

"Bolivia: Defeat of the Right"

In the amazing series of elections in South America in the last five years, the most radical results were in Bolivia, with the election of Evo Morales as President. It is not because Morales stood on the most radical platform. It was rather that, in this country in which the majority of the population are indigenous peoples, this was the very first time that an indigenous person was elected president of the republic. This in itself was a profound social revolution, and was not at all appreciated by the descendants of European immigrants who had always controlled the country.

The big question when Morales was elected was whether he could stay long in office, or whether the Bolivian right, perhaps in collusion with the armed forces, could oust him. He has now demonstrated that he can.

There were three major elements in his program. Bolivia's national income today is primarily drawn from its gas exports, essentially to Brazil and Argentina. The gas is located in the eastern provinces, the so-called Half Moon. And these areas are the ones in which there are the lowest percentages of indigenous peoples. The majority are Euro-descendants. Until Morales came to power, the prices at which the gas was sold were ridiculously low. And the income remained largely with the eastern provincial governments.

So, Morales sought to renegotiate the prices of the gas being exported. And he instituted a hydrocarbon tax so that much more of the income would come to the national government. Morales intended to use the money for social redistribution throughout the country, which would of course significantly benefit the indigenous populations.

In addition, the land in the eastern provinces is exceptionally mal-distributed. Two-thirds of the land are owned by one-sixth of 1% of the population. Morales wished to place a cap on the acreage any one person could own - a form of major agrarian reform.

In foreign policy, Morales attempted to maintain reasonable relations with the United States. He continued to accept the money the U.S. had been giving for anti-narcotic operations, especially since this money went to the armed forces. He did, however, in addition, welcome Venezuelan aid and Cuban doctors. The U.S. government was clearly not happy with Morales and would have preferred to see the Bolivian right return to power.

The strategy of the Bolivian right was to demand more autonomy for the regional governments, ultimately hinting at secession - a project they had never advocated as long as they controlled the central government. They demanded a recall election of Morales. The tactic badly backfired.

Morales accepted the challenge, adding to the recall election the question of whether the nine provincial prefects should also be recalled. In the elections Morales got a whopping 68% support, far greater than the votes he had originally received when he was elected. Seven prefects were returned but two anti-Morales governors were ousted, which has allowed Morales to name successors.

The right in the eastern provinces then sought to block exports of gas. They hoped thereby to induce the Brazilian and Argentine governments to put pressure on Morales. Supporters of Morales then began to demonstrate. The governor of Pando province, Leopoldo Fernández responded with repression. Over 30 demonstrators were killed in the capital city, El Porvenir. Morales arrested the governor and named a navy admiral as the new prefect.

At this point, President Michelle Bachelet of Chile convened an emergency meeting of the organization of the 12 South American states, UNASUR, to consider the situation. All twelve presidents came to Santiago for the meeting, and unanimously adopted a resolution of "full and complete support for the constitutional government of Evo Morales," denouncing any possible coup d'état. The significance of this resolution was that it was unanimous, being signed even by the deeply pro-American president of Colombia, Marcelo Uribe. The resolution was then endorsed by the Grupo Río, composed of 22 countries from all of Latin America and the Caribbean, including Mexico.

UNASUR called for dialogue. Morales called for dialogue himself, even before the UNASUR resolution. The right is stymied. Its last hope was some U.S. intervention. But Bolivia has now expelled the U.S. ambassador, Philip Goldberg, for "conspiring against democracy," that is, with the Bolivian right. The United States is now withdrawing its small aid projects in Bolivia. Russia has offered to enter the breach. The United States is becoming more and more irrelevant in Latin America.

If one asks why even Uribe supported the resolution, it is because no president wants to see the new tactic of secession receiving support. The United States is trying this also in Ecuador, where it has backfired equally, with the great victory of President Rafael Correa's referendum on the constitution.

by Immanuel Wallerstein