

The Battle for Bolivia's Future

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The breaking of a six-month deadlock in Bolivia's constituent assembly has paved the way for the opening of an intense debate on the future of this politically polarised country nestled in the heart of South America. Beginning to lose the battle within the halls of the assembly, the right-wing opposition has threaten to take the fight onto the streets, announcing that it may reject any new constitution that emerges out of the body.

After losing the June 6 vote in the assembly's Vision of the Country Commission, delegated with drafting proposals on the type of country Bolivia should be, Gamal Serham, a delegate from the right-wing PODEMOS party, told the media that the decision had forced a situation of "confrontation".

Five days later, the pro-business Santa Cruz Civic Committee met to discuss the situation. Following the meeting, Carlos Dabdoub, secretary-general of the Santa Cruz prefecture, told Associated Press that the region had decided to begin "democratic resistance". Dabdoub stated that although the movement "is totally peaceful", however he added: "No-one is thinking of an armed confrontation, but we will continue until the end."

Dabdoub announced that the recently formed Pro-Autonomy Junta, comprised of the opposition-aligned prefects from Bolivia's four eastern departments (states), and supported by Cochabamba's prefect, Manfred Villa Reyes, would meet on June 18 to discuss spreading the battle beyond Santa Cruz.

In response, Justino Leano, a mallku (indigenous community leader) from the Council of Markas and Ayllus of Qullasuyu, which unites traditional community structures of the Aymara indigenous people across the altiplano region in the West, warned that the organisations of the Unity Pact had declared a state of emergency and would take up the fight for a plurinational state and indigenous autonomies "in the streets and highways". The Unity Pact includes the country's biggest campesino and indigenous organisations, which back the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) government of indigenous President Evo Morales.

"We are the majority and we are warning [the right] that if the minority continue to put obstacles in the way of the constituent assembly, we are ready to mobilise and organise ourselves to come to Sucre [Bolivia's constitutional capital where the assembly is meeting]", said Isaac Avalos, leader of the United Union Confederation of Campesino Workers of Bolivia, which is aligned with the Unity Pact.

The Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of the East of Bolivia (CIDOB), also part of the Unity Pact, declared that it would begin a march on June 20 from Santa Cruz to Sucre.

This renewed round of confrontation has come as the constituent assembly, having finally agreed on rules for debate and procedure, began to discuss and draft proposals for Bolivia's future constitution. The right-wing opposition, hoping to both weaken the powers and credibility of the body and enforce a minority veto on any radical measures, had been pushing hard for a two-third majority voting system, stalling the body's deliberations.

A compromise agreement was reached on February 14. Delegates will attempt to reach a two-thirds majority, while leaving it open for controversial issues to go directly to a vote in the final referendum on the new constitution.

After the compromise, delegates spent six weeks back in their electorate, discussing proposals for the new constitution with their community. In addition, 21 commissions were formed to draft proposals for the assembly. However, only two commissions submitted articles to the assembly before the June 11 deadline — a reflection of the race against time that the assembly is involved in to catch up and have a new draft constitution by the deadline of August 6.

Disagreement over what a future Bolivia should be like exploded in the Vision of the Country Commission when some of the MAS representatives voted for a proposal put forward by some of the smaller groupings in the assembly. Much of the public debate had centred on the two competing visions for Bolivia put forward by MAS and PODEMOS — a “united, plurinational and communitarian state” versus a “constitutional, democratic and social state of law”. The votes from MAS delegates meant that the minority proposal coming from the commission would be that of Social Alliance and Insurgent Homeland — a “multinational state”. This meant PODEMOS's project would be left off the table.

Conflicts also emerged in the Land and Territory Commission. But the temperature reached boiling point when MAS supporters presented a third proposal in the Autonomy Commission — where the opposition has focussed much of its efforts to weaken the MAS project — raising fears among the opposition of a repeat of the events in the Vision of the Country Commission.

The pro-imperialist bloc in Bolivia — comprised of gas transnationals, large agribusiness, and the political elites, organised through PODEMOS, the Civic Committee of Santa Cruz and the country's eastern prefectures and backed by the US embassy — fears the rise of Bolivia's indigenous majority and has unleashed a campaign of destabilisation aimed at overthrowing the indigenous government.

Bolivia's economic elites have lost any real support base in the country's west and have been pushed out of their traditional positions of power in the government and state bureaucracy by an emergent indigenous rebellion that has thrown out successive presidents and pulverised traditional parties. In response, they have resorted to calls for greater departmental autonomy as a way of protecting their interests and control of Bolivia's natural resources, namely gas — most of which is situated in the east.

Santa Cruz is Bolivia's richest department. According to the Industry and Commerce Chamber (CAINCO), it is the origin of 30% of Bolivia's GDP, produces 50% of the country's exports and receives 47.6% of foreign investment. The banner of autonomy has been used to rally support among the generally whiter, middle-class population of the east against Morales's “indigenous populism”.

Playing on the fears among the middle classes of the possible disintegration of Bolivia and a wave of “indigenous revenge”, the opposition has raised the spectre of the dismemberment of Bolivia into 36 small indigenous nation-states under MAS’s proposal of a plurinational state that grants indigenous autonomy. Ruben Dario Cuellar, the head of the PODEMOS delegation in the assembly, warned of “Aymara colonisation of national territory”. The Santa Cruz Civic Committee warned Morales: “Don’t put at risk the unity of the nation.”

“We have said it clearly that [departmental] autonomy will happen”, replied Vice-President Alvaro Garcia Linera, according to June 12 media reports. However it will only be autonomy that respects “our beloved homeland Bolivia, which is expressed through state property over renewable and non-renewable natural resources”.

Garcia Linera explained that a united, plurinational, communitarian state would be a single state with more than 40% of the economy in its hands and which would recognise Bolivia’s cultural diversity.

Another part of MAS and the social movements’ proposals for the new constitution is the creation of a fourth power — social power — alongside, or above, legislative, executive and judicial power. This proposal, which is yet to be clearly formulated, aims to create spaces of participatory democracy for the direct involvement of Bolivia’s indigenous majority and social movements in exercising power.

Discussing a future Bolivia and the objections raised by the opposition, Adolfo Chavez, one of the leaders of CIDOB, stated bluntly: “the minorities of the right have already managed this country for long enough. Now the indigenous people are guaranteeing a new vision for the country.”

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