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Andrés Gaudán

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Bolivia’s President Evo Morales Expected to Seek Re-election in 2019

by Andrés Gaudín
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Bolivian social movements—campesino, indigenous, miner, and women’s groups—that look to President Evo Morales as a guide—and the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS)—the party that put Morales in the country’s top political position in 2006—have not officially announced they are proposing to call for a plebiscite to approve a constitutional amendment that would allow the leader’s re-election. However, no one doubts that the presidential ticket to be proposed by MAS and the social organizations in 2019 will again be the Evo Morales-Álvaro García Linera duo.

The opposition continues observing how the indigenous president’s profile is growing. A recent private-television poll gave him a 75% approval rating, a level never before achieved by any president. The opposition, however, cannot outline a platform that builds on victories achieved in last March’s regional elections when it beat the ruling party in the country’s four most important urban centers. Morales even "begged" his supporters to "go look for a successor because in 2019 I want to go to my hometown, rest, and open a restaurant."

In October 2014, Morales was re-elected for a third term with 61.35% of the vote (NotiSur, Oct.24, 2014), but in regional elections in March, MAS lost strongholds for the first time in Cochabamba, La Paz, and El Alto, besides Santa Cruz, the country’s richest district where the ruling party grows slowly and never could win an election (NotiSur, Feb. 6, 2015, and April 17, 2015). It was proved, as has been seen in other countries, that when the top leader does not participate directly in an election, national preferences are not transmitted directly to the local candidates. So, just as this new reality drove Morales to ask his supporters to think about finding a new candidate to succeed him, the leader simultaneously left the opposition with the need to try to overcome a state of fragmentation that translates into the inability of coordinating a common alternative at the national level.

Until now, the opposition has had leaders with strong local roots who haven’t managed to project themselves beyond the limits of their own districts. Such is the case with Rubén Costas in the eastern department of Santa Cruz, wrote Sebastián Ochoa, La Paz correspondent of the Argentine daily Página 12. "But beyond there, they won’t get any further," he said.

Three months after regional elections, everything indicates the opposition could not change its own reality, and it continues clinging to the unpopular proposals of its candidates, calling for a higher degree of autonomy from the central government, and forcing the creation of a new fiscal agreement that would federalize use of resources, now 80% managed by the president. In the southern department of Potosí, protests already have begun and were accompanied by acts of violence.

On April 26, the La Paz daily La Razón reported Morales’ message for MAS and the social organizations working with it. "I would like for you, as of now, to think about how to prepare things so that another compañero is in the presidency." Confident that his party will win elections in
October 2019, he added, "We have five years to prepare someone who will be the new president beginning in 2020."

Immediately, leaders of indigenous and campesino organizations responded that the new president must again be Morales and that they would work in their respective congresses to promote a referendum to amend the Constitution.

A few weeks later, in the last half of June, at meetings of their respective congresses, they made that decision just as they said they would. Repeating what he had said in April, Rodolfo Machaca, one of the leaders of the Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia (CSUTCB), said, "Evo must remain at the head of the government for many more years, even after 2015."

Also in June, during a preparatory meeting prior to the annual MAS congress, Victor Borda, vice president of the Chamber of Deputies, said, "One can’t conceive of the process of change without Evo’s leadership."

Morales simply responded, "If the people say we must change the Constitution—meaning that the president should be re-elected—I will obey."

No one says anything officially. Many believe the launching of the campaign to amend the Constitution will be in September, coinciding with a meeting of the Bartolinas, the Confederación de Mujeres Campesinas Bartolina Sisa. This powerful women’s organization carries the name in honor of the indigenous heroine Bartolina Sisa, wife of Túpac Katari, chief of the indigenous peoples during a good part of the 17th century.

After Morales asked his followers to develop a new leadership, the topic became a point of debate inside the ruling party during a regional MAS meeting in the central department of Cochabamba. Nevertheless, party members at the meeting did not respond to the president’s proposal. Instead, they proceeded to simply state that they would work "immediately to achieve Evo’s continuity." A few days later, at another preliminary meeting before the national party congress, this time in the central department of Oruro, party members said, "We must ensure that Compañero Evo continue to head the government."

**Opposition to highway cutting through national park**

While the president allows his political future to be handled by MAS and social organizations, opposition parties only give weak signs of reaction. Except in Potosí where a civic committee was created that organized a march of about 30 people who went to the capital to protest, asking for the construction of an international airport, the other departments have not given signs of any confrontation with the government.

The only ones who did react were the nongovernmental organizations that oppose the construction of a highway that will unite the departments of Beni and Cochabamba (NotiSur, Oct. 14, 2011, and Jan. 11, 2013), passing through the Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Sécure (TIPNIS). The indigenous leader Fernando Vargas announced that between October and December he would organize an "international march in defense of Bolivia’s natural parks" that would start in Beni and go to the US. Vargas did not give any explanation for the long march beyond South and Central American borders.
Another indigenous man, Adolfo Chávez, said he would seek Pope Francis’ support and would travel to the Vatican to do so. During his recent visit to Bolivia, however, the pope did not receive the indigenous leader.

**Business and government investing in development**

On June 25, the government received support from an unexpected source. That day, the Agencia Boliviana de Informaciones (ABI) picked up declarations from Confederación de Empresarios Privados (CEP) president Ronald Nostas announcing that the organization had decided "to accompany the country’s economic growth—projected at 5% this year—with an investment of approximately US$3 billion, just as President Morales asked." Nostas said the investments would be geared toward the sectors of oil, manufacturing, agriculture, cattle, finance, transportation, warehousing, construction, and trade. "Bolivia shows the importance of public-private partnership to finance and invigorate development," the businessman added, indicating that, as long as the government maintains the level of investment it has projected, "the business community will rise to the challenge."

The government projected public investment this year at US$7 billion.

**France, China invest in oil and lithium projects**

The announcement by the CEP businessmen had been preceded by the signing of an agreement with the French oil company Total in which the European firm promised investments of nearly US$1 billion in an exploration project in Incahuasi, a gas field in the eastern part of the country. The Ministerio de Hidrocarburos explained that, with this venture, expected to be underway in mid-2019 (coincidentally in the middle of the next presidential election), Bolivia would increase oil production by 6.5 million cubic meters per day.

Weeks later in July, good news again came from abroad with the signing of an US$178 million investment contract with the Chinese firm CAMC Engineering for the construction, installation, and launching of a lithium exploitation plant.

"Today will be an unforgettable day for Potosí—it’s a historic day; it’s an unprecedented day —because, after completing the first phase, we began the industrialization of the department," Morales said during the act in which China signed the contract to construct the Planta Industrial de Sales de Potásio in the Uyuni salt flat, 390 km south of La Paz. The president explained that it is "a very complex plant, an unprecedented construction with which we are taking a great step forward. Until now we have taken some minor steps, but this is one of the big steps in a project that has been designed within the framework of a long-term strategy."

While the contract was signed in Uyuni without the presence of any departmental authority, in La Paz the opposition protested in a demonstration organized by the Comité Cívico de Potosí. Right away, the opposition added a demand to the construction of a major international airport that the government give it 50% of the royalties generated by lithium exploitation in Uyuni, an area that specialized studies in the US say contains half the world’s lithium reserves.

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