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President Evo Morales Riding High Despite Protests by Bolivia's Doctors, Transport Operators

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Since late last year, when Bolivia's constitutional authority took the surprising step of allowing President Evo Morales to seek reelection ([NotiSur, Dec. 15, 2017](#)), the political right has made a concerted effort to damage the leader's image.

To do so, the opposition is banking on direct action by certain middle class and business-sector groups, specifically doctors and transport operators. In the case of the former, who launched a month-and-a-half-long strike last November, the actions put the health of the population at risk.

Morales, in the meantime, is well positioned to win the 2019 election and thus continue leading the country until 2025. A poll published Jan. 20 by the opposition daily *El Deber* showed that eight out of 10 Bolivians support his government's policies. The country's economic indicators are positive as well. And in October, his reelection bid could get a final boost from the Netherlands-based International Court of Justice (ICJ), which is scheduled to rule on Bolivia's historic maritime dispute with Chile, an issue that unifies Bolivian citizens across party lines ([NotiSur, July 28, 2017](#)).

The Morales administration and the governing *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement for Socialism, MAS) party anticipate that the ruling will be favorable and will give the country sovereign access to the ocean after 135 years of being landlocked.

'Bonos' and other beneficial programs

The nationwide doctors' strike began Nov. 22 and lasted 47 days, until Jan. 8. Backed by university students and health care workers from both state hospitals and private clinics, physicians initiated the work stoppage to challenge new medical malpractice rules (Article 205 of the country's updated criminal code) and to protest a presidential decree establishing an oversight body—the *Autoridad de Fiscalización y Control del Sistema Nacional de Salud*—to regulate the health care system with regards to issues like cost and quality.

"Medical malpractice is penalized the world over with professional disqualification, fines, and even jail time. But unlike in other countries and in other criminal codes—including the old Bolivian criminal code—Article 205 takes special care [to protect medical practitioners] from excesses," Health Minister Ariana Campero said in defense of the new rules. "The text clearly states that in cases where there's a proven lack of technical resources, meaning medications, equipment, or other basic inputs, doctors are exempted from criminal proceedings."

During the first 35 days of the strike, according to the government, 8,000 surgeries and nearly 900,000 patient consultations were suspended. Since 2006, when Morales first became president, public spending on health care has increased by a factor of nearly seven, from US\$401 million per year to US\$2.72 billion in 2017. This year, health care spending will increase an additional 2.7%, bringing it to 7.3% of the overall budget.

“In 11 years, since 2006, Bolivia achieved a major transformation in health care that is reflected, among other things, in a remarkable reduction of the maternal and child mortality rates,” Luis Fernando Leanes, the representative in Bolivia of the World Health Organization (WHO), said Dec. 28 while calling on doctors to end the strike and accept the government’s invitation to meet for talks.

“Bolivia is a model on a global level, and we’ve seen how the programs Mi Salud, Bono Juana Azurduy, Bono Juancito Pinto, and Renta Dignidad have changed people’s lives and dampened the impact of this strike,” the WHO official added.

The Mi Salud program, developed in conjunction with the government of Cuba, provides free, door-to-door medical attention in 325 of the country’s 339 municipalities. The Bono Juana Azurduy is a financial assistance program designed to guarantee health care access and improve all-around development for pregnant women and children under the age of two; its goal is to reduce maternal and infant mortality and improve nutrition. The Bono Juancito Pinto is another financial assistance program designed, in this case, to help families register and keep their children in school. And the Renta Dignidad is an annual and lifetime payment program for people over the age of 60.

Shiny new buses in La Paz

Once the doctors indicated that they might accept talks with the government, the Federación de Choferes de La Paz (Federation of La Paz Drivers), a business-sector association, launched its own protest. Starting in mid-December, it organized a series of roadblocks that peaked in late January, when the drivers blocked access to the capital La Paz and obstructed another 55 strategic arteries there and in the adjacent city of El Alto, impeding the movement of people in low-income districts.

The Federación took similar actions in 2014 to protest, then as now, the government’s decision to improve public transportation in marginalized, topographically challenging areas of La Paz by purchasing 61 new, faster, and more functional vehicles. The smaller, more fuel-efficient buses were designed by engineers at the state-run Universidad Mayor de San Andrés (UMSA) in cooperation with international experts.

The drivers’ federation opposes the government initiative, claiming it cuts into their earnings and could even put them out of business. Not everyone is buying their arguments. “We should speak frankly and say that the implementation of the project didn’t cause any economic losses in 2014, and it won’t harm the sector now,” the opposition daily La Razón indicated. “The project has been beneficial for the entire society.”

Those first 61 buses went into operation in February 2014 and carry the name PumaKatari, in homage to the country’s indigenous ancestry. They’re painted in bright colors with Tiwanaku-inspired illustrations of a half-puma, half-serpent deity. Tiwanaku was the center of Bolivia’s pre-Columbian, highland civilization. The units were built by the Chinese automaker King Long and together form the La Paz bus system, which includes a transfer station connecting passengers to Mi Teleférico, a cable car network.

The public welcomed the PumaKatari vehicles with both enthusiasm and relief, given that beforehand, their only option had been to accept the poor service provided by members of the Federación monopoly or by “pirate” transport operators, the same people who have now gone back to protesting with support from media outlets and leaders from the political right. This time around, the impetus is the government’s plan to expand the PumaKatari fleet with 33 more 62-

passenger buses (like the original ones) plus 39 smaller, more agile units that have 12 seats and can accommodate passengers with wheelchairs, an option that is commonplace in many countries but is a novelty in Bolivia.

Infrastructure and internal consumption

On Jan. 22, Morales concluded his 12th year as president with a speech before Congress outlining the reasons why Bolivia continues to perform well economically despite an unfavorable external context and is now, in his opinion, the most solid and well positioned country in the region.

“The key to the positive results is in the sound management of revenue generated from the nationalization of hydrocarbon (oil and natural gas), a policy of smart savings, the political stability that’s been achieved, and the emphasis on the domestic market as an engine for development,” he said.

The president’s focus on the domestic market contrasts with the low-priority status it tends to have in the neoliberal-oriented programs being reinstalled elsewhere in the region. “Strengthening internal demand helps maintain economic dynamism,” Morales repeated several times. “And it’s based on improved income distribution, better labor conditions, and increased assistance by the state for low-income people.”

Among his government’s accomplishments, Morales highlighted public investment in infrastructure projects aimed at improving internal and regional integrations ([NotiSur, Oct. 6, 2017](#)). The efforts are not going unnoticed, even by his political opponents, as Rubén Costas, one of the president’s fiercest adversaries, made clear by praising the government—perhaps for the first time ever.

“Good highways are no longer a dream but a reality,” said Costas, governor of the wealthy eastern department of Santa Cruz and one of the backers of the strikes by doctors and transport operators. “What’s more, we’re close to being an axis in the railroad line, the Tren Bioceánico (ocean-to-ocean train), that will link Brazilian ports on the Atlantic to Peru and the Pacific and cross Bolivian territory from east to west, acting as a powerful development impetus. We must admit we’re advancing as a country,” he added, much to the dismay of other opposition leaders.

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