



BOLIVIA INFORMATION FORUM

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Bolivia's recall referendum: Resounding support for Evo Morales

Summary

Evo Morales was ratified by 67.76% of the voting public nationwide in Bolivia's recall referendum on Sunday August 10. The four prefects of the 'half-moon' lowland departments, who have led opposition to Morales, were confirmed in post. Two opposition prefects, those of La Paz and Cochabamba, have seen their mandate recalled and will leave their posts.

The atmosphere had been one of tension in the lead-up to the referendum, but the day passed largely without incident. Turnout was over 83%. The vast majority used their vote for the 'yes' or 'no' options, and spoilt ballot papers were a tiny percentage of the ballots cast overall.

Antecedents

The legislation on the recall referendum had been passed last December by the Chamber of Deputies, where Evo Morales's Movement towards Socialism (MAS) party has a majority, but was held up by the opposition-dominated Senate. In May, the main opposition grouping in the Senate changed tack, approving the bill without amendment. Sensing the opportunity to break the deadlock between the government and the opposition, President Morales immediately promulgated the new law and set August 10 as the date. In the wake of the Santa Cruz referendum on autonomies, the opposition apparently miscalculated by overestimating the degree of support it enjoyed.

Content of the Law

The law specifies that the people should decide whether the president, vice-president and prefects should continue in their posts. In the case of the president and vice-president the question posed asked voters directly if they were in favour of continuation (or not) of the process of change undertaken by the MAS.

For the president, vice-president or prefects to remain in office, they had to win more votes than they had in the December 2005 elections. A 'no' vote equal to or more than that vote would force them to leave their post.

In the period leading up to the referendum, there were many who argued that the law implied an uneven starting point and was therefore unfair. It was suggested that in the case of the prefects all should stay if they won 50% plus one of the vote. This call was heeded by the National Electoral Court which, only days before voting took place, decided that since the law did not apply an upper ceiling for recall, only those with less than 50% support would have to leave.

On the day

People turned out massively from early in the morning, showing yet again that Bolivians want to have a say in their future. In spite of the tension in previous days, the voting and the count took place very peacefully, apart from one or two problems in remote areas. The main problems involved members of right-wing gangs in Santa Cruz trying to intimidate voters.

Voting was supervised by over 400 observers, mainly from the Organization of American States, the Latin American Council of Electoral Experts, and by parliamentarians from Europe and the Mercosur countries (Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay).

Results

For President and Vice-president.

These are taken from the official count at 00.00 hours GMT on 14 August, with final results available only for Tarija, Cochabamba, Chuquisaca and Pando. Figures are based on over 96% of the vote nationwide. The first column details the percentage achieved in the recall referendum, the second, the vote in the last presidential elections.

Department	% vote In favour August 2008	% vote National elections 12/2005
Nationwide	67.76%	53.74%
Chuquisaca/Sucre	53.88%	54.17%
La Paz	82.88%	66.63%
Cochabamba	70.90%	64.84%
Oruro	82.94%	62.58%
Potosí	77.76%	57.80%
Tarija	49.83%	31.55%
Santa Cruz	38.15%	33.17%
Beni	42.30%	16.50%
Pando	52.73%	20.86%

The figures show how Evo Morales and Alvaro García Linera managed to increase their proportion of the vote by over fourteen percentage points. They thus have the support of two-thirds of the voting population. This support has increased in all departments, including those of the 'half moon', with a slight fall-off only in Chuquisaca. The altiplano departments of La Paz, Oruro and Potosí show very strong support for Morales, with Cochabamba (valleys) following on, and minority support in only three departments.

For Prefects.

Again, the complete tally is available only for the four departments mentioned above. There was no vote for prefect in Chuquisaca as the incumbent was only voted in last month.

Department	% vote 12/2005	% vote In favour 8-08	% vote Against 8-08
La Paz	37.99%	35.58%	64.42%
Cochabamba	47.64%	35.19%	64.81%
Oruro	40.95%	50.74%	49.26%
Potosí	40.69%	78.77%	21.23%
Tarija	45.65%	58.06%	41.94%
Santa Cruz	47.88%	67.10%	32.90%
Beni	44.64%	64.27%	35.73%
Pando	48.03%	56.21%	43.79%

If the National Electoral Court's ruling stands, two opposition prefects, José Luis Paredes of La Paz and Manfred Reyes Villa of Cochabamba are recalled, and the prefect of Oruro, Alberto Aguilar (MAS) remains, by the skin of his teeth. There will therefore be new elections to prefect in those departments where the prefect was recalled.

The four prefects of the lowland departments in opposition to the government, Santa Cruz, Tarija, Beni and Pando, have been ratified in post with increased percentages of the vote.

Some comments

- Two-thirds of the Bolivian people have given their support to the process of change currently underway, led by President Evo Morales. The results underline the fact that Morales is one of the few (if not the only) politicians of national standing.
- The vote will enhance Morales' position internationally.
- In spite of tension before the referendum, voting took place with few disruptions.
- The majority of the population that is both poor and of indigenous origin voted massively for Morales and García Linera. Middle class support continues, though this varies considerably from place to place.
- The four prefects of the lowland opposition have bolstered their position and are already taking a strong line against Morales, in spite of his increased support there since 2005. Rubén Costas of Santa Cruz made a particularly aggressive speech on election day, promising to move ahead regardless with implementation of (de facto) autonomy. Meanwhile, Morales used conciliatory language promising dialogue on how autonomy would be interpreted in the new constitution.
- Voting patterns within the 'half-moon' departments varied considerably. In Santa Cruz, in the provinces of Ichilo (Yapacaní) and Ñuflor de Chávez (San Julián and Cuatro Cañadas), areas settled largely by migrants from the highlands, as many as 85% of voters backed Morales.
- The vote from some rural areas in Santa Cruz and Potosí still have to be counted.
- This is the first time in Bolivian history that a recall referendum has taken place. Its purpose is to ensure greater accountability. The new constitution envisages a recall referendum becoming standard practice.
- The MAS prefect of Oruro has been called to account by the electorate because he was seen as ineffectual. By contrast, the prefect of Potosí was rewarded for what is seen as his positive performance.

Where next?

The increased support for the prefects of the 'half moon' means that they are likely to increase their efforts to secure autonomy from the government in La Paz. The tone adopted by Costas of Santa Cruz supports this. The opposition prefects – some now styling themselves as 'governors' – will therefore continue to dodge government efforts to promote some sort of dialogue. The war of attrition of the last few months seems set to continue, in spite of the clear validation of Evo Morales's standing as president of Bolivia.