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Ultraright Missteps Could Give Bolivian President Morales Re-Election Victory

by LADB Staff

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By the time of the candidate-registration deadline for Bolivia's Dec. 6 presidential election, the political opposition's fate had been sealed. It failed to agree on a consensus platform or on a common candidate. Its leaders' inordinate personal ambitions and unbridled zeal to be top dog led to the definitive loss of any possibility of unseating President Evo Morales through the democratic process.

Morales is the first indigenous president in the South American Andean country's two centuries of eventful institutional life, which includes 150 coups. Although the first voter-intention polls have only recently been released, all signs point to Morales' being re-elected to a second four-year term by a majority that could reach two-thirds of the electorate. In his 2005 election, Morales took 53.7% of the vote (see NotiSur, 2006-01-06), and, in a recall referendum in 2008, 67% of voters supported him (see NotiSur, 2008-08-15).

In January of this year, the new Constitution, which Morales had promoted, was approved by 63% of voters (see NotiSur, 2009-02-13). In addition to choosing a president, legislators, and governors, residents of rural municipalities will vote in December on whether to adopt a new institutional structure, a possibility that arose from the January approval of the new indigenist Constitution, which also changed the name of the legislature from Congreso Nacional to Asamblea Legislativa Plurinacional. Sixty-three percent of Bolivia's population is indigenous.

In its nine departments, the country has 36 indigenous peoples and 327 municipalities governed by national laws but which will become, if they so decide in December, "indigenous autonomies." Their governance will then be based on ancestral practices and customs, which will be written in a specific statute. However, even if they regain their old communitarian laws, those will be subordinate to the Constitution, and the indigenous autonomies will not be independent in essential matters of justice, such as major crimes, treason, or crimes against humanity.

Opposition unable to agree on one platform, candidate

When registration closed on Sept. 7, eight slates of candidates were officially recognized, but the campaign will be dominated by three: the governing Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), headed by Morales and Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera; the ultraright, headed by Manfred Reyes Villa, a former Army captain who served during a de facto government and is accused of crimes against humanity, and his running mate, former Pando governor Leopoldo Fernandez, jailed for alleged responsibility in a massacre of campesinos; and the right, led by Samuel Doria Molina, a powerful cement magnate.

The other five tickets, which together account for less than 10% of voter support, were created specifically to take votes away from the governing party. They include five indigenous or campesino

leaders with little community support who at one time backed Morales in the MAS' early days. The opposition's fragmentation "a real political suicide, fruit of the personal ambitions of a group of leaders short on greatness," as a columnist for opposition daily La Razon wrote means that the election will come down to a contest between MAS and a precarious alliance between Reyes Villa and Fernandez, which at present has the support of less than 11% of voters. Doria Molina, like Reyes Villa, knows that the most he can hope for is to win a minimal parliamentary representation with little influence on the country's future.

Morales and Garcia Linera had picked up their ample majority even before the electoral campaign began. Their popularity is based on their record since taking office in 2005 a program with strong social and national content that supports a more equitable distribution of wealth and the nationalization of basic sectors of the economy.

Reyes Villa and Fernandez started at a disadvantage and must overcome a very negative image. Reyes Villa is a 1976 graduate of the Pentagon's infamous School of the Americas (SOA), now renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) and often called the School of Assassins in Latin America because of the large number of alumni who went on to become dictators in countries that include Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Panama, and Uruguay. Reyes Villa was in the intelligence service during the last year of the dictatorship of Gen. Hugo Banzer (1971-1978) and in 2005 was elected governor of the department of Cochabamba, but he was later voted out of office in the same 2008 recall referendum in which Morales' tenure was ratified.

Fernandez was governor of Pando until September 2008, when he was jailed along with 77 others as part of an investigation into the killing of 13 campesinos who were demonstrating in support of Morales. A mission of the Union de Naciones Sudamericanas (UNASUR) concluded that Fernandez was responsible for creating and arming the civilian commandos who carried out the killings.

Far right makes major blunders

The opposition had Morales on the ropes during much of 2008. In the five richest departments, all in the eastern part of the country, an autonomy movement began that included separatist threats, which led to a government stability and institutionality crisis (see NotiSur, 2008-04-11). But, less than three months after the recall referendum, the outlook had changed significantly, and a Morales-Garcia Linera victory is now considered a safe bet.

"With a deep feeling of impending defeat," wrote Pablo Stefanoni, director of the Bolivian edition of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, "and in the midst of an acute internecine struggle, the opposition tried to put together an alliance, or at least two or three fronts, more in an attempt to reduce the damage than as an effective strategy for fighting for power." But they failed.

How did an opposition that a year ago could afford to declare de facto autonomy, block Morales from landing at airstrips in the eastern "autonomous" departments, occupy and close government public offices, and shoot at campesinos arrive at this agonizing state, the columnist asked. The answer seems simple, say other analysts.

The right miscalculated the correlation of forces following the recall referendum. What, on the night of the vote, could naively be interpreted as a stalemate (the tenure of both Morales and the eastern governors, with the exception of Reyes Villa, had been ratified) could no longer be seen as such a few hours later following a careful reading of the referendum numbers. In the final vote tally, the president had not only surpassed the symbolic magic barrier of two-thirds (nationally, he took 67%), but he had also increased his support in the separatist bastions, winning in two of the five pro-autonomy departments and reaching 40% in the other three. This is what the opposition did not understand.

Numerically there was no stalemate and ideologically there was no confrontation, because the rightists in the eastern departments only knew how to oppose the administration's social and national platform with violence. Taking over and ransacking public institutions, planting bombs at electric plants and oil refineries, persecuting and assassinating Morales' followers, closing airports and blockading police stations.

"Their arrogance caused them to commit irreparable mistakes," wrote the La Razon columnist. Stefanoni ends his assessment on a somber note. The final straw, he says, was an escapade in which the ultraright involved the rest of the right and the elite of Santa Cruz de la Sierra (the flagship separatist department) in hiring Bolivian-Hungarian adventurer Eduardo Rozsa Flores to set up "resistance commandos" (see NotiSur, 2009-05-08).

Despite the attempt's bizarreness the Le Monde columnist said that Rozsa Flores posted terrorist-commando-training photos on his Facebook page the incident served to legitimize government repression, to confirm the existence of destabilizing and subversive sectors, and, most importantly, to give the government conclusive evidence for its accusations.

Despite that string of mistakes, the opposition still had a card to play to discredit the December elections and try to invalidate a sure Morales victory. In those squandered glory days, the opposition majority in the Senate passed a measure requiring the government to create a new voter-registration roll biometric, expensive, and difficult to pull off in the four-months allotted in a poor country with scarce resources.

Although all elections since Morales took office have been monitored by international observers who certified their transparency, the opposition claimed the voter roll lent itself to a "new fraud."

The government, however, achieved the impossible. The biometric roll, with its photos, its fingerprints, and its digitalized signatures, had registered almost 100% of eligible voters as of Sept. 30, two weeks before the completion deadline. The opposition hoped for a fiasco in the voter-registration process and, with it, an argument to justify efforts to delegitimize the expected governing-party victory and begin a new terrorist round like that which failed last April, when Rozsa Flores died in a hail of bullets, left to his fate and surrounded by useless bombs and munitions, in a confrontation with the police.

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