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Home > Publications > News of the Americas

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Americas Quarterly

Exclusive Interviews

Hemispheric Updates

News & Views

News of the Americas

Papers & Reports

Viewpoints Americas

Weekly Roundup

Program Materials

Program Summaries

Speeches

On the Record

Articles & Op-Eds

Congressional Testimony

Congressional Updates

Multimedia

Podcasts

Webcasts

AS/COA News

Announcements

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In the News

Press Releases

Electoral Rifts in Bolivia

Carlos Macias
June 26, 2008

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Winds of autonomy grow stronger in Bolivia. (AP Images)

On June 22, the gas-rich Bolivian province of Tarija voted **overwhelmingly in favor** of greater provincial autonomy from the central government, joining the Santa Cruz, Beni, and Pando provinces in direct political confrontation with President Evo Morales' administration. This raises the political stakes even higher for the August 10 recall referendum,

which will determine whether Morales and regional governors stay in office.

Wealthy provinces want to **directly manage** the profits derived from their natural gas exports—86 percent of Bolivia's reserves are held by Santa Cruz and Tarija alone—rather than continue the current system of sending them to the central government for redistribution.

Bolivia's National Electoral Court (CNE) declared all the autonomy votes **illegal** as they were not approved by Congress but rather by the region's prefect (governor), in violation of the **current** constitution.

Adding to the controversy, the day after the Tarija vote five governors (from Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando, Tarija, and Cochabamba) issued a statement saying they would not host the August 10 **recall referendum** mandated by the CNE unless the ballot includes recognition for the autonomy statutes. The governors **condemned** the statement, arguing that the governors themselves demanded a recall vote at the end of 2007, a movement he supported and Congress approved on May 8. He questioned the real motives behind the governors' reversal on the recall vote, saying "they want to keep stealing money that belongs to all Bolivians."

Both Morales' political party, Movement for Socialism (MAS), and the opposition-led Podemos party reiterated their support for the recall vote and instructed the governors to respect the constitution. Senator Antonio Pedrero (MAS) emphasized that the opposition **pushed hard** for the recall vote in order to challenge Morales, and now must follow through on its plan.

The referendum **stipulates** Morales must call for early presidential elections if he gets more "no" votes than the 1.5 million votes that elected him in 2005. In addition, the percentage of those "no" votes must be also higher than the historical 53.7 percent he attained when elected. The same rules apply for the vice president and the regional governors, with the caveat that if they lose the recall vote, they must vacate their offices immediately and Morales must designate an interim governor until new state elections are held.

Morales launched a publicity campaign to highlight the achievements of his administration and he expects to receive the more than 53 percent of the vote required to stay in office. According to Agencia Bolivariana de Información, Governors Ernesto Suárez of Beni and Rubén Costas of Santa Cruz also **expect to win** the confidence vote. In contrast, Pando's Leopoldo

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Fernández, Cochabamba's Manfred Reyes, and Tarija's Mario Cossío risk losing their posts.

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The CNE **invited international observers** from more than 17 countries to guarantee transparency in the electoral process. Chuquisaca is the only region whose governor will not be facing a confidence vote, though they will still vote on the president and vice president. Its governor resigned and an **election** will be held on June 29.

Tensions have mounted as Bolivians get closer to the recall vote date, spurring brief outbreaks of violence. Militants of a pro-autonomy movement called Unión Juvenil Cruceñista (UJC) **seized** a toll station on a Santa Cruz highway, clashing with police and leaving policemen injured and several UJC members arrested. The Santa Cruz government condemned the use of violence by the UJC in an effort to **thwart announced violent demonstrations** against several governmental buildings and offices.

Read an exclusive AS/COA **interview** with OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza on the role of the agency as peace broker in Bolivia's political conflict. Read AS/COA's **coverage** of the ongoing Bolivian crisis.

Editor's note: The original article incorrectly stated that to remain in office, Morales must attain more than 54 percent of the votes in the August 10 referendum--he won 53.7 percent of the votes during the 2005 presidential election. However, the referendum works such that he will only step down if more than 53.7 percent of the electorate votes against him retaining office, and those ballots surpass the 1.5 million votes he obtained when elected.

Updated July 1, 2008

Send questions and comments for the editor to:
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