

5-8-2009

Bolivian Government Passes Election Law, Foils Assassination Plot

LADB Staff

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

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Bolivian Government Passes Election Law, Foils Assassination Plot." (2009). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/13776>

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.

Bolivian Government Passes Election Law, Foils Assassination Plot

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Bolivia

Published: 2009-05-08

The approval of a law that sets the date and the rules governing future elections again brought the Bolivian government to the edge of confrontation with secessionist sectors of the right, dominant in the eastern part of the country. The crisis was settled thanks to important concessions by President Evo Morales. Nevertheless, two days after the Ley Electoral Transitoria (LET) was promulgated, the country entered a new crisis when the government said it had thwarted plans of an armed commando group in the department of Santa Cruz to assassinate President Morales and other high-ranking government officials.

The government accused the opposition of involvement and said, "These are preparations for a coup." Before, it had said that the opposition's obstacles to LET approval were aimed at "impeding the Dec. 6 presidential elections because [the opposition] knows it will be defeated." The international press and local analysts agree that the right has scant democratic possibilities of taking over. "Morales still hasn't confirmed whether he will run in the December election, but, if he does, there's a high probability that he will be re-elected against a diminished and divided opposition that has no candidate that can counteract the president's popular support," said AP in an April 11 story datelined La Paz.

Five days earlier, on April 6, the same US news agency had agreed with Morales when he said that the opposition "is trying to stop the elections." President makes major concessions to get bill approved. In late March, the Chamber of Deputies had written and passed the LET, a requirement of the new Constitution approved in a plebiscite on Jan. 25.

But in April, the Senate, where the opposition holds a majority, conditioned its vote. It would only approve the measure if the government guaranteed, in advance, to draw up a new voter roll for which it would have to reregister the more than 4 million eligible voters, as well as photographing and fingerprinting each one of them and agree to change two basic points of the proposal: the vote of Bolivians living abroad and the number of parliamentary seats to be held by native peoples.

The government agreed to the concessions. Instead of 2 million Bolivians living abroad being able to vote, it will be only 200,000, with the rest incorporated gradually onto the voter roll. Who they are and how they will be chosen was not spelled out; the Senate only set the numeric limit. Instead of 14 legislative seats designated for indigenous peoples, they will have only 7 seats, although they are the absolute majority of the population.

The new "biometric voter roll" will cost US\$30 million and be paid for with money that had been designated for refurbishing two presidential planes manufactured in the 1960s and past their normal lifespan. A biometric voter role is an electromagnetic register based on voters' fingerprints and

digital photographs. "The government had to concede a lot, but this is a Pyrrhic victory for the opposition because its problems in defeating Morales are not the voter registry, they are the lack of a program, credibility, and leadership," wrote Pablo Stefanoni in the Uruguayan weekly Brecha. Stefanoni is the Bolivian editor of the prestigious *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

While the right will not be able to capitalize on the government concessions, Morales also had to give up basic parts of the bill, such as the right of Bolivians abroad to vote or the guarantee of a minimum legislative representation for indigenous peoples. The latter is a form of positive discrimination favoring the native peoples who have been unable to gain seats in the legislature because they are widely dispersed geographically.

Opposition remains fragmented

The negotiating took place amid marches and countermarches that showed the government's tolerance for the changes demanded by the opposition and the lack of coherence in the right's premises.

"In that difficult and exasperating process, Evo has been criticized by social sectors that back him but are no longer willing to put up with the provocation of the opposition's constant obstructionism, and they oppose the concessions made during the negotiations," said a news dispatch from Servicio de Prensa Alternativa (Serpal). "With the opposition's provocative obstinacy, the government's will that Congress approve the law, and the social bases' impatience, the balance had reached a critical point on the night before the final Senate vote."

During the 11-day crisis, everything was on display in Bolivia. The rightist *Comite Civico* of Santa Cruz called for collecting 500,000 signatures asking for a referendum regarding drawing up a new electoral roll. "The one we have is lousy and contaminated," said Luiz Nunez, *Comite* president. Poor language and lack of coherence characterized the right in those days. They never went out to collect citizens' signatures, but, if they had collected them, it was not clear what voter roll the referendum would deal with.

The Ecuadoran daily *La Razon*, a main opposition voice, reported on April 5 that anti-government hunger strikes had begun throughout the country, that a large national mobilization was underway, and that denunciations had been made against "international agencies." It was never known whether any of these things had really happened or what international agencies were referred to.

In those 11 days, the opposition went from asking for "monitoring" the voter roll to demanding a "new roll." And from accepting the vote of half of Bolivians living abroad to reducing participation to 10%. There was also movement on the other side. In those days, the social organizations that back the government besieged the Congress, demanding a vote on the law.

Deputies from the governing *Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS)* threatened to resign en masse and thus force early legislative elections, something the opposition would not find convenient. And the president and principal labor and campesino leaders pressured the senators, with some activists carrying out a hunger strike that lasted six days, a measure full of symbolism since women miners used the tactic to confront the dictatorship of former President Hugo Banzar (1971-1978, 1997-2001).

Alleged plot to assassinate president leaves questions

On April 14, finally, the Senate approved the law. At dawn on April 15, in Santa Cruz, a bomb exploded at the home of Cardinal Julio Terrazas, head of the Bolivian Catholic Church and an ally of the right. On April 16, also in Santa Cruz, after a bloody special forces operation in which three people died an Irish man, a Hungarian, and a Bolivian who also had Hungarian and Croatian citizenship the government said it had uncovered a plot to, among other things, assassinate Morales and Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera.

Two men were detained who admitted the plan's existence, accepted responsibility for the attack on Terrazas, and said that, to confuse and instill chaos, there was also a plan to attack rightist Santa Cruz Gov. Ruben Costas. Since that day, and after having found arms and an important quantity of a powerful plastic explosive, the government has said that there were other terrorist cells and, without offering any proof, accused Santa Cruz businesspeople of being the instigators and of funding the destabilizing attempt. Costas was the only rightist leader who responded. Although he was on the list of possible victims, he said, "This story of terrorist cells is nothing more than a crude sham, a deplorable show by the government."

On April 22, Hungarian TV finally broadcast an interview with the Bolivian Eduardo Rozsa Flores, who fought in the Balkan wars and also had Hungarian and Croatian citizenship, and was one of the three men killed. The video was recorded in September 2008, before he traveled to Bolivia. Rozsa asked that the interview only be broadcast "in case of a serious eventuality," and said his intention would not be to kill Morales.

But, he confirmed something even worse: having been hired to form an anti-government militia and fight for the independence of Santa Cruz. He said that those who paid for his Bolivian adventure proposed dividing Bolivia and creating an independent country, something that the Santa Cruz leaders had always denied was their intention.

After Garcia Linera backed Costas into a corner and demanded a public rejection of the coup and secessionist plans, the governor said what the government wanted him to say and what the right would never have wanted to say in public: "We are not going to allow any separatist movement or any coup," said Costas on April 25. At the beginning of an electoral campaign leading to the December presidential elections, between a real video and an unconvincing denial, Morales has in his hands the card he needed proof that the Santa Cruz right was participating in seditious acts.

-- End --