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Bolivians Promote Fourth Term for President Evo Morales

by Andrés Gaudín

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In 32 months, Bolivians will vote for a new president to lead the country until 2025, the bicentennial of Bolivia’s independence. Although the current president, Evo Morales, does not qualify to run for re-election, the ruling Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS) has already decided to support his candidacy for a fourth consecutive term.

Trade unions as well as campesino (rural worker) and women’s social movements had made that same decision sometime in 2016, and the unanimous resolution by the MAS party congress on Dec. 17 was decisive, so all of Morales’ supporters have launched a full electoral campaign.

In February 2016, the same sectors promoted a referendum to allow Morales’ reelection, but the proposition was rejected, 51.3% to 48.7%. It was the president’s first defeat since he began running for office in 2006 (NotiSur, Jan. 22, 2016, March 11, 2016, and June 17, 2016).

The MAS congress floated the idea of “four legal alternatives to enable the new candidacy within a constitutional track”:

• Promote a citizen initiative for a partial constitutional reform that could go forward with the collection of signatures from 20% of electorate.

• Back a constitutional reform through the legislature that would allow reelection for more than one period (Morales was elected to his first term in 2006, but in 2009 he re-founded the Bolivian state and thus began a new “first term.” This was revalidated in his subsequent re-election in 2014).

• Have the president resign six months before the end of his present term.

• Interpret the Constitution in such a way as to empower the president to seek a new five-year term.

In January, Pastor Mamani, the head of the Supreme Court of Justice and the highest authority in the matter, endorsed all four options, saying, “No constitution, law or regulation is perfect nor definitive; all can be improved and transformed when the people ask for it.” In the Bolivian case, he added, “we don’t have another alternative other than to consult society and change the Constitution if it so demands, in order to achieve a revolutionary, structural justice at the service of the people.”

Opposition labels Morales ‘authoritarian’

The opposition, weak and scattered, reiterates a political line that calls Morales an authoritarian figure, almost dictatorial, willing to put himself above the Constitution and the law. Surveys show little citizen sympathy for this view. The opposition’s only unconditional support comes from the hierarchy of the local Catholic Church. Despite good relations between the president and Pope Francis, the Bolivian clergy has placed its powerful network of print, radio, and television media at the service of the effort against re-election.

A survey underwritten by El Deber, an opposition daily edited in the secessionist department of Santa Cruz, indicated that Morales had a 58% approval rating 11 years after he came to power. The
sample does not include the rural areas where the popularity of the head of state has the highest rates. Strikingly, however, the pollster pointed out that 64% would reject another re-election. Morales entered his first term with 54.7% of the vote; he was re-elected with 64.2%; and he garnered 61.3% when elected to his third term. He lost the February 2016 referendum by a 2.6% difference.

Government authorities accepted the result of the referendum, but denounced the opposition for achieving the small majority by using a “dirty campaign” that enjoyed favors from the Catholic Church and Catholic media. Based on the complaint of a former intelligence agent turned radio journalist, Morales was accused of having a secret child with a Bolivian lawyer who worked for the Chinese firm CAMC Engineering Corporation, Ltd., a subsidiary of China National Machinery Industry Corp. (NotiSur, June 17, 2016). Besides having supposedly hidden the child, it was said that Morales had favored the Asian construction firm by awarding it with contracts for major hydroelectric projects, among other things.

The media widely covered the corruption report, which was launched two weeks before the Feb. 21, 2016, referendum, and thus changed the focus of the debate. Instead of a campaign about re-election, the discussion was about alleged corruption. It had devastating effects and the “Yes” campaign dropped from being ahead by nearly 9% to lose by 2.6%. A month after the referendum, it was proven that the child never existed and that no favors had been granted to the Chinese firm, which on the contrary was punished with the loss of its contracts and monetary guarantees deposited in the official banks for failure to comply with agreements. The complainant admitted that he had lied and apologized.

Morales reorganizes Cabinet

In a strong political move aimed at influencing a new referendum, Morales changed half of his Cabinet on Jan. 22. Among those replaced were two of the most powerful members of the old Cabinet: Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca and Presidency Minister Juan Ramón Quintana. Morales asserts that his side will win this time. “The problem isn’t winning, but finding a way to qualify my candidacy. There are three reasons we know we have won: popular support for the process of changes, the weakness of the opposition, and the crisis of the neoliberal model.”

In a speech before the full legislature marking the end of his 11th year at the head of the government, Morales said that during his time in office he had accomplished more than all of his predecessors in the last 180 years.

“From 1825 when the country was founded, until 2005, the country had 83 presidents, of which 37, or 45%, took over the government through coups,” he said. “Listen up, in 180 years, their average time in office was two years. President Andrés de Santa Cruz y Calahumana (1829-1839) carried out a coup planned by the Chilean oligarchy and Bolivia’s ruling class. That was the first coup in our anti-democratic history.”

Morales offered some statistics to explain his optimism regarding the outcome of a new referendum. He pointed out that annual growth in his 11 years in office has averaged 5%, compared to 2.8% in the preceding 55 years, attributing the results to his administration’s policy of nationalizations (hydrocarbons, energy, and mining, among other sectors). He also noted that per-capita gross domestic product (GDP) in the 55 years before his first administration was an average of US$458, while during his administration it reached US$2,297. Nominal GDP is up from US$9 billion in 2004 to US$34 billion today, he said. The president also noted some shortfalls. Extreme poverty fell from
38.2% in 2005 to 16.8% during his administration, but in 2016 the index did not drop as had in the first years. In addition, he stated his “uneasiness” about the increase in urban unemployment, which went from 3.5% to 4.1% between 2014 and 2016, and the increase in the school drop-out rate, which went from 1.5% to 2.2% at the primary level and from 4.4% to 4.9% at the secondary level during those same years. Finally, he also said that the income from gas sales had dropped significantly, as had the Central Bank’s international reserves, which fell from US$15 billion to US$10.08 billion.

Also speaking before the Congress, Vice President Álvaro García Linera, an ideas man for MAS and the government, further detailed Morales’ thinking about the crisis of the neoliberal model.

“The new president of the United States has signed the death certificate for the political project of neoliberal globalization,” he said. “The right no longer has a project in the world; the Bolivian opposition is left without discourse.” García Linera asserted that behind US President Donald Trump’s policies there is only uncertainty over the model that will govern the world, although he proposed that one of the possibilities would be Bolivia’s communal socialism. García Linera focused his speech on the defense of the country’s socialist model, and said that “with the death of neoliberal globalization as a mobilizing illusion, its defenders are without a political project, without discourse, and without a proposal to summon society.”

García Linera, who has already said he won’t run for re-election so he can return to academia, told Congress that the first symptoms of neoliberal decadence made themselves felt between 2000 and 2006 “when, in Latin America, class wars, revolutions, and alternative economic models were built as alternatives to neoliberalism.” In what appeared to mark one of the ways the current administration will counter the Bolivian right, he cited the model developed by the Morales government, which he called “successful” for having brought 20% of the population out of extreme poverty and for creating four times more collective wealth in 11 years than in the 180 previous years of the republican era.

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