

Bolivia: Fascist right launches ‘civic coup’

By [Federico Fuentes](#) and [Stuart Munckton](#)

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September 13, 2008 — “[Today] a civil-prefectural coup against the unity of the country and democracy has been initiated”, Bolivian minister of government Alfredo Rada declared on September 9, as a growing wave of violence by small gangs of fascist youth engulfed the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra.

The violence by armed fascist gangs, backed by local authorities, spread in the following days throughout the rest of the so-called “half-moon” — the four eastern departments of Santa Cruz, Pando, Beni and Tarija. The half moon is home to much of Bolivia’s natural resources and the main base of opposition to the left-wing government of President Evo Morales from the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), who on August 10 won a recall referendum on his presidency with 67% of the vote.

With a sizeable white middle class, compared the largely indigenous west, the oligarchy in the east has worked overtime to whip up a racist frenzy against a national government headed by Bolivia’s first ever indigenous president and the largely indigenous social movements that back it.

The oligarchy has pushed for “autonomy” from the national government in a manoeuvre aimed to protect its privileges from the national government’s pro-people measures, and now appears to be attempting to impose its domination of the half moon by force.

Reign of terror

Incited by the Santa Cruz Civic Committee, which groups together sectors of the oligarchy, and with the collaboration of the departmental prefects in the east and the US embassy, on September 9 the fascist shock troops of the Santa Cruz Youth Union (UJC) laid siege to public institutions, NGOs, community radio stations and the offices of the state TV channel, in some cases attempting to burn them down.

That same day, the head of the parliamentary bloc of the right-wing Podemos party and large landowner, Antonio Franco, “applauded” the violent takeovers, while Podemos deputy for Santa Cruz, Oscar Urenda, issued an open call to arms.

“If we are going to talk about confrontation, then lets talk about confrontation, if we are going to talk about war, there will be war, but they are not going to able to impose things on us”, he proclaimed. “We are strong enough to split this country and if I have to grab a log, a gun, I will do it, I’m going to defend my territory.”

An eyewitness account from September 12 published on Marxist.com writes: “What started on September 9th as vandalism against public institutions has developed into a fascist orgy

of violence which threatens civil war.”

The writer states: “The list of occupied institutions is long. Everything from tax offices, administration of land, immigration authorities to the department of forestry was brutally destroyed. The national administration of land had its entire inventory destroyed and burned, and the same happened to the nationalized telecom company ENTEL. ENTEL had its entire main building smashed and the fascist hordes stole everything of value.”

The writer reported a “consistent attack on all social organizations and government supporters. In Santa Cruz, the human rights organization Cejis, is ravaged and their entire inventory is burned and destroyed. The same happens to CIDOB, the indigenous people’s main organization in Eastern Bolivia. All left wing leaders are hunted and many have had to go underground.”

“In ... Tarija, the fascist gangs attack the peasants’ marketplace. Molotov cocktails are thrown at all the stalls ... One right wing leader declares Tarija to be independent and declares civil war in the region.”

According to a September 12 Reuters report, the government has accused the fascists of “a real massacre” against government supporters in Pando with at least 15 people recorded killed. The national government is seeking the arrest of Pando prefect, Leopoldo Fernandez, who is alleged to have organised the killings. Fernandez has fled to Brazil.

According to a September 10 AP report, opposition protesters blew up a pipeline in Tarija, reducing the flow of gas to Brazil by half at one point. The protests also interrupted the flow of gas to Argentina. Santos Ramirez, president of the state oil company, YPFB, called the explosion “a terrorist attack”.

In response, additional troops were immediately ordered to the eastern departments to secure gas and oil installations. Gas exports to Argentina and Brazil were returning to normal by September 12, according to a Reuters report that day.

Counter-offensive

The attempt to seize power through brute force in the half moon is clear, but it has been met by a counter-offensive by the government and the powerful social movements that support the process of change.

The eyewitness account provides one example of the heroic actions of supporters of the government in the Plan 3000 working class neighbourhood: “The workers have rallied to a massive defence against the 400 young fascists who attack the marketplace with clubs, Molotov cocktails and hand weapons. Rapidly, thousands rally for the defence which develops into extreme violence with many wounded. About 3 o’clock at night, the fascists have been driven out, but the inhabitants keep the entrenchment defended.”

In the lead-up to the current wave of violence, Morales declared that his government would ensure that the institutions and security of the state were respected and called for the “unity of the people and the Armed Forces to defend the process of change”, according to the September 9 Argentine daily Clarin.

The article reported that phone calls had poured into the state radio station asking Morales

to decree a state of emergency.

Minister of the presidency Juan Ramon Quintana, however, stated on September 9 that the government would not declare a state of emergency, arguing that the opposition wanted to provoke repression in order to have a banner around which to mobilise wider sections of the population against the government.

The commander of the army's eighth division, General Marco Bracamonte, declared that the military would prevent any further takeover of oil and gas installations and defend the security of the state.

On September 10, the Six Federations of Coca Growers of the Tropics of Cochabamba, the union organisation from which Morales emerged and still remains president of, along with peasant organisations in Santa Cruz, began to cut off Santa Cruz's road access.

The Chapare coca-growing region in Cochabamba — a MAS stronghold — is strategically located with the main highway connecting Santa Cruz to Bolivia's west running through it.

Other social organisations also began to block road access to the other eastern departments.

A September 11 Prensa Latina article reported on the pledge to continue and strengthen the blockade of Santa Cruz by the National Coordinator for Change (CONALCAM), which unites many of the social movements that support the process of change led by Morales.

