department where much of the nation's natural-gas reserves and agricultural industry is. In the days following the referendum, Morales agreed to a recall referendum in August on whether he should remain in the presidency.

Provincial governments would negotiate gas treaties

The win for the referendum in Santa Cruz put pressure on Morales, although his backers repeatedly pointed to the "unconstitutionality" of the vote and noted that the country's top electoral court, the Corte Nacional Electoral (CNE), had ordered the postponement of the referendum. Other departments, also ignoring the CNE order, are planning to hold similar votes or are considering holding them (see NotiSur, 2008-04-11).

The referendum in Santa Cruz ostensibly would create a state legislature and state police force and wrest control of the state's massive natural-gas reserves from the national government. Another part of the referendum would allow the state governor to sign international treaties. The ballot also grants the state control of land distribution, effectively threatening to completely stall Morales' plans for land reform in Bolivia (see NotiSur, 2007-01-19).

Heavy flooding in the departments of Beni and Santa Cruz had already forced the government to postpone land reforms last year (see NotiSur, 2007-03-23). Morales accused the landholders of Santa Cruz, a narrow percentage of whom own a vast majority of the department's lands, of sponsoring the referendum to protect their wealth. The powerful business class hopes to shelter vast soy plantations and cattle ranches from Morales' plans to redistribute land to the poor.

The referendum also declared Santa Cruz's population "mostly mestizo (mixed race)" and required schools to teach that Santa Cruz is a "melting pot of Bolivians." This measure rebels against the indigenist-centered cultural and economic policies of the Morales government. The referendum for autonomy goes contrary to one of the more popular planks in Morales' platform: the nationalization of the country's natural-gas resources (see NotiSur, 2006-05-12 and 2006-11-17).

Morales has sought to distribute substantial taxes and royalties on petroleum projects like the Impuesto Directo a los Hidrocarburos (IDH) to the rest of the country, which severely undermines a major basis of departmental governors' economic power. Reports indicate that there is little likelihood that international corporations and governments would negotiate on a state-to-state or department-to-department basis but would continue to deal only with the federal government.
**Strong showing for opposition**

Voters in Santa Cruz received ballots asking them to answer "yes" or "no" to the following question: Do you support the ratification and implementation of the Autonomy Statute of Santa Cruz, approved on Dec. 15, 2007, by the provisional autonomy assembly, so that it immediately becomes the law of the land for all those who live in and who carry out public functions in the province?

Exit polls in Santa Cruz showed the referendum winning with about 85% support, Bolivian television channels reported. The push for autonomy drew broad support in Santa Cruz, which has been an opposition stronghold since Morales took office in January 2006, promising to nationalize the country's energy industry, divert more natural-gas taxes to central government coffers, and break up large landholdings, most of which belong to Santa Cruz farmers. "It looks like the political opposition in Bolivia is going to have a strong showing," Erasto Almeida, a political analyst at the Eurasia Group in New York, said before voting began. "We'll probably see tensions picking up in the next few months, but I don't think things will degenerate into widespread violence."

Morales, the country's first indigenous president, argues that he needs a strong central government to spread Santa Cruz's wealth to the rest of Bolivia, South America's poorest country. Santa Cruz residents drove through the streets the night of May 4 honking and cheering in celebration, and local leaders declared that voters had embraced the autonomy cause.

Santa Cruz Gov. Ruben Costas told supporters gathered under the palm trees in the central plaza of the state's capital that they had "begun the most transcendental reform in national memory." It is not clear how "autonomy" would alter Bolivia's heavily centralized government, which until 2005 allowed presidents to name political cronies as governors of Bolivia's nine states.

Santa Cruz leaders insist they have no intention of seceding a move that would find little support on a continent packed with Morales' leftist allies. The Organization of American States (OAS) warned in April that the vote could provoke violence. The Washington-based organization held an extraordinary session on Bolivia May 2.

Former Cuban President Fidel Castro wrote May 1 that Bolivia may "suffer dramatic events" because of the referendum, which he said was backed by "oligarchs." Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, an ally of Morales, called the vote "a blow to the heart of South America," during his weekly television show.

Resistance to Morales has spread to four of the country's other eight departments, including the gas-rich region of Tarija, on the border with Argentina. Leaders in Tarija, Beni, Pando, and Cochabamba are also considering autonomy votes.

The autonomist departments are known as the Media Luna or half-moon because of the crescent shape they form. Bolivia's CNE said that it was the only agency authorized to oversee elections and that it would not be involved in the vote.
Finance Minister Luis Arce froze bank accounts belonging to the department on April 24, saying the government had not received required reports on the region's budget, the newspaper La Razon said. "I view this as a poll or a survey, not a binding referendum," Morales, 48, said in an April 22 interview with Bloomberg Television. "We're not going to recognize the results because they are illegal and unconstitutional." While the government and the separatists had little success in moving negotiations forward, some analysts were sanguine about the possibility of future accords. "In the end, both sides have big incentives to reach a political compromise on autonomy, energy policies and taxes, but it will take some time to get there," Erasto Almeida of Eurasia Group said.

**Morales alleges high absenteeism**

While the autonomy vote passed overwhelmingly, opponents claimed that absenteeism undermined the mandate of the movement to loosen ties with the central government. Whatever the turnout, the politically charged election appeared to have boosted the bargaining power of the autonomy leaders. Morales quickly invited state governors for negotiations following the balloting.

