

BOLIVIA - Confrontation over Agrarian Reform

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November 30, 2006 - [ALAI](#) - The government of Evo Morales and the indigenous social movements of Bolivia have won an historic victory with the passage of an agrarian reform law that calls for the "expropriation of lands" that "do not serve a just social-economic function." According to Miguel Urisote, the director of the Land Foundation, an independent research center in La Paz, "this is a blow to the latifundias, the large estates where many Indians often work in slave-like conditions."

Morales sent agrarian reform legislation to the Bolivian Congress just over half a year ago. It passed the Chamber of Deputies where Morales' party, the Movement Towards Socialism, or MAS, has a majority. But then it was stymied in the Senate where the right wing opposition has a majority of one. Protesting the impasse, thousands of Indians descended on La Paz from the four corners of the country. Delia Duran who started marching twenty days ago from the eastern department of Santa Cruz, the strong hold of the large landowners, said: "We are tired of working for the families of the rich. When are we going to be able to work for ourselves? We want our own property, we have nothing, we live in huts made of straw and plastic."

Fearful of this mass mobilization, the right wing parties abandoned the Senate two weeks ago, depriving it of the quorum necessary to conduct any business. Backed by the demonstrators, President Morales declared that if the Senate "does not want to change the law, the people will rise up to change it by force." He threatened to issue an executive decree enabling him to expropriate lands by fiat.

But he did not need to take this dramatic step as the rug was pulled out from under the absent Senators. Under Bolivian law each Senator has a substitute who is entitled to vote if the designated Senator is absent or unable to attend Senate sessions. Three of these substitutes switched sides. They went to the Senate, forming a quorum along with the MAS Senators and passed the agrarian reform legislation. Another critical law dealing with the petroleum companies operating in Bolivia was also passed. Forty - four new contracts with the companies were approved, ceding more revenue to the government and recognizing the state's basic control over the country's natural gas resources.

The opposition is outraged, claiming fraud and that the government bought off the substitute Senators. But according to Teresa Morales of the Center for Strategic Studies in La Paz, "the substitutes come from the north, the poorest region of Bolivia. Two of the substitutes are themselves participants in indigenous movements and they responded to pressures from the grass roots."

Just as important as the agrarian reform law is the struggle that is occurring over the Constituent Assembly that was elected earlier this year to draft a new constitution and to "refound" the country's governing institutions. The Movement Towards Socialism controls 54 percent of the Assembly's delegates, and along with allied parties and social movements it has over 60 percent of the votes. Meeting since July, the Assembly has accomplished nothing because the right wing parties are insisting that a two- thirds vote is necessary to approve any of the planks of the new constitution. MAS asserts that a majority is sufficient to work on the new constitution and that only the final draft must be approved by a two-thirds vote. Then it will be submitted to the population for majority approval in a national referendum.

Last week MAS and its allies decided to start drafting the different parts of the constitution with a simple majority. The right wing opposition immediately began to tie up the sessions, with some of its delegates proclaiming a hunger strike, saying they would not leave the building where the assembly meets. In four of Bolivia's nine departments, the opposition has taken control of local civic committees, even calling for

secession from the Bolivian state if the Assembly uses the majority voting rule. Morales responded by declaring that another mass march like the one for agrarian reform might be needed “to put order in the Constituent Assembly.”

The opposition however continues to fragment. Several assembly delegates from right wing parties have announced that they will now participate in its sessions and collaborate with MAS and the social movements. According to Miguel Urisote of the Land Foundation, “the large landowners and the agro-industrial interests of Santa Cruz are loosing their economic and political clout. Their anti-Indian and racist policies are being rejected even by some of their traditional allies. The agrarian reform law and the Constituent Assembly are opening the road to a new Bolivia.”

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