

Bolivia's president resigns warning of civil war

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The resignation of Bolivia's President Carlos Mesa Monday has failed to halt the explosive confrontation between masses of working class and indigenous peasant demonstrators and the country's ruling oligarchy, backed by Washington and the transnational corporations.

Mesa warned after announcing his offer to surrender the presidency that Bolivia is teetering "on the brink of civil war." Mass protests continue to paralyze the capital and much of the country, while the traditional parties of the right are conspiring to bring in a repressive civilian-military junta.

The popular demonstrations have galvanized around the demand for the nationalization of Bolivia's gas reserves, the second largest in Latin America. The right, meanwhile, is pressing for autonomy for the wealthy eastern region centered round Santa Cruz—a center of some of the richest gas fields—along with the suppression of the protests.

Forced to flee his office by dynamite-wielding demonstrators, Mesa delivered a self-pitying speech lamenting his inability to defuse the immense social and political tensions that have seized the country. He was brought into the presidency less than two years ago after a similar round of demonstrations forced the resignation of former President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada.

"My promise to Bolivia has been taken advantage of by radical sectors which, knowing that the president and his government have sought peace and dialogue, pressured and pressured and moved things to an unsustainable point," declared Mesa. "It doesn't make sense to continue insisting on a philosophy that has been greeted in such an excessive and violent way."

Mesa had insisted that he would not follow Sánchez de Lozada's example by attempting to drown the protests in blood. The massacre of scores of workers by security forces in October 2003 triggered a popular rage that forced his predecessor to flee to Miami. Yet, it may be the case that his admission of failure and his declaration "I am not prepared to kill" represents an invitation for others to carry out an even more ferocious round of repression.

This is the second time in barely three months that Mesa has tendered his resignation. He did so as well last March in an attempt to defuse mounting demonstrations, but the country's Congress rejected the offer. There is no indication that they will keep him in office this time, however.

Rather, the president of the Senate, Hormando Vaca Diez, indicated that he was prepared to call the Congress into session to consider the resignation. Under the constitution, he would replace the president, an option that Mesa and others warned against because of the inevitability that the assumption of power by this right-wing politician would further inflame the situation. Instead, they have called upon Vaca to resign as well, along with the head of the lower house,

clearing the way for the president of the Supreme Court, Eduardo Bracamonte, to take office and call immediate elections.

Demonstrators in La Paz, responding to the possibility that the Senate president would assume power, chanted his name (which is Spanish for cow), "Vaca, Vaca, the slaughterhouse awaits you."

Vaca's political allies indicated that he wanted the presidency, "if only for six months," and was not prepared to listen to the pleas of Mesa and the Catholic Church for a joint resignation. His coming to power is apparently supported by the right-wing coalition headed by the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (MNR), which previously backed Sánchez de Lozada. The survival of such a regime is conceivable only through a ruthless police-military crackdown.

With the Congress building in La Paz besieged by demonstrators, Vaca has called for the legislature to convene Thursday in Sucre, the country's nineteenth century capital, about 200 miles away.

Evo Morales, the coca growers' leader and deputy of the MAS (Movement towards Socialism), said he would call for a redoubling of the blockades and demonstrations that have shut down most of the country in order to prevent Vaca from coming to power.

Polls have indicated that Morales would be the most likely winner of a new election. The MAS leader is being groomed to act as a "responsible" statesman of the "democratic left," along the lines of Lula in Brazil. For that reason he has largely shunned the demand advanced by the demonstrators for nationalization of the country's energy sector and the expropriation of the multinationals—British Petroleum, Total Repsol, Shell, Petrobras—which currently control the bulk of Bolivia's wealth. Instead, he has concentrated on the call for the convening of a Constituent Assembly as a part of a compromise deal with the Bolivian right to hold a referendum on autonomy.

This deal brokered by Mesa last week to hold a parliamentary session to consider the two conflicting demands did not halt the mass protests. Now Mesa's resignation has also failed to have any effect. There is no assurance that calling of new elections will have any greater impact.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Sean McCormack called for a "peaceful, democratic and constitutional solution" to the Bolivian crisis, a remark that was widely interpreted as US backing for Vaca to assume power, as called for in the constitution, and unleash a wave of repression. Washington also ordered the evacuation of families of US government officials in Bolivia, along with the embassy's "non-essential" personnel, and issued a travel advisory urging US citizens not to travel to the country.

Monday witnessed one of the largest demonstrations in Bolivia's history, dominated by indigenous peasant farmers. On Tuesday, columns of unemployed miners marched down from the neighboring

working class city of El Alto, joining teachers, workers, students and peasants. The city shook to the sound of exploding dynamite sticks tossed by the miners, who confronted security forces firing unending barrages of tear gas canisters and rubber bullets, leaving the center of the city enveloped in a white cloud of the stinging gas.

