

The Final Battle in Bolivia

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Evo Morales, the first Indian president of Bolivia, is forcing a showdown with the oligarchy and the right wing political parties that have stymied efforts to draft a new constitution to transform the nation. He declares, "Dead or alive I will have a new constitution for the country by December 14," the mandated date for the specially elected Constituent Assembly to present the constitution.

Vice-President Alvaro Garcia Linares states, "Either we now consolidate the new state...with the new dominant forces behind us, or we will move backwards and the old forces will again predominate." A leading trade union leader, Edgar Patana, put it bluntly: "The final battle has begun, and the people are prepared for it."

For over a year the oligarchy centered in the eastern city of Santa Cruz has conspired to frustrate the efforts of the Constituent Assembly in which the governing party, the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS), and its allies hold 60 percent of the seats. First the right wing parties in the Assembly, led by Podemos, insisted that a two-thirds vote was needed even for committees to approve the different sections of the new constitution.

When the opposition was overruled on this point, the oligarchy then won allies in the city of Sucre, where the Constituent Assembly is being held, by asserting that the executive and congressional branches of government should be moved from La Paz to Sucre, which used to be the center of government until the late nineteenth century. This was also a racial strategy as La Paz and its sister city El Alto are at the heart of the country's majority Indian population that support Morales and mobilized in 2003 to topple an oligarchic president in La Paz who murdered Indian demonstrators in the streets.

In Sucre in recent months right wing militants have menaced and assaulted delegates of MAS, including Silvia Lazarte, the Assembly's indigenous women president. The Assembly has been effectively prevented from functioning since August 15.

Then in a move to more equitably redistribute the country growing oil and gas revenues, Morales in mid-October declared that a retirement pension equal to the minimum wage would be extended to all Bolivians that would come directly out of a special hydrocarbon fund. Morales simultaneously cut the payments from the fund that go to municipal governments like Santa Cruz with no congressional oversight. This caused an uproar in the Media Luna (Half Moon) region, comprised of the department of Santa Cruz and allied departments, with many of the business interests of the country threatening to create shortages and sow economic chaos by withholding their produce from the market.

Three hundred peasants, who came to Sucre last week to protect the Assembly members in its efforts to reconvene, were violently expelled from their sleeping quarters at the

Pedagogical Institute by right wing students and Lazarte was prevented from convening the Assembly. Then Morales moved the Assembly meeting site to an old castle on the outskirts of Sucre that also serves as a military school and barracks. The head of the armed forces, General Wilfredo Vargas, backed the meeting of the Assembly at the castle, saying "it has to meet to continue ...to modernize the state in all its features."

Then Vargas in a swipe at one of the regional political leaders allied with the Media Luna who claimed that Cuban and Venezuelan military units were in the country, declared: "No information exists of such units. And if it were the case, they are military units of the State and as part of the State they represent the Bolivian people."

The Bush administration is also jumping into the fray. Earlier this year Morales denounced that US backed agencies and non-governmental organizations that are providing direct support to right-wing political parties and allied institutions, ordering that all such funding would now be channeled directly through the government. Then at the recent Ibero-American Summit in Santiago Chile, Morales declared that "while we are trying to change Bolivia...small groups of the oligarchy are conspiring in alliance with the representative of the government of the United States," referring to the US ambassador to Bolivia, Philip Goldberg. To support his claims a photo was shown of Goldberg in Santa Cruz with a leading right wing business magnet and a well known Colombian narco-trafficker, who had been detained by the local police.

On November 15, the US State Department spokesperson, Sean McCormick, responded by demanding that Morales stop launching "false" and "unfounded" allegations of conspiracy by the ambassador. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called the Bolivian ambassador in Washington to deliver the same tough message.

The delegates of the right wing parties led by Podemos boycotted the meetings at the castle, declaring that the Assembly is "illegal." On Friday 139 of the 255 Assembly members met and approved the broad outlines of a new constitution to carry out the reforms championed by Morales and the country's social movements. The next step is for the Assembly to adopt the specific clauses and content of the constitution.

But before that process could begin, the opposition in Sucre, led mainly by students and young people, violently took over all the major public buildings using dynamite and Molotov cocktails, demanding the resignation of "the shitty Indian Morales." Parts of the city were in flames as the members of the Assembly abandoned the castle on Saturday, and by Sunday rioting mobs controlled Sucre, forcing the police to retreat to the mining town of Potosi, two hours away. Three people, including one policeman, are dead, with hundreds injured. The right wing and the business organizations in Santa Cruz and allied departments are threatening to declare autonomy and even talking of cession.

"We are at a national impasse" says Manuel Urisote, a political analyst and director of the Land Foundation, an independent research center in La Paz. "The right wing led by the Santa Cruz oligarchy is in open rebellion, but Morales, the Movement Towards Socialism and the popular movements will not back down. The military is supporting the president. As a national institution it intends to maintain the territorial integrity of Bolivia and it will not accept decrees of cession by Santa Cruz."

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