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President Evo Morales Loses Bolivian Reelection Referendum

by Andrés Gaudín

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After a decade of victories not only in presidential elections but also in legislative and even municipal contests, all by solid margins, Bolivian President Evo Morales suffered his first setback last month, losing a popular referendum that could have extended his hold on power beyond 2019.

The subject of the Feb. 21 plebiscite was a constitutional reform that, had it been accepted by a majority of voters, would have allowed Morales to seek reelection in 2019, when his current term—his third—expires. The decisive vote, which spells the end of another South American government committed to bringing about substantial economic and social changes, followed what had been a particularly violent month. The most serious episode took place just four days before the vote, on Feb. 17, when a mysterious fire claimed the lives of six people in the city hall of El Alto, a municipality near the capital of La Paz.

The Morales administration and many national and international analysts claim the result of the vote was greatly influenced by a so-called “dirty campaign.” Others, however, see it as a natural shift in public opinion. Anthropologist Salvador Schavelzon, a researcher at the Universidade Federal de São Paulo in Brazil, believes the loss reflects “an exhaustion” of Morales’ political base. Popular support has waned, he told the Argentine daily Página 12, as “the political project that promised decolonization gives way to a fragile model that ended up betting on unrealized industrialization.” The outcome of the plebiscite cannot, therefore, be blamed just on dirty tricks, media influence, marketing techniques, or imperialist US intervention, Schavelzon opined.

‘Strategic counteroffensive’

Recent elections in Argentina (Nov. 22, 2015) and Venezuela (Dec. 6, 2015), where conservative opposition forces scored huge victories (NotiSur, Dec. 4, 2015, and Jan. 8, 2016), marked a real turning point for the referendum campaign in Bolivia. The developments there energized the contest in Bolivia, and yet the campaign failed to foster the kind of real exchange of ideas that a matter of such importance required, not just for Bolivia, but for all of South America, where governments that had seemed like models to emulate are falling by the wayside one by one.

The Bolivian opposition, encouraged by the success of their counterparts in Argentina and Venezuela and alarmed by a series of polls favoring the reelection option, reacted with a wave of personal attacks against President Morales. The opposition did so both in and outside the country, making use of social networks and traditional media, and always harping on a central theme—corruption—a scourge the Morales government had taken upon itself to denounce last November, when it revealed an embezzlement scheme involving the emblematic Fondo de Desarrollo Indígena (Fund for Indigenous Development) (NotiSur, Jan. 22, 2016).

On Dec. 9, Vice President Álvaro García Linera addressed Bolivia’s leading newspapers and foreign correspondents to denounce the launch of a campaign “to restore the conservative order” in the region. “We’re talking about a strategic counteroffensive by the imperial right, by ultraconservative,
pro-privatization, colonialist sectors,” the La Paz newspaper La Razón quoted him as saying. The concept of “empire,” in the Bolivian context, refers to the US. “The tool of this offensive is the economic war, the war of prices, but also of slander and violence,” García Linera added.

As if to prove the vice president’s point, the country’s major trucking companies, grouped together in the Cámara Boliviana de Transporte (CBT), began blocking traffic along national highways, and on Jan. 29, launched a blockade of the Tambo Quemado, the sole pass through which Bolivian export goods must travel to reach Chilean oceans ports. The association surprised the government by demanding a series of tax breaks in areas that included not only those related to transportation, such as fuel, insurance, and mechanical services, but also on expenses related to health and private education. According to the Ministry of the Economy, the reforms would have cost the state more than US$71 million annually.

On Feb. 5, two weeks before the constitutional referendum, the Army cleared the blockaded roads and the Tambo Quemado pass, which is of particularly strategic importance, given that Bolivia is landlocked and relies of Chilean ports for access to the sea. The government rejected the CBT’s demands for preferential treatment, and Morales announced the creation of a state trucking company. But he also offered to engage the association in talks “of the highest level”—meaning he would participate personally—after the referendum took place. The president promised, furthermore, that the government would guarantee any loans that trucking companies secure in Russia and China, countries the CBT leaders are set to visit in order to consider the advantages and disadvantages of purchasing vehicles there. Before Morales made the offer, the transportation leaders had said they’d prefer to buy units made by Mercedes Benz and Scania, European manufacturers.

