Bolivia Makes Clear Its Anti-Imperialism

Andrés Gaudán

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

Recommended Citation

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.
Bolivia Makes Clear Its Anti-Imperialism

by Andrés Gaudín

Category/Department: Bolivia

Published: Friday, December 10, 2010

In the week before it hosted the IX Conferencia de Ministros de Defensa de las Américas, with ministers from 30 countries participating, Bolivia laid the groundwork with a series of startling announcements. On Nov. 14, during the Bolivian Army's bicentennial celebration, Army chief Gen. Antonio Cueto was cheered when he announced to the troops, his counterparts from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru, and President Evo Morales that, "from now on," the Army is a socialist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, and communitarian organization. He said that "no foreign power will ever impose its will on us or take over our natural resources."

Following Cueto's comments, Morales addressed the troops and, in obvious reference to the US, made similar statements. An Associated Press story, filed from the eastern city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, venue of the conference, said that the president told the troops, "If any imperial power tries to intervene militarily under any pretext, such as the fight against drug trafficking or terrorism, I call on the armed forces to be prepared to defend the country as in 1810, when we fought for independence and in defense of sovereignty and natural resources."

Later, on Nov. 22, the president was absolutely explicit and accused the US of encouraging military coups in Latin America.

In subsequent days, Gen. Cueto called for punishing "to the full extent of the law" those who, in 2005, ordered turning over to the US the Bolivian's Army's only 28 MHN-5 Chinese-made ground-to-air missiles. Cueto referred to the anti-corruption law that bears the name of Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz, a socialist leader who was kidnapped, assassinated, and disappeared in 1980 during the dictatorship of Gen. Luis García Meza (1980-1981).

The commander added that, "in defense of its sovereignty, the Bolivian Army will not allow foreign powers to install military bases in our territory under any circumstances."

New school of the Americas for ALBA

On Nov. 17, the Spanish news agency EFE reported that Defense Minister Rubén Saavedra had announced the establishment in Bolivia of an Escuela de Defensa de los Ejércitos de la Alternativa Bolivariana para las Américas (ALBA), an institution that, in some ways, will replace in the region the US Pentagon's infamous School of the Americas (now the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, WHINSEC).

Amid these announcements, the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights Navanethem Pillay arrived in Bolivia. She praised the Bolivian government for passing a law against racism and discrimination (NotiSur, Nov. 5, 2010), a measure that was criticized by the major media in the country and by sectors of the political right.

Army's commitment to socialism a "natural" outgrowth of Constitution

Gen. Cueto explained the surprising announcement on Nov. 14 as a natural outgrowth of the new Constitution, which stipulates that Bolivia is a unified, plurinational, communitarian, free,
independent, sovereign, democratic, and intercultural state. "That perfect definition," he said, "leads to the Army's emergence as a socialist, communitarian institution and as such we declare ourselves anti-imperialist."

Last March, Cueto was a key player in two incidents that began to outline the new characteristics of the Bolivian Army. On March 23, during the Día del Mar commemoration, which marks the anniversary of Bolivia's loss of its coastal territory in the 1879-1984 War of the Pacific, he and the other military commanders presided an event in which, for the first time, the multicolored wiphala flew as a national symbol and a new Army slogan expressing allegiance to civilian authority was introduced.

The wiphala is a multicolored square flag used by all native Andean peoples. Since that day, and by law, the wiphala is flown at all public buildings and promenades alongside the historical green, red, and yellow striped Bolivian national flag.

At the same event, Morales inaugurated the new slogan used to swear allegiance to the country. "Police and armed forces of the plurinacional state of Bolivia, homeland or death!" said the president. And the troops responded, "We shall overcome," which is added to the classic military slogan "subordination and persistence."

At that moment, the opposition began looking for a way to pit the military against the civilian and democratic Morales government, trying to stir up resentment because the wiphala "is a symbol of an inferior race," as the Santa Cruz daily El Deber wrote, and because the new slogan is a reminder of the Cuban Revolution and guerrilla fighter Ernesto "Che" Guevara, who was assassinated in Bolivia by members of the Army during a very different time.

The right first accused the president of "surrendering to Cuba." Then it used the negative reaction to the slogan by a small group of retired military who participated in the campaign against the guerrillas led by Che Guevara in the 1970s.

But the offensive got no traction in either case. As he had done in March, Sen. Marcelo Antezana, former Army chief of staff (2003-2004) and opposition legislator, promised to initiate treason proceedings against Morales and Cueto. To date, this has not happened.

**Morales speaks forcefully and publicly to US defense secretary**

Finally, and following the announcement of the creation of the ALBA defense school, the 30 defense ministers arrived in Bolivia, among them US Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

The day before the conference began, El Deber published statements by Gates warning Bolivia and Venezuela "to be very careful and very cautious about how they interact with the Iranians in terms of what the Iranian motives may be and what they are really trying to do." Gates was commenting on an Iranian offer of aid, detected, Gates said, by US intelligence, to develop nuclear-energy programs in both countries.

As a preview of the heavy artillery that he would fire later, Morales said that Gates' statements were "a rude intervention in our internal affairs," and he emphasized that, "under my leadership, Bolivia will have alliances and agreements with whomever it chooses and without accepting prohibitions or advice from anyone."
Hours later, Bolivian government spokesperson Iván Canelas said that, despite the differences, Bolivia and the US were negotiating to reach a framework agreement that would allow the resumption of diplomatic relations that were frozen in 2008. Nevertheless, he said that "the possibility that US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents [expelled from the country that year] will return is absolutely ruled out."

Finally, on Nov. 22 and face to face, looking straight at Gates at various points in his speech, Morales opened the defense ministers conference using an unusually harsh tone and denouncing the "permanent US interventionism in political issues in Latin America." After accusing the US of backing the 2009 coup against Honduran former President Manuel Zelaya (NotiCen, July 2, 2009) and the attempted coups against Ecuador (2010), Bolivia (2008), and Venezuela (2002), Morales said that "we must recognize that the North American empire beat us in Honduras, but the score is three to one in our favor because the Latin American people won here, in Ecuador, and in Venezuela."

Then, with the disappearance of the slight smile that accompanied his soccer analogy, Morales spoke directly to Gates, telling him straight out, "The US must understand that it has to respect the present democratic system."

At least in public, Gates did not respond personally either to the criticisms or the accusations and left Bolivia that afternoon. It was the US Embassy that issued a response, saying that it "regretted" that Morales has accused the US of promoting four coups, and it said that Bolivia had missed "an opportunity to make progress on the conference's key themes."

**UN high commissioner praises progress in Bolivia**

Amid the tension generated by the US visit, the country received the UN high commissioner for human rights. The government, which had approved the anti-racism and anti-discrimination law inexplicably rejected by much of the media, which said that punishing xenophobic attitudes threatens freedom of speech, received an explicit and timely statement of support from the international official.

Pillay compared the aberrant racism in Bolivia with apartheid in South Africa and said that the concept of freedom of speech should not be degraded to the point of being confused with business freedom, which is what the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa (SIP) did last month when it sent a support mission to its associates in Bolivia who had begun a campaign to discredit the democratic government of Morales.

"Racist hate speech that incites violence is unacceptable in a democratic society and cannot be protected by freedom of speech," said the commissioner on Nov. 17, according to EFE. "To protect legitimate freedom of speech, adequate legal safeguards are required."

As in the case of the wiphala and the new oath of the armed forces, the right is keeping quiet.

-- End --