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Opposition Unable to Coalesce Ahead of Bolivian Elections

by LADB Staff

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The opposition to Bolivian President Evo Morales was unable to come up with a common program and thus agree on a unified candidate by the constitutional deadline for registering electoral alliances and fronts for the Dec. 6 presidential elections. All polls, and the less-fanatical members of the opposition, agree that the opposition's disputes and fragmentation increase Morales' chance for re-election for a term that will run from 2010-2015. "In my judgment, it is practically unthinkable that a leader capable of putting Morales' continuity in doubt could emerge at this point. His enormous support is so solid that it has made him the most popular political leader in Bolivia, and, I think, electorally unbeatable," former President Carlos Mesa (2003-2005), a member of the opposition, told the Associated Press.

Mesa has already said that he will remain "completely on the sidelines" in these elections. The latest polls give Morales a voter-intention rating that approaches, and in some cases surpasses, 60% of the electorate, while his closest opponent, former vice president Victor Hugo Cardenas, barely captures 18% in a single poll that puts him in the best position among opposition leaders. Cardenas was vice president during the first administration of former neoliberal President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (1993-1997, 2002-2003), who is in exile in the US after being formally charged with responsibility for the deaths of 67 people (see NotiSur, 2008-06-20, 2007-10-26).

Cardenas is an intellectual of Aymara origin, which many political analysts say is essential for anyone trying to electorally unseat Morales, who is also Aymara. The two other opposition leaders who have some political standing are Samuel Doria Medina, a powerful business leader in the cement industry who receives 15% support in voter-preference polls, and Manfred Reyes Villa, a controversial former Army captain and former governor of Cochabamba department who receives about 10% support.

Opposition coalition disintegrates

Until July, the opposition agreed on only one point that the ideal candidate to defeat Morales should be Indian. It had set its sights on Gov. Savina Cuellar of Chuquisaca department. However, the Alianza Comite Interinstitucional (ACI), the political coalition of seven local and national parties that supported her and that she headed, fell apart July 16, the result of a conflict of personal interests among the leaders of the group.

"With occurrences like this we are allowing the government to remain in the hands of Evo Morales, so he and his Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) can begin a new five-year term after which it will be much more difficult to oust him from the presidency democratically," said Rodolfo Rivas, Cuellar's chief of staff and official spokesperson. "We had barely finished saying in a political plenary that Savina's candidacy was locked in when the uproar began and every one went their own way. I am talking about something serious, about a political dismemberment that keeps us from making progress on a minimal agreement."

Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera said that the government was not pleased that serious disagreements had arisen among the opposition, "because the real power hidden behind the 12 potential opposition presidential candidates knows that it cannot and will not defeat Evo, and is therefore looking to sow discontent so it can then say they lost the elections because of fraud. An opposition without a leader or a platform is not serious and can only be happy denouncing a nonexistent fraud that will then allow it to carry out destabilizing actions that can lead to a coup."

Similar sentiments were expressed by campesino leader Fidel Surco, president of the Coordinadora Nacional por el Cambio (CONALCAM). On Aug. 12, a letter-bomb delivered to his home exploded in the hands of his wife, Arminda Colque, who lost several fingers and the sight in one eye and suffered serious damage to one knee. The same day, two police guarding an office building in La Paz were seriously wounded when a package addressed to an executive of an industrial business exploded in their hands.

"The rightist opposition's best program is terrorism," said President Morales. In an increasingly difficult domestic climate, Morales continues governing. He began giving out land provided through the agrarian-reform program passed in a plebiscite in January, and he announced the upcoming nationalization of railroads and electricity companies, among other measures.

Morales has embarked on an active foreign-policy effort that has achieved some significant successes. He reached a detente with neighboring Peru, with whom diplomatic relations had been very tense for some time. He strengthened a friendly dialogue with the Chilean government. (Bolivia's historical disagreement with Chile goes back to the 1879-1884 War of the Pacific that left Bolivia without access to the sea.) Morales reached a tentative agreement with Uruguay that would allow Bolivia to use Uruguay's ports for trade. And, most important, he resumed dialogue with the administration of US President Barack Obama, after expelling the US ambassador in September 2008 (see NotiSur, 2008-09-19).

Foreign Relations Minister David Choquehuanca did not give details of the conversation in Washington in late June, but he did say that, in a new round of talks, "we could concretize a bilateral agreement to end our differences."

Opposition seeks advice from marketers

For many analysts, the opposition has lost its compass. Thus, facing the impossibility of sustaining a useful dialogue among its own multiple voices, it consulted a group of seven marketing experts to determine how to package the electoral campaign and what the profile should be for a candidate capable of opposing Morales with some chance of success.

The first surprise came in response to a question on how to confront the president. Opposition daily La Razon said, "Six of the seven experts consulted warned that [the opposition] should not attack the transformations pushed by Morales because that is, precisely, his greatest political capital." The second surprise came with the candidate profile. All agreed that, rather than a man, the right's representative should be a woman, and better yet an indigenous woman. And they even listed the characteristics that such a candidate should have and not have. "She should not have ties to traditional politicians and political parties; she should not have contacts with big business; she

should say that she is willing to continue the change begun by Morales; and she should not become embroiled in confrontations with the president," wrote La Razon.

Savina Cuellar's failure to emerge as a candidate left no one with those characteristics among the poor and chaotic offerings of the opposition. Despite having everything in his favor, Morales acknowledges that he must be extremely careful in all details. The opposition cannot defeat him, but it owns economic power and the communications media and, in addition, has strong foreign support.

The government's weak spot is the new voter registry being drawn up that will be used for the first time in the December election. It is a difficult task, using a biometric model that reads fingerprints of all ten fingers, a photograph, and the digital signature of the voter. It will register 4.5 million voters and has become the only factor that could invalidate whatever claim of fraud the opposition's ace in the hole. The problem is that construction of this voter registry only began Aug. 1 and must be finished Oct. 15, a deadline difficult to meet.

"If we take into account the rural socioeconomic context, where there is a lack of basic services, electricity, telephones, Internet, human resources trained in managing information-technology systems, few and bad roads, a complicated geography, the concern of those warning of the difficulty in reregistering everyone in a new system is understandable," said a "civil servant authorized by the Bolivian electoral agency," as cited by EFE.

Given the possibility that the biometric voter registry will not be finished, some are calling for a political agreement to preserve the right to vote of residents in rural areas (the great majority Morales supporters). Such an agreement would allow, for this election only, the option of voting under the old system, similar to the system used in countries much richer than Bolivia, such as Argentina, and with far fewer voters, like Uruguay.

While the opposition shows signs of weakness and dispersion in its inability to come up with a common candidate, it has already said that it will not accept the possibility of using, this once, a mixed system, with some voters registered under the old system and others under the biometric model. If an emergency occurs, the opposition will resort to the allegation of fraud to explain away the defeat it will suffer in December and question the legitimacy of the likely new term of Evo Morales

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