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Bolivia’s Governing Party Stumbles In Local And Departmental Elections

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Just five months after its resounding victory in last year’s presidential contest, which President Evo Morales, now in his third term, won in a single round with 61% of the vote, Bolivia’s governing Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) suffered a sharp setback in the municipal and departmental elections held March 29.

Of the country’s nine departments, MAS lost two (Santa Cruz y Tarija) that are traditional right-wing strongholds but went Morales’ way in October. The president’s victories there raised false hopes among his backers that the political map was undergoing an irreversible change (NotiSur, Oct. 24, 2014). Last month’s contests told a different story. Besides coming up short in Santa Cruz and Tarija, MAS lost the country’s principal cities, including La Paz and El Alto, places where the president’s leadership was originally cemented. The governing party also lost the departmental governorship in La Paz, a district that is highly significant given that it is home to both the legislature and presidential palace. MAS won four departments easily and will face runoffs in two others.

"The result will not affect Morales’ stability or his comfortable control of Congress," a correspondent for the Argentine daily Página 12 wrote April 2. "He thus remains in a strong position to govern. Furthermore, among all his colleagues in the region, he is the most popular at a moment when [Bolivia’s] economy is registering solid growth numbers."

Vice President Álvaro García Linera referred to the results as "something more than a strong wake-up call." But he also tried to downplay the situation, echoing similar statements by Morales to argue that "MAS is the largest party in the history of Bolivia with a presence in all 339 of the country’s municipalities."

Morales and his vice president are right in that regard. What they did not explain—but is also true—is that MAS has been competing the last nine years against an atomized right that only has one component with any kind of national presence: the Unidad Democrática (UD) alliance headed by business leader Samuel Doria Medina. The right is otherwise made up of more than 100 departmental, municipal, and even neighborhood groups that are forever fighting among themselves and are unable to develop a common program or make an impact nationally.

"Mistakes were made"

In what could only vaguely be construed as self-criticism, MAS leadership recalled that local and regional elections—either because of the strength of certain local leaders, the wider panorama of parties that participate, or for the simple reason that voters don’t want to give all the power to a single party or person—tend to produce a fragmentation of the vote and do not, therefore, always fall in line with national election results.

The leadership chose not to consider how its candidate choices, some of which produced real discomfort within the party base, might have affected the outcomes. MAS had other problems as
well. In certain cases voters punished the party because they simply disapproved of the job MAS officials were doing in various municipal and regional posts. Some MAS candidates were also done in by corruption allegations. Leadership failed, in those cases, to adequately react and replace the troubled candidates, which is what happened in La Paz and El Alto, the two most emblematic districts for Morales’ party.

In El Alto, a highland city with approximately 650,000 inhabitants, corruption allegations against the incumbent, former union leader Edgar Patana, surfaced during the final stretch of the mayoral campaign. The scandal involved a video recording in which Patana is shown receiving an envelope supposedly containing bribe money he received for calling off a union measure. Mayor Patana ended up losing to right-wing candidate Soledad Chapetón, an indigenous woman of the same Aymara ethnicity as Morales.

President Morales acknowledged mistakes in the party’s choice of "certain candidates" but did not accept responsibility, even though corruption claims involving Patana and other MAS figures received unending media attention. "Perhaps in some municipalities mistakes were made in choosing candidates, but above all that is our democratic revolution," he said.

As costly as it proved to be, the Patana scandal was not the biggest burden MAS had to bear in last month’s elections. Right around the time the Patana video surfaced, a second corruption case also came to light, in this case involving more than US$10 million from the Fondo de Desarrollo para los Pueblos Indígenas, a national development fund for indigenous communities. Among the many people linked to the affair are numerous indigenous and campesino leaders allied with the government, including the party’s La Paz gubernatorial candidate Felipa Huanca. Even though nothing has been proven, the electorate reacted by punishing candidates implicated in the scandal.

While various opposition analysts took advantage of the situation to talk about Morales’ "authoritarianism" and "haughtiness," the president offered only a timid assessment of the results. García Linera—the MAS leader usually tasked with communicating the more ideological aspects of the party—was also mildly self-critical in his reaction to events. The governing party’s poor showing was because of "our weakness in establishing local leaders, both on a departmental and municipal level," he said on the night of the elections. "National elections are about projects that involve the nation as a whole, the state, the economy, and society. Regional elections are about personalities and leadership, about the ability to manage local issues, provide basic services, and the pressing needs of the people. That’s were our weakness showed: we didn’t form local leaders."

**Time to mend fences?**

The results of the election—which delivered Morales the first major setback of his presidency and reduces his ability to maneuver and negotiate—could have repercussions on Bolivia’s timid and zigzaggy efforts to rebuild diplomatic and commercial relations with the US.

Diplomatic relations between the two countries have been minimal since 2008, when the Bolivian government declared then US Ambassador Phillip Goldberg to be persona non grata and later expelled the entire contingent of Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) personnel operating in the country (NotiSur, Sept. 19, 2008). Commercial relations have been compromised since the US, in response, removed Bolivia from the list of countries that benefit from the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA), an instrument created in 2002 to ensure the tariff-free entry
into the US of a wide range of export products from four Andean countries (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru) as compensation for the war against drugs (NotiSur, Oct. 31, 2008).

On Jan. 4, less than two weeks before the start of his third presidential term (NotiSur, Feb. 6, 2015), Morales sent a two-pronged message to the White House. The president complained that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) was infiltrating his party as a way to weaken it ahead of the March 29 departmental elections. But he also expressed his desire that bilateral relations be normalized this year, according to the German news agency Deutsche Presse-Agentur (DPA).

For Morales’ swearing-in ceremony on Jan. 22, the US government, rather than send a top-level delegation, dispatched its Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Tom Malinowski. After meeting with Bolivian Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca, the US official commented publicly that his government was interested in evaluating various issues, including drug trafficking and trade relations.

To the surprise of his hosts, Malinowski also talked about the "respect and admiration" the administration of President Barack Obama has for the political process that has evolved and the changes introduced since Morales first came to power in 2006. The comments were surprising because the US removed Bolivia from the list of ATPDEA beneficiaries because of the latter’s lack of cooperation in drug fighting. News agencies quoted Malinowski as saying, just after his meeting with Choquehuanca, that the US has great "respect and admiration … for the progress that Bolivia has made in social inclusion."

In what was almost like a delayed response to the dual message Morales sent on Jan. 4, a US State Department report made public in March accused Bolivia of not doing enough to fight corruption associated with drug trafficking. The Associated Press (AP) news agency shared details of the report on March 20, just days before the local and departmental elections. The document, the AP explained, claims that 95% of the cocaine produced in Peru passes through Bolivian territory en route to markets in Brazil and Europe. It also says that Bolivia continues to be the world’s third-leading cocaine producer, behind Peru and Colombia.

The report’s message seemed to scuttle the progress that Morales and Malinowski made in trying to imagine major improvements to US-Bolivian relations this year. The Bolivian government responded emphatically. "All the US State Department does is create more obstacles in the way of its hypocritical call for re-establishing relations," government spokesperson Hugo Moldiz told the La Paz daily La Razón. "Bolivia doesn’t have to be examined by or offer explanations to anyone."

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