



BOLIVIA INFORMATION FORUM

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Behind the news from Bolivia

On May 4 Santa Cruz, Bolivia's second largest department by population, will hold a local referendum on the issue of greater autonomy from the central government, based in La Paz. The referendum has no basis in law and is unconstitutional.

The growing demand for autonomy

Whilst demands for greater decentralisation are not new, they tended to increase as the Constituent Assembly progressed towards writing a new constitution.

Election of a Constituent Assembly was a key demand of Bolivia's social movements and its people more generally -- including the indigenous majority -- at the ousting of President Sánchez de Lozada in October 2003. It was but one of a number of demands -- including the recovery of natural resources, particularly the country's large gas reserves -- to bring greater justice to a country afflicted by colonialism and neoliberalism where the majority received neither the benefits of economic development nor political participation.

When he became president in January 2006 with over 50% of the vote, Evo Morales moved swiftly both on the gas issue and on the constitution. Members were duly elected to the Constituent Assembly in July 2006.

In elaborating its text, the Assembly consulted widely on all the main issues. It held meetings in all the departments, worked in committees to draw up different parts of the text, and sought to involve all shades of political opinion. However, it faced serious upheavals. The party representing the right, PODEMOS, which boycotted key meetings, did its best to obstruct dialogue and question the legitimacy of decisions reached.

There was a great deal of agreement between the different political persuasions represented in the Assembly. However, a few issues remained in dispute, requiring greater definition. These included questions of land tenure, decentralisation (autonomy), and the powers of local government.

The issue of autonomy has turned into the political banner under which Santa Cruz in particular is rallying the opposition. Dissatisfied with the role played by PODEMOS, the right wing has developed new power bases in the departmental civic committees. Led by the *Comité Pro Santa Cruz*, these are unelected bodies that represent major business interests. The civic committees, in turn, have managed to ensure the election of their supporters as departmental prefects. They seek to protect the interests of landowners, agribusiness and industrial and commercial concerns. They are now the focus for opposition to Evo Morales' government.

The Constituent Assembly's text contains a number of proposals on autonomy, including the need to grant autonomy to municipalities and to indigenous peoples both in Santa Cruz and elsewhere. However, the *Comité Pro Santa Cruz's* proposals seek to reinforce the power of the elite by restricting autonomy to the departmental capitals. They were drawn up without consultation with the local indigenous population or the local representatives of the people.

What are the civic committee demanding?

The so-called Autonomy Statutes involve radical constitutional changes. Bolivia would become a federal state or, indeed, a country divided in two. Rubén Costas, the prefect of Santa Cruz, recently announced that May 4 would see the birth of a "second republic". Under these proposals, nearly all functions of government would pass into the hands of the local administrations, such as control over natural resources and the rents arising from them, control of the size (and ownership) of landholdings, policing and responsibility for the judiciary. Indigenous people are dismissed as "a minority", and their collective landholdings would be put at risk.

Negotiations with central government

Since the beginning of the year, there have been a number of unsuccessful attempts at dialogue between political groupings represented in the Assembly, between President Morales and the prefects, and among the parties represented in Congress. Recent attempts by the Church to mediate have also

failed.

The government has offered to return part of the pre-fects' income from oil and gas, now being used to pay the *Renta Dignidad*, a monthly pension to all people over the age of 60. It has also consistently said that it is prepared to come to a consensus view on the part of the new constitution that deals with autonomies.

However, the *cruceño* authorities and the civic committees in the three other departments that make up the eastern lowland 'crescent' -- Tarija, Beni and Pando -- refuse to return to the negotiating table, unless entirely on their terms. They have refused to postpone the schedule for holding the referendums. The civic committees have also rebutted international attempts, through the Organization of American States, to encourage dialogue.

The government position

Since January 2006, the Morales government, with the support of the social movements, has moved ahead on some basic issues, such as:

- Giving back ownership of gas and oil deposits to the state, and increasing the percentage of rents received from the sale of gas, both to Brazil and Argentina, and from international companies working in Bolivia;
- Holding of an elected constituent assembly and drawing up a new constitution. This has yet to be approved in a nation-wide referendum;
- Using increased income, particularly from taxes on oil and gas, to address some basic issues of social protection, such as providing a yearly allowance for children in primary school (which has increased attendance, particularly amongst girls) and the *Renta Dignidad*;
- Lowering the cost of basic services for those with least income (electricity in particular, but also telephones);
- Bringing a sense of pride and self-recognition to the indigenous majority, a step that no political change will wipe out.

The government is trying to bring about some basic redistribution, recognising the rights of all Bolivians, particularly the indigenous majority. Its philosophy is based on the concept of "living well" (not better than your neighbour), in harmony with the earth and in solidarity with others. This is a welcome voice in a world seeking to confront problems like climate change. At the same time it is trying to break open some of the 'padlocks', as President Morales calls them, that lock Bolivia to its colonial past and to more recent policies of neoliberalism.

Implications for the future

The situation in Bolivia is worrying, but not -- as the

national and international press would have us think -- on the brink of disaster. However, the referendum will show that:

- Hostility to the referendum is high. In many low-income areas of Santa Cruz -- such as the *Plan 3000* district of Santa Cruz city and areas of organised migration from the highlands (San Julián, Yapacaní etc.), local people will not allow voting to take place. Some groups, including indigenous peoples and peasant organisations, are calling for abstention. Others are calling for a No vote.
- The possibility of fraud is very real. The *Comité Pro Santa Cruz* directly controls some of the members of the departmental electoral court. Concerned to avoid provocation, the government will not be policing the elections. And since the referendum is illegal, there will be no international observers present.
- Violence could erupt. The shock troops of the *Unión Juvenil Cruceñista* (UJC) will seek to intimidate people into voting Yes.
- Demonstrations will be held in major cities throughout Bolivia on May 4 behind a call for national unity.

The way in which the referendum has been forced upon public opinion has shown up divisions not only between those accustomed to hold power and those historically excluded, but also between different parts of the country: the highland 'Indian' departments and the lowland supposedly 'whiter' population. This has unleashed latent racism. Perhaps most importantly at the moment, the referendum is bringing out serious differences amongst people in Santa Cruz itself.

The attitudes revealed by the *Comité Pro Santa Cruz* are likely to persist. These include justifying the maintenance of feudal conditions of employment on vast *haciendas*, and making it obligatory for people working for companies in Santa Cruz to attend the demonstrations it organises. The UJC, with its racist agenda and violent tactics, is closely related to the civic committee.

It is not easy to predict what will happen next. The referendum forms part of a strategy to weaken the Morales government. It will probably be followed by similar votes in Tarija, Pando and Beni. The *Comité Pro Santa Cruz* is keen to derail the new constitution. Once the referendum is held -- and assuming the majority vote Yes, there may be further negotiations with the government. If, as is likely, these prove inconclusive, the *cruceño* elite may seek to take matters entirely into their own hands and go further down the path towards separatism.

Ultimately, as Evo Morales pointed out recently in an interview with the BBC, greater autonomy should benefit the country's people as a whole, not just the *cruceño* oligarchy and the local organisations that it controls.