Bolivia Calls for Regional Effort Against Corruption

Andrés Gaudán

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

Recommended Citation
Bolivia Calls for Regional Effort Against Corruption

by Andrés Gaudín

Category/Department: Bolivia

Published: 2013-10-18

Bolivia plans to ask the 33 member-countries of the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (CELAC) to establish common ways of dealing with corruption. President Evo Morales has called for a CELAC meeting in Cochabamba on Nov. 8 with transparency and corruption the only issues on the agenda.

"The idea proposed by Compañero Evo [President Morales] is to seek the establishment of joint regional strategies to combat corruption," said Nardi Suxo, head of the Ministerio de Transparencia Institucional y Lucha Contra la Corrupción.

President Morales' administration has already proposed fellow Andean countries—Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, and Chile—adopt anti-corruption strategies that reach beyond their national borders. The administration believes that its war on corruption is the most successful such effort in the region and considers itself to be in a unique position to share its experience with neighboring countries.

By focusing the CELAC meeting exclusively on transparency and anti-corruption, Suxo said all 33 members might be able to commit to work together on those issues. But more than just a commitment—which in the end could be nothing more than a simple statement of the goal—the idea is to create tools to measure and prevent corruption as well as to establish a system for consultation between countries.

Suxo explained measurement as being able to know how citizens perceive the problem of corruption. The minister said she is confident that regional agreements will be made in Cochabamba that will measure the public's perception of the problem "in accordance with our standards" and not those used by outsiders who come to gauge suspects in the manner of Transparency International (IT), a Berlin-based organization she is leery of. "That organization has refused to reveal its sources of funding," she said. "Thus we object to it judging countries like ours involved in a revolutionary process."

Establishing a system of consultation is crucial for Bolivia, Suxo said, because ever since the Ministerio de Transparencia Institucional was created key suspects have fled the country to escape facing corruption charges in Bolivian courts. The minister said there are currently ex-ministers of previous administrations, governors and mayors who had been elected by the people, members of the military, magistrates and officials of this government who have fled to the US, Peru, Paraguay, Colombia, and Brazil. Once accused, they claim political persecution and go abroad to seek asylum, a humanitarian institution deeply rooted in the Americas. Bolivia wants to prevent such evasion through a consulting mechanism that allows countries to know the background of asylum seekers.

The idea of sharing experiences is not new. At the XV session of the Parlamento Andino held in La Paz in February 2011, the Bolivian government invited Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, and Chile to join an alliance to establish a cooperative system of anti-corruption measures. Only Ecuador was receptive to the proposal at that time and the effort did not meet with success.
Vice President Álvaro García Linera then had openly told his colleagues that Bolivia needed the basic agreements because of corruption-case disagreements with neighboring countries. "We have found that many Bolivian politicians prefer to flee, to escape, because they know they are guilty of corruption. Since there are no expeditious, trustworthy consulting mechanisms they enjoy impunity when countries that are our friends provide them cover," he said. "In a framework of respect for the laws of our countries we should work toward designing and consolidating policies of cooperation between friends so that such transnational impunity does not take over our continent.

**Bolivia embarrassed in US sting**

On Aug. 31, the Morales government was embarrassed when the deputy chief of Bolivia’s police anti-corruption unit, Mario Ormachea, was detained in the US after being caught in a sting operation as he allegedly received a bribe. In addition to firing the official, the Bolivian government has asked for his extradition. It also reprimanded his superiors for giving signs of subordinating democratic institutions.

Again, it was García Linera, speaking on behalf of the government, who reminded senior police officials that there are mechanisms that must be used. "Understand," he publically told the police chief, "that when the president’s office wants to appoint a minister or vice minister, the first thing the president does is to ask the Ministerio de Transparencia Institucional and the Ministerio de Coordinación Presidencial to carefully review the nominee's background. That person is named only if he doesn't have a criminal record. This is what we do, and it is what every institution should do."

Following this setback, the government said it would train undercover agents to combat corruption. "What needs to be done is to further strengthen government transparency; we have approved training undercover agents on corruption issues," Morales told Suxo. "The Ministerio de Transparencia has not yet created the structure. The time has come, minister, to build an undercover unit with agents who can move freely through all government agencies to search for evidence of the mishandling of public affairs."

**Successful efforts at home**

Suxo maintained that Bolivia has stepped up anti-corruption efforts at home. "As of last December," she said on Sept. 19, "we've managed to recover US$120 million and we expect to be able to announce the recovery of at least another US$5 million from persons prosecuted for corruption by year's end."

Suxo said that the amount stolen from state coffers is more significant than a simple number. "It should be seen in the context of a small economy, such as the Bolivian economy, and as an example of what can be obtained when there is a decision to make public life transparent."

One week after the minister’s comments, events in Argentina provided an example of what the minister said. On Sept. 27 that country’s justice department ruled senior officials in the administration of former President Carlos Menem (1989-1999) would have to pay nearly US$900,000 to each of the families of three of the seven people who died in a military arms and ammunition factory in 1995. Since those found responsible evidently lack the resources to pay the compensation, the money will end up coming from the government.

The explosion at the factory in Río Tercero, a city in the central province of Córdoba, was a case of arson, a clear and criminal act of corruption. Efforts were made to hide the smuggling of arms...
sent indirectly to Ecuador, a country that was then at war over a border dispute with Peru (NotiSur, March 31, 1995, and July 26, 1996).

Suxo said the Bolivian government is in the first phase of a complex task. Investigators working through a network of complicity and concealment can sometimes discover corrupt persons but not necessarily be able to recover the stolen money.

In Bolivia, during the first six months of this year, the attorney general’s office has initiated legal action against 2,239 judges, prosecutors, clerks, and other low-ranking judiciary officials.

As part of its continued battle against corruption, the government recently upheld jail sentences against two corrupt judges in the eastern city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra. The first involved a judge offering a favorable ruling in exchange for a large sum of money. The second involved the firing and imprisonment of the head of the Dirección de la Hoja de Coca e Industrialización, a key agency supporting medicinal use of the coca leaf for which Morales had personally supervised the selection of its general director. The official had taken coca leaves confiscated from drug traffickers and clandestine laboratories where cocaine is produced. The government has said it will hold its own officials up to the same yardstick used for previous administrations.

-- End --