

Bolivia constitution text sparks right-wing secession threat

No sooner had President Evo Morales officially received the text of the new constitution from the president of the Constituent Assembly on December 15 than opposition leaders in four of Bolivia's eastern departments announced their de facto 'autonomy' from the La Paz government. This puts them on a collision course with the constitutional authorities, voted in two years ago on a landslide election victory.

The declarations of autonomy in Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando and Tarija are clearly unconstitutional. The existing constitution – which dates from 1967 – states that Bolivia is a single, unitary republic. It makes no mention of autonomies. The decision of departmental prefects to make themselves 'governors' is equally unlawful. At the same time, the prefects and civic committees of the four departments concerned have refused to recognise the new constitution.

The declarations on autonomy state that, subject to referenda, departmental authorities will assume control over the rents from natural resources, including natural gas. They also give these authorities jurisdiction over land distribution and confer on them control over the police, systems of justice and migration. This goes far beyond decentralisation; it is a short distance from outright secession.

The new constitution recognises indigenous rights for the first time and provides a framework for creating a more just society, for example by limiting the size of vast landholdings in the eastern lowlands. As such, it is anathema to the landowning elite of Santa Cruz.

Having systematically frustrated the work of the Constituent Assembly, the opposition parties – principally the right-wing Podemos grouping – boycotted the plenary sessions in which the text of the new constitution was agreed. In conjunction with the civic committees of the eastern departments – non-elected bodies representing mainly elite interests – the opposition parties have thus decided to radicalise their demands.

Evo Morales has called for calm and appealed to the opposition to resume dialogue in the interests of the country. By calling for a recall referendum, he has also put his own job on the line, as well as those of the departmental prefects. A recall referendum would give electors the chance, democratically, to resolve the current stand-off.

Internationally, most other countries of South America have made clear their unequivocal support for the constitutional government in Bolivia. The European Union has also issued a statement to that effect. In Britain, there is an early day motion (EDM) before the House of Commons that proffers full support for the legally constituted government in Bolivia.

However, the situation in the country remains very tense. The economic power of the Comité Pro-Santa Cruz and its counterparts in other departments is substantial. Their ability to whip up regionalist sympathies against La Paz should not be underestimated. The position of the armed forces has so far been one of loyalty to the government, to the constitution and to democracy, but there are some doubts as to the stance of the military establishment overall.

It remains to be seen whether, over the holiday period and early January, the autonomy declarations turn out to be a final bargaining bid by the right-wing opposition to shift negotiations over the constitution in its favour; or rather the first illegal step by the elites of Santa Cruz and other departments to a permanent division of the country.

The Bolivia Information Forum (BIF) will endeavour to keep you informed of events in Bolivia over the Christmas period, particularly if the present stand-off deteriorates. Active solidarity may be called for. One thing you can do immediately is to contact your MP and urge him or her to support the EDM (No. 571).

To find/contact your MP, go to:

http://www.parliament.uk/about/how/members/mps_contact.cfm

To read the EDM go to:

<http://edmi.parliament.uk/EDMi/EDMDetails.aspx?EDMID=34714&SESSION=891>

In the meantime, may we take this opportunity to wish all of you a very happy Christmas.

Bolivia Information Forum,
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