3-12-1987

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Bolivia in Crisis After House Censures Economic Team; Cabinet Resigns

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Bolivia
Published: 1987-03-12

The government of President Victor Paz Estenssoro is undergoing its worst crisis since it was installed 19 months ago. For the second time in less than two weeks, on March 10 the entire Bolivian cabinet resigned. This time the collective resignation was the outcome of a vote by the House of Deputies to censure the government's economic team. In an effort to express "solidarity," the other ministers joined with the economic team in turning in their resignations via a single letter delivered to President Estenssoro.

The vote of censure apparently originated in the administration's refusal to pay compensation demanded by provincial governments of oil-producing regions for financial losses resulting from the previous government's economic policy. According to Information Minister Herman Antelo, the censure constituted a "destabilizing" action against the Estenssoro administration because it "puts at risk the success" of the government's economic policy. The deputies' decision provoked as well a reaction by leaders of the ruling National Revolutionary Movement (MNR) party, who announced that MNR deputies who voted in favor of the censure would be "publicly expelled."

Next, the government may also find it necessary to revise a political alliance in force since September 1985 with the National Democratic Action (ADN) party of former President Hugo Banzer. ADN deputies also voted in favor of the censure, along with leftist opposition and MNR deputies. Technically, the ADN constitutes the largest political opposition force in the House of Deputies. However, on previous occasions ADN has joined the MNR and supported the government's economic stabilization policies. MNR and ADN deputies comprise a majority in the House.

The latest crisis marks the fourth time the president was obliged to restructure his cabinet during his tenure in office. The most recent cabinet crisis occurred on Feb. 26 when all ministers turned in their resignations. According to Deputy Mario Rueda Pena of the National Revolutionary Leftist Movement (MNRI), the government's actions in discussions with officials of the US Drug Enforcement Agency caused the February ministerial crisis. In that cabinet reshuffling, Interior Minister Fernando Barthelemy and Peasant Affairs Minister Edil Sandoval were replaced. Later they confirmed their departure from the cabinet was largely the result of opposition to Washington's recommendations toward reducing Bolivian coca production.

ADN Deputy Fernando Kieffer condemned US "opposition and haggling over" monetary compensation offered to coca growers to persuade them to grow other crops. He said the government must negotiate better terms with Washington as the country is in dire need of resources for economic recovery. Senator Daniel Cabezas of the Revolutionary Movement of the Left (MIR) said the plan to convert 50,000 ha. of coca plantations to other crops is doomed to fail. He said the plan is not integrated into national development programs. Next, and more important, Cabezas said, any negotiations with the US on this issue should be focused on maintaining national sovereignty.
and the economic welfare of 350,000 families who depend on coca production for their survival. (Basic data from UPI, AP, PRENSA LATINA)

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