The Morales administration reacted to the opposition offensive by pointing its finger at the US government and at former Bolivian political leaders exiled in Miami, Florida. On Jan. 11, according to the Spanish wire service EFE, Morales charged that the money financing the opposition campaign “comes from the US, though we don’t yet know if it’s directly from the State Department, or from the criminals and corrupt people who moved there and are in cahoots with the Interamerican Institute for Democracy (IID).”

The president went on to say, “When I talk about criminals and corrupt people, I’m referring to people who have been legally accused of things as serious as genocide,” in apparent allusion to figures such as former President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (1993-1997 and 2002-2003) and his former right-hand man, Carlos Sánchez Berzaín, who serves as the executive director of the IID. The IID’s president, since May 2015, is Cuban-American writer Carlos Alberto Montaner, a columnist for the El Nuevo Herald newspaper in Miami and a persistent enemy of Morales.

**War of words**

The same day the government broke up the roadblocks, the media broke a bombshell news story that the US Embassy in Bolivia may have helped disseminate. Carlos Valverde, a former intelligence chief (1989-1993) who went on to become a television journalist, accused the president of influence-peddling in connection with a woman named Gabriela Zapata, a former girlfriend of Morales who until recently was a senior manager with China CAMC Engineering, a Chinese firm that won millions of dollars worth of government contracts. The story marked the first time in 10 years that Morales has been associated directly with corruption.
According to Associated Press correspondent Carlos Valdez, the president explained that he, indeed, had had a relationship with Zapata, and that in 2007 the couple “had a child who unfortunately died.” Zapata, who was arrested in late February, now claims the child is alive and that she will present him publicly “at a convenient time,” the BBC reported.

China CAMC Engineering is one of more than 70 Chinese firms under contract with the Bolivian government. It is building a potassium salts plant, a project to provide drinking water, and also won a bid to drill a series of oil wells. As proof of its transparency with regards to the firm, the Morales administration noted that on Dec. 11, 2015, it terminated a contract it had with CAMC, which was supposed to build a stretch of railroad in the central part of the country but failed to meet established deadlines. The government also said it had recovered the US$23 million it had offered the company in bank guarantees.

The government accused the US Embassy’s chargé d’affaires, Peter Brennan, of “giving instructions to Valverde” during a meeting the two men supposedly had in the eastern city of Santa Cruz. “We’re looking into whether this man should be told to leave the country,” Morales said. Valverde hasn’t responded to the accusation. The US Embassy released a statement Feb. 16 saying that, “Brennan meets with people from all sectors, including ministers, lawmakers, athletes, artists, journalists and many others. In no way does this imply any kind of conspiracy, interference or any other activity against the government.”

For now, at least, Valverde’s story has not prompted any legal actions against the president. The only proof the former intelligence chief offered was a birth certificate for Ernesto Fidel Morales Zapata, the baby who allegedly died. At the president’s request, the Congress formed a committee on Feb. 16 to investigate the claims.

“It’s another filthy trick by the right, by the empire. It’s part of a very dirty campaign,” Morales said Feb. 9 after reading out loud some of the negative comments posted about him in social media networks. The messages contained words such as “dirty Indian,” “faggot,” “drug addict,” and “idiot.” The president also pointed out various Internet memes comparing him to animals such as monkeys, llamas, and pigs. “What a coincidence,” he added. “This base language and recurrent insults, which come from the empire and sound so pathetic when repeated by people who, given the supposedly intellectual positions they occupy, ought to be more imaginative. [People like] Montaner, in that article he wrote for El Nuevo Herald in Miami, that US city which is a nest of gusanos [worms].”

In the Jan. 23 edition of El Nuevo Herald, Montaner, the IID head, wrote about Morales in an article called “Una calamidad llamada Evo” (A Calamity Called Evo). “He seems to really enjoy being president… [even if] he doesn’t know anything about law, economics or history. He doesn’t know anything about anything, except the infinite goodness of coca, a plant whose cultivation is increasingly widespread, to the dismay of the Drug Enforcement Administration,” he wrote. Montaner then cited Transparency International’s Perception Corruption Index to describe Bolivia as a “pigsty,” and accused Morales and García Linera of “collaborating with Cuban security services (…) to imprison their adversaries, exile them, and, once in a while, assassinate them.” Despite the seriousness of the claim, neither Montaner, El Nuevo Herald, or Morales’ political opponents in Bolivia followed up on the charges. Less than a month later, six people died in El Alto.