

Bolivia: Evolving Political Crisis

By [Franz Chávez](#)

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean](#)

Global Research, September 14, 2008

IPS 14 September 2008

"Twenty Families Are Obstructing Governability"

LA PAZ, Sep 10 (IPS) – The Bolivian government's determination to hold a referendum, by presidential decree, on a new constitution that it hopes will "re-found" the nation as a "plurinational state," has ceded to pressure from the rightwing opposition. The vote has been postponed several weeks, and Congress will be setting the rules.

Leftwing Bolivian President Evo Morales sought approval from Congress to change the date of the referendum from Dec. 7 to Jan. 25, 2009. But he would need the votes of at least 20 of the 56 lawmakers belonging to the rightwing Social and Democratic Power (Podemos) party.

The National Electoral Court (CNE) ruled that the referendum could not be held without parliamentary approval and forced President Morales to withdraw his original decree, issued after a massive showing of public support in the Aug. 10 recall referendum, in which he took 67 percent of the vote.

The official results announced by the CNE gave Morales a majority of the votes in 82 of the country's 98 provinces, which are subdivisions of its nine departments (regions). Nationwide, he garnered 2.1 million of 3.1 million votes.

It is precisely this avalanche of votes, the greatest proportion won by a president since the restoration of democracy in 1982, that raises questions for sociology Professor Joaquín Saravia, who told IPS that "The government appears insecure, because it has overwhelming social and political support, but this has not translated into real control of the country, which is alarming," he said.

The head of the governing Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) parliamentary group, César Navarro, said that democratic changes being promoted by the government are resisted by the elites, who are accustomed to lives of privilege and benefiting from the state.

Morales and his team have called on their supporters to hold counter-demonstrations against the roadblocks set up 17 days ago by the rightwing opposition on the borders with Argentina and Paraguay and south of La Paz. The opposition is threatening to extend the traffic blockades to highways leading to Brazil, in the eastern department of Santa Cruz.

So far the conflicts have occurred hundreds of kilometres away from the largest cities, like Santa Cruz, Cochabamba and La Paz, which have traditionally been scenarios for the social protests or military coups d'état that toppled governments throughout Bolivia's 183 years of history as an independent nation.

Although serious difficulties in transporting fuel make it likely that cities near the roadblocks will run out of petrol and cooking gas in less than a week, the government remains calm while keeping a close eye on the protests.

The initial goal of the roadblock protests in the wealthier natural gas-producing provinces in the east was to demand reimbursement to the regions of 49 million dollars in natural gas taxes that the central government had diverted to a monthly pension of 26 dollars a month for the elderly.

But the main aim now is to block the referendum on the new constitution, which includes a legal limit on the size of “latifundios” (huge landed estates).

Professor Saravia estimates that the opposition movement, made up of business organisations, rightwing parties and pro-business and agribusiness Civic Committees, is led and orchestrated by just 20 families of landowners and industrialists. However, they have the power to obstruct governability for the first indigenous president in the history of Bolivia.

Fifty-five percent of Bolivians are indigenous people, mainly Quechua and Aymara, and a further 30 percent are mestizos (of mixed indigenous and European ancestry). The remaining 15 percent of the population is white, according to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Factbook.

Saravia said he was deeply concerned that in the absence of a government capable of maintaining public order, activists on both the right and the left may try to take the solution of the conflict into their own hands, using violent means. The outcome would be impossible to predict, he said.

“The government is behaving short-sightedly and irresponsibly, because social unrest is growing, and the violent protests are violating the rule of law and showing disrespect for the police and the armed forces,” he said.

The opposition has been using radical rightwing youth groups to occupy public offices by force, triggering violent clashes with the security forces guarding the buildings. On Tuesday the airport at Cobija, the departmental capital of Pando, north of La Paz, was still occupied by opposition demonstrators.

Government buildings have been taken over in the southern city of Tarija and also in the small northeastern city of Trinidad, the capital of Beni, where the landing strip was occupied as well Tuesday, according to press reports.

Under these circumstances, “the last recourse of the state for imposing the rule of law and defending the constitution is the armed forces, which will be called out if there is widespread violence,” he said.

José Antonio Aruquipa of Podemos, a member of the constituent assembly which rewrote the constitution, told IPS that the president’s decree for a constitutional referendum is a way of imposing his draft constitution, which “may be divisive and provoke a confrontation.”

Ahead of the parliamentary debate, Aruquipa is demanding that the draft constitution be revised, while reiterating his procedural objections to the manner in which the draft text received its final approval in the city of Oruro, on Dec. 9, 2007.

The new constitution was passed by over two-thirds of the constituent assembly with very little discussion, at a marathon all-night session that was boycotted by the rightwing opposition..

The government has called a march by social movements and trade unions which is to arrive at La Paz on Wednesday, Sept. 16, in order to exert pressure on Congress during the debate on the constitutional referendum bill.

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