Bolivia: Local Elections Bring Surprises, Opposition From Left

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Bolivia is in a strange situation. As the government and the opposition see it, both have a reason to celebrate the results of the April 4 departmental and municipal elections. After President Evo Morales' overwhelming re-election victory (64.2%) last December (see NotiSur, 2009-12-18), everything indicated and analysts, political commentators, and polls concurred that the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) would again sweep to victory. That did not happen. While the governing party won the governorship in six of the nine departments (up from three in the 2005 elections), it lost in most cities, including La Paz, the capital and an impregnable MAS bastion until April 4. Despite the disappointing results, and despite the schism within the party that led to its defeat in the capital and the birth of a moderate-left party, the Movimiento sin Miedo (MSM), the government can celebrate. And, paradoxically, the old rightist opposition can also celebrate because, with the presidential election as backdrop, it was prepared for a MAS gale that would shake it to its foundations throughout the country, and it nevertheless held its own. The need to get along and, above all, the certainty that there were no great winners despite all the celebrating, made both sides initially give measured reactions. "Perhaps, everyone seems willing to embark on a civilized coexistence," said a radio commentator sarcastically. Breakthrough in relations between government, opposition It is clear that, following the elections, both the president and his staunchest detractors the three rightist, secessionist governors of the rich eastern departments exchanged proposals to begin to work together. Despite having all the economic power in the country the best lands, gas, iron, such industry as exists, and oil leaders of the eastern departments know that there is neither a unified opposition in Bolivia nor the possibility that all opposition sectors will join forces. "Even before April 4 it was clear that the opposition in Bolivia was a conglomeration of voices, there was no single, binding force but rather a number of opponents incapable of coordinating actions or submitting to a unified leadership," said political analyst Roger Tuero in statements quoted by Radio Nederland. "In Bolivia there is no political opposition, there are many regional oppositions." This phenomenon of a scattered opposition had sharpened in the weeks prior to the April 4 elections. Convinced that MAS candidates would win handily throughout the country, in a repeat of the December presidential elections, many front-line leaders who were under judicial investigation opted to illegally leave the country, seeking political asylum or a safe place to hide. At the same time, the business class that had waged economic war against the government chose to reach an understanding through dialogue and, two weeks before the elections, its principal leaders met with Morales. After five years without meeting face to face, on March 23 leaders of the Confederacion de Empresarios Privados de Bolivia (CEPB) entered the government palace and, after more than two hours with Morales, left "happy to have broken the ice and opened the doors to a new stage of working together that will benefit everyone," in the words of CEPB president Daniel Sanchez Soliz. He added, "We will soon be ready to invest US$1 billion and create at least 50,000 new jobs in the next five years." Before giving any details regarding the investments, the CEPB asked for special treatment "certain perks" it said, in tax and energy matters and in infrastructure construction, especially roads. All analyses agreed that the meeting was significant. Suffice it to
note that in 2008 Morales had accused the eastern-department opposition of having declared "political war" and the business class of waging "economic warfare" to weaken and topple his government. Advances on plurinational goals, anti-corruption The pre-electoral context brought other noteworthy endeavors. With the premise that the armed forces must change its philosophy and that "the enemies of the country are the separatists and imperialists," the government decided that, beginning with the March 24 celebration of the Día del Mar, the three branches of the military and the police would incorporate into their events and their uniforms the motto "patria o muerte, venceremos" (country or death, we shall overcome) and the whipala, the flag of multicolored squares of the native peoples. It was another step toward consolidating a plurinational state, a constitutional concept rejected by rightist sectors in the eastern departments. In addition, an anti-corruption law that calls for investigating the source of fortunes was enacted, eliminating the statute of limitation for economic crimes against the state. Vice President Alvaro García Linera said, "The new law will put in jail every individual and any public official who dares to touch even one cent belonging to the state." Morales cited government estimates that corruption costs Bolivia between US$200 million and US$300 million a year. To illustrate the extent of the problem, the president said that "some families, ex-ministers, and former high-ranking authorities are desperately transferring their assets to other people to erase the evidence. Families are even leaving Bolivia." The president asked for international help in the matter, saying, "Neighboring countries, presidents, governments, international agencies, you cannot protect, hide, or defend any corrupt person." A more balanced political panorama For most analysts who are not committed to the government but very critical of the rightist opposition, the April 4 election had two especially noteworthy by-products. First, a leftist opposition, the MSM, has emerged and with it a new political figure, Juan del Granado, mayor of La Paz, who was able to get his candidate elected and defeat Morales' candidate. The defeat was a blow to the MAS militancy. The president never explained his decision to break with the MSM, which has been a MAS ally, but those close to Del Granado say that the break came because of the mayor's opposition "to Evo's personalism, to accepting candidates hand-picked by him." Clearly the break was critical for the emergence of a leftist opposition, something impossible to imagine even two months ago. In these elections, Morales' failure to repeat his overwhelming triumph of December 2009 could be a clear sign that Bolivians want balances in political power and want to avoid the ideological confrontation that is sought by the president and that has characterized his time in office. This, for analysts, is the second significant by-product of the elections. Ricardo Paz, a professor at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés (UMSA), says, "The April 4 vote signifies the re-establishment of political balance in the country, because the impression, until the very day of elections, was that the Movimiento al Socialismo would become a hegemonic party." In that light, the electoral results could be the best thing possible for the interests of Bolivia.