Permanent mobilisation

Fidel Surco, president of the Confederation of Colonisers — an organisation of indigenous campesinos — announced that CONALCAM had called for "permanent mobilisations" until Congress ratifies a referendum on adopting the new draft constitution scheduled for December, according to Prensa Latina.

The draft constitution, which would expand the rights of indigenous people, enshrine greater state control over natural resources and open the way for redistribution of large land holdings to impoverished campesinos, is a key source of conflict.

A key demand of the right-wing forces in the half moon is to withdraw plans for a referendum on adopting the text.

On September 10, Morales announced the expulsion from Bolivia of the US ambassador, Philip Goldberg, for his role in backing the coup. Goldberg had publicly urged the US to intervene on the side of the 'half moon authorities behind the violence. Goldberg was given 72 hours to leave the country.

On September 11, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez gave the US ambassador in Caracas 72 hours to leave, in solidarity with Bolivia. On September 12, ABN reported that Honduras had suspended recognition of the US's ambassador to it in solidarity with Venezuela and Bolivia.

The US responded by expelling the Venezuelan and Bolivian ambassadors from its territory

On September 11, Chavez offered Venezuelan military assistance in defence of democracy

to Bolivia. “If any of our governments is overthrown, we will have a green light to perform military operations of any type to give the power back to the people in those countries”, Chavez insisted according to a September 1 Xinhua report.

Struggle for power

The “civic coup” that has been unleashed comes on the back of three weeks of small but violent demonstrations, generally limited to the inner city areas of the capitals of the half moon departments.

Protesters assaulted indigenous people, social movement leaders, MAS councillors, police officers and soldiers as well as initiating road blocks, occupying airports and state institutions and even physically taking over military airplanes.

The protests have focused on the issue of the revenue from the “direct tax on hydrocarbons”. More of the revenue from natural gas used to be directed towards the departmental authorities, but the Morales government is seeking to redirect revenue towards anti-poverty social programs, such as a new universal old-aged pension.

With moves towards nationalisation of Bolivia’s sizeable gas reserves — opposed by the opposition parties who, when in power, sought to privatise the industry — royalties from hydrocarbons have skyrocketed. As a result, even with the government’s redistribution policies, revenue to departments has still significantly increased.

Five of the nine departments are controlled by prefects openly hostile to the national government (the half moon plus Chuquisaca) and these authorities have used the increased funds to help organise violent destabilisation measures against the national government.

Since Morales’s crushing 67.4% victory in the recall referendum, his government has announced its intention for a referendum on the new constitution drafted by an elected constituent assembly.

While Morales issued a decree to hold the referendum on December 7, the National Electoral Court ruled that it would not hold the consultation as such a referendum had to be approved by parliament.

Oscar Ortiz, president of the Podemos-controlled Senate threatened on September 10 to intensify the violent protests if MAS insisted on its campaign to approve the new constitution, which would declare Bolivia a “plurinational state”.

Behind the half moon prefects and civic committees stand large agribusiness interests and gas transnationals who see their interests threaten by the advance of the self-proclaimed “democratic and cultural revolution” led by Morales.

Fearing the consolidation of the process of change, the rich elites have stepped up their attempts to oust the Morales government.

US role

The government has accused Santa Cruz Civic Committee president Branco Marinkovic, who only hours before had returned from a visit to Miami, of being the instigator of the plan to set the country alight.

Marinkovic, who has helped direct the UJC violence, is accused of acting “with the financial support and advise by ex-minister Carlos Sanchez Berzain, who is accused of genocide in Bolivia”, reported ABI on September 9.

Berzain is wanted in Bolivia on various charges relating to the deaths of more than 60 people in a massacre in 2003 that attempted to crush an uprising against plans to privatise Bolivia’s gas industry, when he was justice minister.

While Bolivia has asked the US to extradite both Berzain and Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (president in 2003), the Bush administration has refused to collaborate. Instead, Berzain was granted asylum in the US in July.

Further evidence of the role of the US in the current coup was demonstrated in a brazen display of imperial arrogance when Goldberg declared that “Washington should interfere in [Bolivia’s] internal affairs” and “called on the Bolivian government of President Evo Morales to pay attention to the demands of the opposition”.

Golberg merely confirmed what the MAS government has long asserted: Washington is directly involved in the plot to overthrow Morales, including via increased funding to opposition parties, “civil society” organisations and pro-autonomy groups.

On August 25, Goldberg secretly met with Santa Cruz prefect Ruben Costas, only nine days after Costas had announced plans to violate the national law by implementing a series of “autonomy” measures aimed at undermining the national government.

Morales declared the decision to expel Goldberg to be a homage to the historic struggle of the Bolivian people against imperialism — adding that only the people organised can defend democracy.

According to a September 12 AP report, Morales decreed a state of emergency in Pando, sending fresh troops to secure control. The carrying of weapons is banned under the decree “to safeguard lives and the collective good”, according to Rada.

The decree came after the authorities in the half moon finally agreed to national government requests to enter into talks to resolve the crisis.

It is clear that the talks will centre on the question of the referendum on the new constitution, with the secretary for autonomy in Santa Cruz stating: “We all agree that we have to look for a point of compromise.”

Speaking in Cochabamba, Morales stated that opponents “have every right to reject the new constitution, but through the vote and not through violence”.

However the current crisis resolves itself, the battle between poor, mostly indigenous oppressed majority and the racist, US-backed oligarchy is a central part of the continent-wide struggle against US domination and neoliberalism.

Supporters of social justice around the world need to raise their voices against US intervention and fascism in Bolivia, and for democracy.

For ongoing news, as well as to sign on to an international statement of support for Bolivia, visit <http://boliviarising.blogspot.com> .]

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Articles by: [Federico Fuentes](#)
and [Stuart Munckton](#)

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