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May 14, 2008

Bolivia under siege

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<http://www.straightgoods.ca/ViewFeature8.cfm?REF=291>

Bolivia is facing a new crisis, which many Latin Americans believe is caused by the United States. On one hand is a proposed new progressive constitution, which gives significant rights to the native majority; on the other is an up swelling of separatist movements, which the Bolivian government calls the Kosovo strategy — an American attempt to destabilize a national government it cannot control.

On May 4, the oil-rich department (province) of Santa Cruz held a vote on autonomy — that is, declaring its independence from the rest of Bolivia. Those who organized it call the vote a referendum. As the vote ignored all national laws and regulations, the national government calls it a public opinion poll.

The vote count showed 85.9 percent in favour of the proposal — hardly a surprise, since opponents had called for a boycott of the vote, in the belief that vote counting would be rigged. The lack of neutral observers meant that no one could verify the vote.

What was not expected was the level of opposition to the vote. In large parts of the countryside and in the poorer areas of the cities no voting took place. Either crowds prevented the setting up of voting stations or no one showed up to vote. This continued despite mobs of young shock troops who invaded the poorer barrios with clubs and whips. The result was that the voting authorities were forced to recognize the level of abstention, which they claimed was 40 percent.

The Catholic Church played an interesting role in the May 4 vote. Before the vote, there were reports about natives working in slavery conditions on large estates in Santa Cruz, which happened to be owned by leaders of the autonomy movement. Cardinal Julio Terrazas denied these report. He then participated in the May 4 voting.

As a result, the national government claims the church hierarchy is supporting the pro autonomy movement, and has rejected church involvement in negotiations. For their part, the leaders of the autonomy movement refuse to engage in any negotiations without the presence of the church.

Tracking the US role in all this requires some digging. One indicator is that Philip Goldberg is the US Ambassador to Bolivia. He was the US chief of mission in Kosovo from 2004 to 2006 and is widely regarded as the pilot for US plans to separate Kosovo from Serbia.



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supported progressive changes. Internationally, this support by students was used to give a progressive tinge to the idea of autonomy.

The right-wing student movement formed the majority in the mob, which attacked the members of the Constituent Assembly in Sucre in November 2007. They beat many delegates with fists and clubs and held at least one, a native, over a burning fire of tires threatening to burn him alive. He only survived due to the lucky arrival of an opposition deputy with several journalists. Killing the native delegate in front of the press would have created bad publicity. Nevertheless, to escape he had to run a gauntlet of students armed with wooden clubs. These students also provided a shock force to attack native demonstrations and to intimidate those who did not agree with autonomy. None of this was reported in the mass media .

Evo Morales has offered to negotiate with the dissident departments. However, there is not much to negotiate. Santa Cruz and the other dissident departments want significant changes in the proposed constitution, which would gut it of all social progress. They also want most of the oil and gas.

Also, Morales had imposed a temporary ban on soy oil exports when Bolivia was faced with a shortage of cooking oil and increasing prices. Branco Marinkovic, the president of the Santa Cruz Civic Committee, is the major exporter of soy oil. He was not amused. He does not want it to happen again.

Marinkovic also owns 90,000 hectares of land, much of it unused. Another family close to the committee has 120,000 hectares. The national referendum on the constitution gives the population of Bolivia the choice of a maximum land area owned by one individual of either 5,000 or 10,000 hectares. It is unlikely that Marinkovic would accept losing most of his *latifunda*. Therefore, he fiercely opposes further land reform.

Three other autonomy votes are already scheduled. Pando and Beni will vote on June 1 and Tarija on June 22. However these are not the only votes scheduled.

Fearing that the Morales government would schedule its national referendum on the new constitution as an alternative to the autonomy votes, the elite-dominated Senate passed a law, which calls for a recall referendum on Morales, his Vice-President and the prefects. Morales has accepted the challenge and the vote will take place on August 10.

Therefore, it seems that the national government has decided to devote much of its efforts in the next three months to a campaign to win a large vote of confidence for Evo and to unseat the pro-autonomy prefects — which shelves for the moment the referendum on the new constitution. As the recall referendum comes almost two months after the last autonomy vote, it also gives the pro-autonomy elite lots of time to deepen its organization.