

BOLIVIA - Electoral Uncertainties (Boris Rios, ZNET)

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October 27, 2005 - [ZNET](#) - According to Bolivian electoral law, interim president Eduardo Rodriguez must hold national elections within a timeframe of no more than 180 days from the start of his presidency last June. The realization of these elections, however, remains up in the air due to a recent ruling by Bolivia's constitutional court. Conflicts surrounding the distribution of congressional seats are now putting elections, scheduled for December 4th, at risk and bringing the country to the brink of a new crisis.

In May and June of 2005, Bolivia was embroiled in mobilizations of various social movements and social sectors motivated by the call for nationalization of the country's natural gas resources. The protests resulted in the resignation of then president, Carlos Mesa, which ultimately led to the constitutional succession of Bolivia's Supreme Court President, Rodriguez, to the presidency. It's worth clarifying that Mesa's resignation was not a demand of those mobilized in the streets, but rather an exit of his own choosing.

The Start of the Conflict

Once the date of elections was set for December 4th, three conservative members of congress from the department of Santa Cruz initiated a constitutional challenge to the elections. Their challenge cited electoral law mandating that "the distribution of total seats between departments be determined by law based on the number of their inhabitants, according to the last National Census..." which would be the census of 2001.

If enacted, the demand would decrease the number of congressional seats for the departments of La Paz, Oruro, and Potosi, and increase the number of seats for the departments of Cochabamba and Santa Cruz.

The Constitutional Court upheld the challenge, passing the responsibility of the modification of seat distribution to the Congress.

Now, the National Electoral Court, the institution responsible for the execution of elections, has established a deadline of this Thursday, October 28th, to add and subtract from the list of candidates for seats affected by the constitutional court ruling in order to proceed with elections as scheduled.

The Fight in the Congress

The decrease in seats for the departments of La Paz, Oruro, and Potosi and the increase of the same for Cochabamba and Santa Cruz was immediately rejected by the departments (states) negatively affected.

Yesterday, after weeks of gridlocked negotiations, the congress met for a vote on the various proposals for redistribution. The first proposal, put forth by Santa Cruz, was overwhelmingly rejected; at which point the entire Santa Cruz congressional delegation walked out and returned to Santa Cruz.

Today, the congress is scheduled to reconvene, likely without the representatives from Santa Cruz. While the other affected departments have all reached agreement on a compromise distribution, the Santa Cruz delegation maintains a hard line of nothing less than a gain of 4 seats as in accordance with the census.

The Base of the Conflict

The central theme of the current Bolivian conflict is a political power play in the national Congress that

goes hand in hand with a recent shift in economic power. In the years of dictator-turned president Hugo Banzer (who was from Santa Cruz) and since, the elites of Santa Cruz have been the recipients of significant economic support from the Bolivian government. The same investment in industry that increased job opportunities, economic growth, and personal wealth for Santa Cruz's elite, has led to a corresponding increase in immigration from other regions.

It is not a coincidence that the department of Santa Cruz which has recently been calling for regional autonomy was the instigator of this demand for a redistribution of seats, one which will directly increase the congressional power of the department.

What hangs in the balance is equality between departments: the departments which have suffered economically, and because of this have decreased in size, are struggling against political invisibility and the loss of their voice in government.

As it stands, the current crisis in Bolivia could end in the postponement of elections, putting the country in crisis once again. On one hand, President Rodriguez has promised that whether or not there are elections, he will leave his post at the end of his interim term, potentially leaving the country in a power vacuum. On the other hand, social movements, and specifically the sectors supporting the Movement Towards Socialism party of Evo Morales, see in the conflict a move to prevent the possibility that Morales win the elections and become Bolivia's next president. Morales is currently leading most public opinion polls.

Because of the looming crisis, president Rodriguez has announced that he is considering issuing an executive decree establishing the number of seats in each region, and holding elections based on that configuration- with or without agreement in congress.

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