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Three More Bolivian Provinces Vote for Autonomy

by LADB Staff

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Large majorities of voters in three of Bolivia's nine departments cast ballots in favor of greater autonomy from the central government in June. The votes in Beni, Pando, and Tarija complemented the May 4 vote in the department of Santa Cruz, whose voters also approved an autonomy referendum amid a ruling-party boycott (see NotiSur, 2008-05-16). In the three votes, like in the May vote in Santa Cruz, an overwhelming majority opted in favor of autonomy, but there were also significant levels of abstention.

The federal government does not recognize the votes as legitimate and calls them separatist efforts to undermine reforms by the government of President Evo Morales. The eastern departments, generally wealthier and whiter than the parts of the country where Morales draws much of his support, are known as the half-moon, given their crescent shape.

As the areas with the lion's share of the nation's vast natural-gas reserves and agricultural industry, the half-moon departments and especially Santa Cruz have been at the heart of opposition to the federal government and especially the Morales government. Regional leaders strongly resent efforts by Morales' Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) to reform land holdings and redistribute of natural-gas wealth.

Major portions of the more central departments of Cochabamba and Chuquisaca are also important centers for opposition movements. While the autonomy referendums would take power from the central government, they would concentrate power in the hands of regional governors.

The MAS and other government supporters call the ballots separatist or even secessionist efforts to undermine democratically supported national reforms, and they allege that the US, which is critical of the Morales administration, is funding opposition groups (see NotiSur, 2008-02-29, 2008-04-04).

Scattered clashes on election day in Beni and Pando The Amazonian states of Beni and Pando passed autonomy measures by more than 80% of the voters on June 1, according to preliminary vote counts released the evening of the election.

Government officials had encouraged Morales' supporters to abstain from voting, and pro-Morales groups in the small Pando town of Filadelfia burned voting urns to protest the referendum. Scattered clashes between autonomy backers and pro-Morales groups in the Beni state capital of Trinidad left about eight people injured, according to local media reports.

State leaders hailed the measure as the latest step in a growing decentralization push that opposition groups hope will provide a counterbalance to Morales' populist government. "We ask the country and the world to respect our sovereign will to be autonomous," said Beni Gov. Ernesto Suarez at a victory rally in Trinidad, as autonomy supporters waved the green state flag and danced
through the streets in traditional feathered headdresses. "Tomorrow we can take our own way, our
own direction, our own development."

Rural Beni and Pando states have found common cause in the autonomy movement with their
wealthier neighbor Santa Cruz a hotbed of anti-Morales sentiment where 86% of voters opted
for autonomy. Morales has dismissed all three referendums as illegal "surveys" by conservative
opposition groups hoping to cripple his government. "It's not a problem of autonomy," Morales
said June 1. "The problem is that they can't accept that an Indian from the countryside is their
president."

Nevertheless, the president made a rare trip to Pando's capital of Cobija on May 30 to deliver a new
fleet of ambulances and announce a US$6 million infrastructure project. Morales won a landslide
election in 2005 to become Bolivia's first indigenous president largely by drawing a long-ignored
poor Indian majority into the democratic process, a generation after the country's last dictatorship.

But with Bolivia now bitterly divided on his policies, anti-Morales opposition has coalesced around
a rival version of democracy based on states' rights. Statutes passed in Santa Cruz and on the ballot
in Beni and Pando would protect huge cattle ranches and soy plantations from expropriation under
Morales' land-reform plan (see NotiSur, 2008-06-13). MAS supporters point to these outcomes as
proof that the autonomy movement is a front to support traditional oligarchs.

A little dynamite in Tarija

Natural-gas-rich Tarija became the fourth Bolivian state to vote for autonomy from the government
on June 22. Autonomy backers celebrated in Tarija's capital after pollsters released results showing
the "yes" vote getting about 80% support. "A new Bolivia must be built on a foundation of
autonomy," Gov. Mario Cossio told a crowd of supporters that night. "Centralism has left a bad
legacy we are the second-poorest country on the continent. Autonomy is the new path." Tarija's vote
was carried out with some delays but without major problems.

Supporters of Morales blocked roads to two small towns but failed to disrupt the voting, said Miguel
Angel Guzman, president of the state electoral court, which supports the autonomy measure. Tarija,
in the border region with Argentina and Paraguay 650 km south of the capital La Paz, is home to 85%
of Bolivia's natural-gas reserves, the nation's main export. Tarija and the fellow energy-rich state
of Santa Cruz want more local control over their gas revenues, which Morales' central government
needs to support poorer regions in the west. It remains unclear how the new autonomy measures
would work.

The states have yet to test their self-declared freedoms by withholding gas revenues from Morales'
government. A possible preview came the week of Tarija's vote in Santa Cruz, where national
police arrested two men with a rifle and telescopic sight, saying they planned to assassinate the
president during his visit to the eastern state. But a local Santa Cruz prosecutor allied with the state
government released the men, saying they were only going hunting.

Some officials protested the large number of voters who had been eliminated from the rolls, though
Guzman explained that they had not participated in the last election and therefore were required to
reregister to vote on June 22. A local television station was attacked with dynamite June 21, though officials reported only property damage. Police arrested an Army lieutenant who prosecutors said works for the central government. But Presidential Minister Juan Ramon Quintana denied that the lieutenant belonged to Morales' security team.

Opposition win in Chuquisaca

The opposition to Morales appeared to have gained another toehold in Chuquisaca on June 30, when exit polls showed opposition party member Savina Cuellar had won the election for departmental governor. Polls distributed by several television stations showed Cuellar had won against MAS candidate Walter Valda with support ranging between 55% and 60% while Valda's support stood between 36% and 40%.

Elections were put together after ex-governor David Sanchez of the MAS resigned and fled to Peru last November. His resignation came a few days after the deaths of three people during violence surrounding meetings of the Asamblea Constituyente in Sucre, Chuquisaca (see Notisur, 2007-12-14). Right-wing groups had been protesting for the nation's capital to be moved to Sucre and they clashed with police in efforts to keep the assembly from meeting.

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