Early partial returns, along with exit polls by pro-autonomy news media, showed the Santa Cruz autonomy referendum passing in a landslide. But vote totals and turnout figures were not immediately available. With little independent monitoring of the vote, both sides had plenty of room to interpret the results in their favor. The OAS did not send monitors since the federal government did not recognize the ballot and the CNE also abstained from taking an oversight role. Morales said the referendum failed, citing media reports indicating that 39% of voters had stayed home. He called for "a true autonomy, for the people, and not just certain groups an autonomy that permits the people to decide their destiny."

The government-run news service Agencia Boliviana de Informacion (ABI) claimed an abstention rate of 40% to 45%, while the main daily newspaper in Santa Cruz, the pro-autonomy El Deber, reported it at 26%. Violent confrontations leave one dead, dozens injured Scattered confrontations between supporters and opponents of Morales took place after voting began the morning of May 4, with at least one person killed and 35 injured, the newswire EFE said. The conflict was centered in the poor Santa Cruz neighborhood of Plan 3000, a bastion of Morales support populated by Indian immigrants from the poorer western highlands. Relatives of a 70-year-old man said he was killed when police fired tear gas to break up one scuffle.

Morales called the measure unconstitutional, noting that the referendum went ahead despite the CNE order to postpone it. The CNE had also ordered the postponement of a referendum on a new draft for the Constitution passed by Morales' allies in a Constituents Assembly. Morales respected the CNE order to postpone the constitutional referendum.

**Morales accepts recall challenge**

Shortly after the triumph of the Santa Cruz referendum, Morales agreed to hold a vote of confidence in his rule later this year. Morales, who has more than two years to serve as president, agreed on May 9 to hold the referendum after the opposition-run upper house of Congress backed it. The Senate has repeatedly challenged his government.
Citizens will vote within 90 days on whether he, his vice president, and nine governors should stay in office. On May 12 he signed a recall-vote bill, meaning the vote would be held on Aug. 10. "Personally I have no fear of the people," Morales said. "Let the people judge us." The terms of President Morales and Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera expire in January 2011. They could be forced out sooner, however, if more than 53.74% of voters their margin of support in the December 2005 election reject them. In that case, a new general election would be held.

Governors of nine regions, including opposition politicians, would be subjected to the same test. The referendum on confidence was raised by President Morales in December. He proposed the recall vote amid a fierce battle over his proposed draft constitution that would increase the political power of Bolivia's long-oppressed indigenous majority (see NotiSur, 2007-12-14). Bolivia's lower house approved it but the idea went nowhere until the week of the Santa Cruz referendum, when it was suddenly revived by the opposition-controlled Senate.

The success of the anti-presidential poll in Santa Cruz has encouraged opposition hopes of defeating Morales. The referendum's rules tilt in Morales' favor, according to international press outlets. Morales' opponents, according to Associated Press writer Dan Keane, rushed the recall referendum through without considering the fine print, which clearly gives Morales the upper hand. The referendum requires removal from office if the officials get more "no" votes than the votes they won when they were elected in 2005. The percentage of "no" votes also must top the candidates' previous winning percentage.

Morales won the presidency with a solid majority of the vote, a historic mandate in a country where presidents sometimes take office with half as much support. The Bolivian presidency has traditionally been a high-turnover position, with few leaders finishing their elected mandate. Instability in South America's poorest nation frequently leads to political turmoil, protests, blockades, and has regularly overwhelmed successive governments.

Morales apparently hopes to beat that trend with the recall referendum. If 54% vote against him in August and the "no" votes top the 1.5 million ballots he won in 2005 he'll be forced to call for a new presidential election. If either "no" count falls short for example, if 1.6 million Bolivians vote against Morales but turnout is high enough to keep their votes below 53.7% he'll remain in office.

Bolivia's governors, however, all won office with less than 50% of the vote setting a much lower bar for their "no" votes. The opposition governor of La Paz state, Jose Luis Paredes, won the pro-Morales stronghold with only 38% in 2005. If 39% of the state votes against him in the recall, he will be removed from office even if 61% vote to keep him. "It makes an unfair difference, and I'm the most affected," Paredes said. "But I also think it's a good way out of this impasse we find ourselves in. If I lose, I'm going home and President Morales will just have to choose a new governor."

Should Morales lose, he must call a new presidential election to be held between three and six months from now. But any governor who loses will be immediately removed from office, with Morales naming an interim replacement until new state elections.
The language of the referendum does not prohibit Morales or the governors from running again if recalled. While his opposition is gaining steam in the country's eastern flatlands, Morales is wagering that a recall will help his Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) pick off a governorship or two in the rest of the country with La Paz a chief target.

"It's great Bolivian chess," said Jim Shultz, director of the nonprofit Democracy Center, which monitors Bolivian politics. "I'm assuming they've played through all the moves, and it's not a bad board for Evo Morales. Not a bad board at all." A 2004 recall referendum in Venezuela left President Chavez in a much stronger position when a record number of voters handed him a double-digit victory (see NotiSur, 2004-08-20 and 2004-11-19).

But Chavez also had more of his ducks in a row in 2004 than Morales has: he had completed constitutional reforms in earlier years, and he held major strength in the Asamblea Legislativa (AL). While Morales' strength is nowhere near as consolidated as Chavez's was when the Venezuelan opposition took him on, he is still relatively popular.

Opinion polling by Mexican research firm Mitofsky showed Morales popularity at 56%. In economic terms, increasing commodity prices also help buoy most South American governments now in power, although rising inflation has led to popular dissatisfaction in a number of sectors.

In Morales' case, higher gas prices have helped advance the Bolivian economy somewhat. On May 1, Bolivia's national Labor Day holiday, Morales decreed the government was taking majority control of four energy companies and the country's biggest telecommunications provider. The government said it would pay US$43.1 million for the energy companies after two years of negotiations failed.

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