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.

What are the civic committee demanding?

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.

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
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However, the cruceño authorities and the civic com-
mittees in the three other departments that make up
the eastern lowland ‘crescent’ -- Tarija, Beni and
Pando -- refuse to return to the negotiating table,
lessen entirely on their terms. They have refused to
postpone the schedule for holding the referendums.
The civic committees have also rebutted interna-
tional attempts, through the Organization of Ameri-
Can 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 al-
  lowance 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 tele-
  phones);
• 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 or-
  ganised 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
Unió n Juvenil Cruceñista (UJC) will seek to intimi-
date people into voting Yes.
• Demonstrations will be held in major cities
throughout Bolivia on May 4 behind a call for na-
tional 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 seri-
ous 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 in-
conclusive, the cruceño elite may seek to take mat-
ters 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.