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Bolivian Opposition Has Little Success Uniting Ahead of 2014 Presidential Election

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Although Bolivia's next presidential election is still two years away, the opposition is already focused on it, with all that implies in countries like this one in the South American altiplano, where party, personal, business, and even racial interests carry more weight than concern for the nation. In recent weeks, the leadership of parties in opposition to President Evo Morales began negotiations to create an electoral front to be able to go into the December 2014 elections with a chance of defeating the president.

Despite the meeting being called by white, racist groups allied with the secessionist interests of the rich eastern region of the country, what those groups are most interested in is winning over a segment of the indigenous population. In a country with an indigenous majority, no project with a democratic façade could survive without at least minimal indigenous representation.

"This will be the longest and most contentious campaign in the history of the country. The intensity of the debate and depth of the conflicts among the contenders point to an increasingly antagonistic evolution of the campaign. We are looking at two years and four months in which the electoral cost-benefit of political logic will be imposed in defining the agendas of the political, union, institutional, and citizen actors," wrote Ricardo Paz Ballivian, an analyst with the La Paz daily La Razón, on Aug. 13. And he was not wrong. The Bolivian reality is indeed contentious.

Opposition copies unsuccessful Venezuelan model

The opposition is using the Venezuelan model, in which, after 13 years of fighting separately against the government of President Hugo Chávez, opposition groups formed the Mesa de Unidad Democrático (MUD) and held a primary to choose a candidate, Henrique Capriles, to represent them in the presidential election (NotiSur, Feb. 24, 2012). The effort failed, because the MUD believed that "all against Chávez" was the key to ending the Revolución Bolivariana, forgetting that without a governing plan it could not convince the people to vote for its candidate.

In their efforts to create an alliance similar to the MUD, proponents insist on using the good and the bad of what the Venezuelans did: they propose that the leadership come from an internal election among all parties and sectors of the opposition spectrum; and they say that, without an agreed-upon platform, which "should be finished by mid-2013," they cannot compete against Morales and his Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS).

However, along with imitating what is good in the Caribbean model, both those who came up with the idea of a broad-based opposition front as well as potential members—including some indigenous groups that have distanced themselves from the MAS—fell into the "all against Morales" position as the way to go. With that vision, they have only managed to deepen the existing divisions in society.

The first proposal to form a "unity table" was announced by Samuel Doria Medina, leader of the Unión Nacional (UN), a rightist party that, with Doria Medina as its candidate in the 2009
presidential election, came in third, with 5.65% of the vote, compared with Morales’ 64.22% (NotiSur, Sept. 4, 2009). Doria Medina, a powerful cement magnate and owner of the Bolivian Burger King franchise, was accompanied by rightist Amilcar Barral, who has a degree in marketing and heads the Nueva Alianza Boliviana (NAB), a group without parliamentary representation.

On Nov. 13, Doria Medina and Barral publically presented the Frente de Unidad por la Democracia and said that, "although we are aware that ample ideological differences persist" among those who share only a rejection of Morales, they were calling on the entire political-opposition spectrum to "delineate a programmatic agreement" and designate "through democratic mechanisms [a primary] one candidate to represent us in the 2014 presidential election."

**Little positive response from other groups**

For now, most opposition parties have responded with silence, but "that is not to say that behind closed doors they are not analyzing Doria Medina's idea, so the still unborn Frente de Unidad por la Democracia could be a good way to sweep up the entire electorate so that in 2014 not one vote of hatred for Morales escapes," said sociologist Alfonso Solís when questioned by the news agency ANSA.

The only group that responded was the Movimiento Sin Miedo (MSM)—the major opposition force since it broke with Morales shortly after the 2009 election—and it did so only to say that its differences with the UN make a political alliance impossible. When MSM leader Juan del Granado, a former mayor of La Paz, explained to the press the reasons for the negative response, he did so expressing opposition more to Morales than to Doria Medina, a man who is his polar opposite politically and who has a shady past with multiple corruption convictions, which bar him from holding public positions, from running for elective office, and from leaving the country without court authorization. Del Granado said that the MSM "opposes the MAS's personalist and authoritarian vision but also the opportunist view of conservative sectors that want to form unity fronts only to win elections any way possible."

Differences within the opposition became clear when it was unable to present a unity candidate for the upcoming January elections in Beni department, which will elect a governor for the next five years. Doria Medina and Barral had also proposed selecting a unity candidate for the Beni election. In the end, three opposition candidates—among them indigenous Deputy Pedro Nuny—will face off against Jessica Jordán, a former beauty queen who will represent MAS.

While efforts with the MSM did not initially bear fruit, other indigenous leaders, such as Nuny and Fernando Vargas—who, in alliance with the secessionist right of the eastern department of Santa Cruz, led the opposition to Morales in that region—are open to proposals, even overlooking the exacerbated racism of many of the groups that could make up an opposition front.

**Opposition unable to block MAS attorney general candidate**

The first signs that indigenous groups were willing to align with the right to act against the indigenous Morales government appeared a month before Doria Medina and Barral proposed a unified opposition. On Oct. 3, two indigenous legislators elected to represent MAS in the lower house voted with the opposition to block the suspension of Deputy Adriana Gil, a young woman from Santa Cruz who represents the ultraright Convergencia Nacional (CN). The motion to suspend Gil was because of her racist expressions against the president, whom she always refers to as "the
Indian." Seventy-seven votes were required to sanction Gil, two-thirds of those present, but the motion was defeated by a 75 to 41 vote. "I thank the indigenous bloc of MAS; this proves that we can work together for Bolivia," said Gil after the vote was taken.

Felipe Dorado, another CN deputy, went even further and proposed that Del Granado's MSM and Doria Medina's UN form "a unified bloc to allow us to put an end to the two-thirds government." Two-thirds is the majority needed to make "special decisions."

The litmus test for a "unified bloc" was the legislative election for the new Fiscal General del Estado, a key post in the country's legal structure. Dorado's hopes were soon dashed. On Nov. 20, when his proposal and that of Doria Medina and Barral were still fresh, the Asamblea Nacional (AN) quickly voted on the attorney general post. With 144 of the AN's members present—36 senators and 130 deputies—MAS was able to pull together 105 votes to elect Ramiro Guerrero, a prestigious jurist who was among the framers of the new Constitución Plurinacional. The opposition complained of "errors" in the election process. Morales responded saying that it was a "formidable setback to neoliberalism and the racists."

The dailies La Razón and Página Siete wrote that, despite the discouragement caused by the designation of the new attorney general, opposition groups—including those of Del Granado, Nuny, and Vargas—continue discussing forming a front. However, neither Guerrero's election nor the latest polls give them reason to push the idea. In Bolivia, perhaps the only South American country with reliable polls, society continues to favor the MAS government.

A survey by the private Ipsos consulting firm, published Nov. 26 by opposition Santa Cruz daily El Deber, showed that, in the last six months, Morales' approval rating has risen by 11 points to 59%. The numbers are similar to those compiled in a private study by Página Siete, although slightly lower than the results of a survey by AmericasBarometro of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), an initiative of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. The LAPOP study gave the Morales administration an approval rating of 64.2%, the same percentage with which Morales won the 2009 election (NotiSur, Dec. 18, 2009).

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