A glimpse of the militancy and profound anger of the demonstrators was provided by the correspondent of the Argentine daily *Clarín* Wednesday. “Yesterday, from the morning it was the miners cooperative members’ turn to protest, rough and frustrated men in a country that has not known how to respect their place. Combative unto death, they suffered the process of privatization like few others and among their ranks unemployment bears the face of hundreds of thousands. Many came down with their wives, and many too carried their babies wrapped up in cotton scarves.... Many of them wore their old helmets on their heads, including many women...”

“It is a strange and intense picture. They drag their feet and chant with a cigarette in their hand. ‘What do we want?’ shouts the leader. ‘Nationalization!’ replies the chorus. ‘When?’ ‘Now, now, now.’ They march in an orderly fashion, some with clubs. There are ranks and ranks of the impoverished, without teeth, wearing pants that are dull from so many suns and pullovers that are tattered. ‘Out with all the politicians! Out with them!’ is the new demand.”

While the masses have advanced the most radical demands, the existing leaderships within the mass movement have demonstrated the absence of any independent political perspective. The bankruptcy of the of the COB (Bolivian Workers Confederation) leadership was once again on display as officials of the union federation gathered last Friday outside the headquarters of the Bolivian army to call for the military to intervene.

The union officials demanded a “patriotic government of civilian-military convergence,” with the chief of the army, General Marcelo Antezana, deposing Carlos Mesa. “We have reached an agreement with some officers very linked to General Antezana to initiate this process that will allow us to recover the fatherland for the country and for Bolivians,” declared protest leader Pedro Cruz, while other demonstrators banged on the doors of the army headquarters.

The clashes between the miners and the police Tuesday were the most violent so far in the two-week upheaval. At least 30 people were arrested and a number wounded.

Confrontations were also reported in Santa Cruz, where fascist thugs of the Santa Cruz Youth Union joined with police in an attempt to break up a road blockade manned by indigenous peasants.

Ironically, the collapse of the Bolivian government coincided with the collapse of the Bush administration’s efforts to ram through the Organization of American States a plan to set up a permanent mechanism for monitoring the democratic performance of the hemisphere’s governments and pave the way for US-led interventions. Latin American and Caribbean delegates to the OAS general assembly meeting in Fort Lauderdale, Florida rejected the US proposal, seeing it as a transparent attempt to advance Washington’s provocations against the Venezuelan government of President Hugo Chávez. Instead, they opted for a “compromise” measure that merely stated the body’s commitment to democracy, while warning of outside intervention in the internal affairs of member states.

As the OAS meeting ground toward a close, the US State Department’s top official on Latin America, Roger Noriega, issued a belligerent and imbecilic statement charging the Venezuelan regime with instigating the events in Bolivia.

“Chávez’s profile in Bolivia has been very apparent from the

beginning,” said Noriega. “His record is apparent and speaks for itself.”

Alí Rodríguez, Venezuela’s foreign minister, categorically rejected the accusations of the US official. “The problems in Bolivia are problems that belong to Bolivia, and it is up to the Bolivians to solve them,” he said. “Venezuela is scrupulously respectful of the sovereignty of all countries.” He challenged Washington to produce any proof of its charge of Venezuelan meddling.

A State Department official responded later in the day, producing a few news clippings citing statements by Evo Morales praising Chávez that proved absolutely nothing.

There is hardly any need for an outside spark to ignite the social powder keg existing in Bolivia, South America’s most impoverished country. According to Bolivia’s National Institute of Statistics, 64 percent of the urban population lives in poverty, while in the countryside conditions are even worse, with 80 percent in poverty. More than one-third of the country lives on less than two dollars a day, while the infant mortality rate—95 for every 1,000 births—is worse than much of Africa.

The conception that the country’s wealth should be utilized to benefit its people rather than fatten the profits of foreign oil conglomerates has gripped the masses. This is not—to use the words of George W. Bush at his speech at the OAS this week—the product of a “false ideology,” but rather a conclusion drawn from intensely bitter experience with free-market policies and wholesale privatization.

The conception that the struggles that have shaken Bolivia in recent weeks are the product of “outside agitation” by Chávez is an echo of the longstanding US view that every movement against social oppression and every challenge to the interests of US-based multinationals represents a “communist conspiracy.” This police-state ideology guided a US policy of support for military dictatorships and savage repression in Latin America for over 50 years. Noriega’s comment is a warning that the Bush administration is prepared to resort to these methods once again.



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