

Washington threatens Bolivia on presidential vote

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In the run-up to the selection of a new president in Bolivia, the Bush administration has issued unconcealed threats of US sanctions and potential military retaliation if the candidate opposed by Washington ends up winning.

The top two candidates in the June 26 election were Gonzalo Sanchez Lozada of the right-wing MNR (National Revolutionary Movement) with 22.4 percent of the vote, and Evo Morales, a leader of the coca farmers' protests, whose MAS (Movement towards Socialism) won 20.9 percent.

In an indication of the sharply polarized political environment, another new party, the NFR, or New Republican Force, placed third. According to published reports, this party has received significant funding from sources linked to the anticommunist Unification Church of Reverend Moon, which has previously forged ties to right-wing army generals in Bolivia. The NFR received 20.9 percent of the ballots cast, just a few hundred votes less than the MAS.

Under Bolivian election law, in the absence of an absolute majority for any candidate, the country's congress picks the winner. The US embassy, working together with the parties of the Bolivian oligarchy, is carrying out an unconcealed campaign to ensure that the national legislators deliver sufficient votes to keep Morales out of the presidential palace.

The attempt to bully the Bolivian electorate into voting against Morales began before last month's popular ballot, with US Ambassador Manuel Rocha warning that in the event of a victory for MAS, Washington would cut off all aid to Bolivia, one of Latin America's poorest nations.

"The Bolivian electorate must consider the consequences of choosing leaders somehow connected with drug trafficking and terrorism," Rocha declared in

a speech last month. The message left little to the imagination. As the Bush administration has spelled out, the consequences for an alleged connection with terrorism is a "preemptive" US military strike.

The US Embassy's blatant intervention in Bolivia's election appeared to boost support for Morales, who benefited from a nationalist backlash. The candidate himself referred to Rocha as his "best campaign chief."

The election results reflected the massive alienation of the Bolivian people from all parties, with the abstention rate—27.9 percent—significantly outstripping the vote for any candidate. The incumbent president, Jorge Quiroga, was barred from succeeding himself after taking over the uncompleted term of former general and military dictator Hugo Banzer. Quiroga billed himself as a US-educated technocrat, who would use business know-how to lift Bolivia's economy out of its protracted stagnation. His party, the ADN (Nationalist Democratic Action), won barely 3 percent of the ballots cast.

The MAS of Morales and another new party, the MIP (Movimiento Indio Pachakuti), which won 6 percent of the vote, arose from the mass protests by peasant farmers against the repressive US-backed campaign waged by the Banzer government against the cultivation of coca, the plant used to produce cocaine.

Plan Dignity, funded by the US and directed by Drug Enforcement Agency, Pentagon and Central Intelligence Agency operatives, has been a major focus of Washington's "war on drugs" in Latin America.

In a country in which 70 percent of the population of eight million lives in poverty and the minimum wage is the equivalent of just US\$60 a month, the campaign to forcibly eradicate one of the few profitable cash crops sparked massive resistance.

Morales's role in these protests as well as his

condemnation of the economic policies promoted by the US and the International Monetary Fund have made him a target of Washington's ire. In a recent interview, he declared that his government would introduce an "anti-neo-liberal and anti-capitalist" program. "As the neo-liberal model has failed," he said, "now it's the turn of the poor to impose their model." By this, he means farmers' cooperatives supported by the state.

The revival of left-nationalism and peasant-based populism in Bolivia is symptomatic of the desperate crisis engulfing not only this impoverished country, but virtually all of Latin America. With much of the landlocked country's trade dependent upon markets in Argentina and Brazil, the crisis in these larger nations has only exacerbated an economic collapse that has seen a tripling of the Bolivian unemployment rate in recent years.

Increasingly, spokesmen for Bolivia's ruling circles questioning whether any candidate can govern the nation. In the national congress, Morales's MAS would hold the largest bloc of seats in the lower house, while trailing the MNR only slightly in the senate.

Sanchez de Lozada, himself a millionaire businessman, has sounded this theme repeatedly. In a recent speech to army officers he appeared to suggest that a military coup might be the only way out, declaring that now "is the hour for you to carry out your institutional duty," and adding that "it is better to prevent than to be sorry." The MNR candidate went on to express the hope that "my fellow candidates, if they win the presidency, do not carry out their word, because if they keep their promises, we will be liquidated."

The open call by Ambassador Rocha for the right wing to unite in order to defeat Morales provoked protests from both Bolivia's electoral court and most of the country's political parties.

Washington brushed off these assertions of national sovereignty, however, with its chief spokesman on Latin America, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Otto Reich, ratcheting up the threats during a recent tour of the continent.

"We do not believe we could have normal relations with someone who espouses these kinds of policies," Reich said during a stopover in Argentina. If Morales wins, he added, "it would make it impossible for the US to aid Bolivia." Reich is the principal proponent of

a policy of outright US gangsterism in Latin America as the means of upholding the interests of American corporations and banks on the continent. A right-wing Cuban exile and a veteran of the "contra" war against Nicaragua under the Reagan administration, he barely escaped indictment, and was found by the US Comptroller General to have engaged in "prohibited, covert propaganda activities."

In Venezuela, a country where Reich served briefly in the 1980s as US ambassador, he is widely believed to have been the key American figure involved in the abortive attempt earlier this year to overthrow President Hugo Chavez through a military coup.

Similar plans are no doubt already well developed in Bolivia, where the US ambassador has long played the role of an imperial pro-consul, particularly under the Banzer-Quiroga regime.

Washington has a ready-made instrument at its disposal for a coup plot in the form of the Expeditionary Task Force, a 1,500-man paramilitary unit created last year under the auspices of the State Department's International Narcotics Control Program. The force is comprised of former Bolivian army officers and enlisted men whose salaries, training and orders come from the US Embassy in La Paz. The force has been implicated in killings and assaults against coca farmers and protesters.

The growing US intervention in Bolivia, as throughout Latin America, is exposing the real face of an unelected American administration bent on imposing the will of big business through naked force. Coupled with the downward economic spiral gripping most of the continent, this increased US pressure is pushing the region toward social eruptions.



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