Former Allies Strike to Send Message to Bolivian President Evo Morales

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Former Allies Strike to Send Message to Bolivian President Evo Morales

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Far from the euphoria of 2006, when Bolivian President Evo Morales was elected for the first time, or of 2009, when, following a constitutional referendum, he was re-elected to govern Bolivia until 2014, today the president is constantly challenged. An unusual wave of confrontations begun among groups that were historic allies—the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB), teachers, transport workers, health workers, indigenous groups—has moved beyond the confines of rich, white, and secessionist eastern Bolivia and reached most of the country.

A Fundación UNIR investigation indicated that in April the country set a record for social disturbances, with 123 conflicts, a 35% increase from the previous month. The foundation found that, in addition to the significant economic losses caused by these conflicts, the general level of violence increased, although at no time was governability at risk. Despite these events that undermined the president's image, a survey published by the Bolivian magazine Poder, and cited in the Argentine daily La Nación, showed that, if elections were held today, Morales would win comfortably against any candidate put forward by a unified opposition.

Vice President Álvaro García Linera, an academic who is most adept at communicating the government's actions, says that he is not concerned that "those who feel the need to express themselves do so in the way they find most suitable." In an interview with the Mexican daily La Jornada, the vice president said, "It's a matter of natural contradictions within a people, tensions that are submitted for collective debate to carry forward revolutionary changes. And that's healthy, it's democratic, and it's the foundation for the life-giving renovation of the social movements' actions."

Nevertheless, García Linera warned, "It's also a question of contradictions that could be used by imperialism [referring to the US] and the forces of the right [political groups allied with eastern Bolivian business groups], which project their long-term interests using some grassroots groups and a purported pro-environmental discourse." The vice president consistently criticizes nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) "disguised as defenders of the environment," which he accuses of being financed by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and of working for US interests in South America.

Doctors first to walk out, others follow

The conflicts came in stages. They began on March 28 when doctors and health-care workers went on strike, shutting down all but emergency health services for more than two months. The country had never experienced anything like it before. The professionals walked out to protest a decree affecting all public-administration workers that increased the workday from six to eight hours.

Later, medical students from state universities, primary-school teachers, drivers of public buses and trucks, the COB, and indigenous groups joined the doctors. The students joined the strike in solidarity with the doctors. The teachers did so for a 12% salary increase. Opposition transportation
workers were protesting that the capital city of La Paz was "executing a massive transportation project for a city whose streets and avenues are clogged by thousands of small busses and cars with taxi meters, most of them old, run-down, and polluting," wrote Spanish news agency EFE.

The COB called a two-day general strike, which had few participants, to demand an increase in the national minimum wage from 815 pesos (US$117) to 8,125 pesos (US$1,250). Indigenous groups divided their protests. Those in the eastern part of the country began a march to La Paz calling on the government to halt construction of a highway aimed at integrating regions of the country now isolated from each other (NotiSur, Oct. 14, 2011). Those in western Bolivia blocked the main highway that goes to the Chilean port of Arica, calling for construction of an alternative route.

A columnist with the La Paz daily La Razón described the increase in violence that Fundación UNIR referred to as "stark acts perhaps valid to achieve other, more far-reaching objectives but not for protests like those of the doctors, teachers, transport workers, and the COB." What were the foundation and the newspaper referring to? "To the brutal violence of not attending to the health needs of the population for more than two months, for example," said political analyst Fernando Mayorga.

To intensify their conflict, the doctors falsely denounced the "massive hiring of Cuban doctors." The students in solidarity with the doctors then took over the campus of the Universidad de El Alto and burned a Cuban flag. The doctors also announced that 4,000 of them were on an indefinite hunger strike, others painted posters with their own blood ("because we have no money to buy paint"), and the rest sewed their lips shut "as a sign that freedom of speech does not exist in Bolivia."

The action that had the greatest impact, however, occurred on May 1 when a doctor "crucified" herself on the grounds of the Hospital Universitario in La Paz, accompanied by her two children, aged four and six. Two days later, the Defensoría del Pueblo, civil-society agencies, and a representative from the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Bolivia repudiated the use of children in the protests. UNICEF said the doctor's action was "inadmissible from any perspective."

The teachers were not to be outdone: some crucified themselves; others decided to "wall themselves in." What does that mean? They shut themselves in classrooms, and other strikers outside covered up the doors and windows with bricks and cement.

Little by little tensions have been diminishing. Today, only about 100 indigenous from eastern Bolivia are marching to La Paz to demand that the government halt construction of the highway through their natural reserve in the Amazon.

**Vice president explains highway's importance**

On May 2, EFE, taking an unusually strong stance against the Morales administration, described the terrain through which the indigenous were marching. "They march on a road destroyed and under water from the rains." That is precisely the highway that the government wants to build to connect the eastern and western areas of the country.

When La Jornada asked García Linera why the government wants to build a highway that some indigenous oppose, he gave three reasons. "First, to guarantee the population of the natural reserve—the Territorio Indígena Parque Nacional Isiboro Secure (TIPNIS)—access to their constitutional rights and guarantees: potable water so that the children do not die from intestinal infections; schools with teachers who teach in their language, preserving their culture and enriching it with
other cultures; access to markets to transport their products without having to navigate on rafts for a week to sell their rice or buy salt at a price ten times higher than in a neighborhood store."

Second, he said, the highway will connect the Amazonía, which comprises one-third of Bolivian territory, with the other regions in the valleys and highlands. "One-third of Bolivia is isolated, which means that state sovereignty is replaced by the power of the rural employer, the foreign lumber company, or drug traffickers," said García Linera.

But the third reason is central, and the vice president called it strategic. "The oligarchy's separatist tendencies, which in 2008 were on the verge of dividing the country, were suppressed because the oligarchy was defeated politically when it tried to stage a coup in September of that year and because part of its material base, agroindustry, was taken over by the state. However, these forces with separatist tendencies still maintain a final economic pillar—control of the Amazonian economy, which, to reach the rest of the country, has to go through processing and financing by businesses controlled by the fraction of the oligarchy centered in the department of Santa Cruz."

Finally, García Linera said that a route that directly links the Amazonía with the rest of the country would radically change the structure of regional economic power, destroying the separatist groups' final material base and giving way to a new geoeconomic projection. Referring to the highway's strategic aspect, the Bolivian government did not ignore the US, "interested in protecting the Amazonía as its water and biodiversity reservoir and in fomenting divisions among leaders of indigenous communities to create conditions to expel the indigenous [who support Morales] from state power." The vice president said, "Paradoxically, history has made some leftists the best and most eloquent defenders of imperialism and of the most conservative interests."

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