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Push to Extend Bolivian Presidency Continues After Paternity Scandal

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Some of the social organizations that have backed the administration of Evo Morales and Álvaro García Linera in Bolivia are calling for a new referendum on constitutional reforms that would allow the president to run for reelection (Notisur, July 31, 2015, Jan. 22, 2016, and March 11, 2016). But it appears that opposition from the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB) and from key officials who continue to support the government but who believe that this is not a good time for such a referendum, will not allow the effort—spearheaded by a group of women agrarian workers or campesinas—to be anything more than a trial balloon.

The group, the Confederación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas de Bolivia Bartolina Sisa (FNMCB-BS)—named after an 18th century Aymara heroine and the wife of Tupac Katari, the leader of an indigenous rebellion against the Spanish empire—announced their proposal on May 22. Two weeks later, the proposal was essentially rejected. Nevertheless, influential analysts such as Ludwing Valverde, president of the Colegio de Politólogos, an association of political scientists, believe that the idea could mature and be picked up again as October 2019 approaches and Bolivians get ready to elect their next president.

Las Bartolinas, as FNMCB-BS members call themselves, made their proposal known just three months after the Feb. 21 referendum that split the country 51.3% against vs. 48.7% in favor of reelection (a difference, in absolute numbers, of 136,482 out of 5.5 million votes). Government officials accepted the results but attributed them to a “dirty campaign never before seen in Bolivia.”

During a television program that aired two weeks before the referendum, journalist Carlos Valverde had accused Morales of having refused to recognize a son he fathered with a young businesswoman named Gabriela Zapata, and of having paid for the mother’s silence by awarding a multi-million-dollar public works project to the Chinese engineering firm CAMC, which she headed. Morales came to his own defense, saying Valverde was “an agent serving the United States” and pointing to a meeting between

the journalist and Peter Brennan, chargé d’affaires at the US Embassy, weeks before Valverde made the accusation on his TV show.

Bolivian Cabinet Chief Juan Ramón Quintana later noted that Carlos Valverde “was a paramilitary between 1976 and 1980 during the dictatorship of Gen. Hugo Banzer (1971-1978 and 1997-2001) and recycled himself as national head of intelligence between 1989 and 1993, always with good relations with the US.”

Paternity brouhaha
The Bartolinas’ proposal came after May 11, when a judge said the existence of Zapata’s child had not been proven. The judgment is based on the “proven lack of existence of the child in question” and on the fact that “it has been shown that there are no records that confirm the physical existence
of the subject [a minor who would be 9 years old today].” The woman could now be tried for human trafficking and use of minors, since in her efforts to prove Morales’ paternity, “she presented the courts with photographs of four different children,” Judge Jaqueline Rada wrote in her decision.

Five days later, the daily La Razón quoted Carlos Valverde as saying he had been wrong when he made the accusation against Morales, and that “I now have been able to confirm that this child [the supposed son of the president] never really existed.” García Linera spoke on behalf of the government: “The traitorous right that accused Evo of hiding a son also has deceived Bolivia. Zapata’s relatives, linked to the opposition, knew the truth,” the vice president said. “Zapata lied, her relatives lied, and the right lied, using a liar to lie to the Bolivian people and twist the people’s will.”

Although the government didn’t make any public comments on the possibility of repeating the Feb. 21 vote—the paternity controversy had a decisive impact on the result—the Bartolinas launched their proposal, and they had the immediate support of other social organizations, including a coca farmers group, several campesino organizations and the Consejo Indígena del Sur, an indigenous rights group. “We have to compensate for lies about Evo,” they all said. Even Concepción Ortiz, the vice president of the ruling party, Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), gave the Bartolinas her support at first. But Ortiz was overruled by Pedro Montes, the leader of the MAS legislative bloc in the Bolivian Congress, who reminded her that “a decision of this importance should be taken by a party congress.”

Among the opposition, the rejection of a new referendum was automatic. Despite the government posture, Senator Jeanine Añez of the Movimiento Demócrata Social charged that the Morales-García Linera administration “uses leaders of social movements to stay in power eternally.” Businessman Samuel Doria Medina, leader of the right-wing Frente de Unidad Nacional, tweeted that “tyranny wants to implement a plan to disregard the people’s Feb. 21 decision.” Tyranny is the democratic Morales-García Linera government.

**New York Times editorial sparks reaction**

In the middle of an internal debate that never actually took shape, on May 26 The New York Times published an editorial, in English and Spanish, titled The Worst Boyfriend in Bolivia. The editorial coincided with Carlos Valverde’s reappearance, now in Argentina, where he arrived saying he was the object of political persecution in his country. He penned a story for the far-right Buenos Aires website Infobae titled “Evo Morales must be investigated for influence peddling and falsifying a public document.” He was not specific, but he could have been referring to some documentation relating to the Zapata case.

The editorial in the New York Times begins, “If Bolivia’s widening political scandal were to be turned into a soap opera, a fitting title would be ‘Heartless Ex-Boyfriend.’ The protagonists: a Machiavellian statesman and a former paramour. The plot: She threatens to expose him as a monster, but he is determined to stay in power indefinitely, even if he has to jail, silence and discredit her and his critics.” It continues, “For several months, Bolivians have been glued to the real-life drama starring President Evo and his former girlfriend, Gabriela Zapata.”

The editorial then summarizes the case. It takes as truth Zapata’s version, along with Carlos Valverde’s new version and with statements of representatives of the most extremist opposition. Then it says that while this plot develops, “Mr. Morales’ allies in Congress have been peddling bills...
that would curtail freedom of the press and regulate social media.” And it adds, “What they fail to see is that Mr. Morales’ defeat in February resulted from damning facts, not critical news coverage. And they are clearly nervous about the insider account of corruption Ms. Zapata stands to tell if she gets her day in court.”

The Bolivian news agency (Agencia Boliviana de Información, or ABI) reacted May 31, saying that the New York paper had “treated Evo with a string of harsh terms, such as calculating, ruthless and even dangerous, and [called] his partners henchmen, as if they were a gang of criminals.” ABI and the independent newspaper La Razón agreed that The New York Times was misinformed because those bills on freedom of the press and social media had never been presented to Congress.

The most striking, nevertheless, comes at the end of the editorial when it says, “On Tuesday [May 23], Mr. Morales announced a new referendum campaign, saying that he lost the first one because it was tainted by ‘lies’ about the Zapata case.” The last sentence of the editorial was, “There’s no telling how this saga will end, but one thing has become abundantly clear: Mr. Morales and his allies are making the cover-up worse than the crime.”

Morales’ only reference to the possible new referendum was made in Cuba and it was on May 22, not May 23. According to the Cuban news agency Prensa Latina, that day Morales said, “Now there are people who regret having voted No on the February referendum; some have asked for the vote to be nullified, others want a new election because we have been influenced by a lie.” The agency also quoted the president as saying that city dwellers felt they had been scammed and used, and that the possibility of a new referendum was being discussed in meetings, conferences, and other gathering places. It reported Morales as saying that among the urban organizations in this movement “there are universities, neighborhood councils, school boards with parents, and professionals.”

The president did not reopen the topic, and the minister of defense, Reymi Ferreira, said, “The topic is not on the agenda of the Evo Morales government, which is focused on governing.”

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