

BOLIVIAN ELECTIONS

by Donna Lee Van Cott, University of Tennessee

Bolivia's recent national elections reflect two important political changes with profound implications for domestic and foreign policy: (1) the exhaustion of the post-transition political party system, and (2) the political inclusion of the majority indigenous population.

Between 1985 and 1997, political competition revolved around three parties that alternated power, leaving at least one of the others in the opposition: the center-right Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (MNR) and Acción Democrática Nacionalista (ADN), and the center-left Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR). These three parties combined attracted between 54% and 65% of the vote. While this year the MNR and MIR held their bases, the collapse of the ADN, attributable to the death of its founder, Hugo Banzer, and the unpopularity of his government, left the traditional three parties in the minority (42.2%) in a political spectrum now dominated by leftist and populist parties. In addition, two pragmatic populist parties, Unidad Cívica Solidaridad (UCS), and Conciencia de Patria (Condepa), that had been important alliance partners since 1989 failed to pull their usual 10-30%, winning a combined 5.88%.

Given the fragmentation of the party system, Bolivian elections are followed by the formation of a governing coalition by one of the top vote-getters (since 1997, one of the top two). This was achieved 25 days following the elections, when the MNR (with 22.5%) announced a "Co-government of National Responsibility" with the MIR, along with pledges of support for his election from the ADN and UCS, which are considering offers to join the government. Whereas in the past the pact had always excluded at least one of the major three parties, this year all three form a traditional bulwark against populist and leftist opposition forces. The alliance corresponds to 17 of 27 senators and 66 of 130 deputies--enough to elect Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada ("Goni") president, but a slim majority (only one vote) for passing legislation. Thus, the axis of competition within the old party system has been replaced with a dynamic pitting a declining old party system against "anti-systemic" forces.

The new pact is also unusual for the delay in its formation, which reflects the great reluctance of MIR leader Jaime Paz Zamora to support his bitter rival. In the tense weeks following the election, the MNR's top three challengers (Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS) 20.94%, Nueva Fuerza Republicana (NFR) 20.92%, and MIR 16.3%) announced their refusal to ally with Sánchez de Lozada, with whom they have both programmatic differences and personal enmities. The new Bolivian government is essentially a pact to prevent coca growers leader Evo Morales, the only other candidate constitutionally able to become president, from assuming that office, in the hopes of safeguarding Bolivian political and economic institutions until the next election cycle.

Morales, an Aymara Indian who was expelled from congress in January for his involvement in violent demonstrations against the government's coca eradication policy, will lead the opposition. Morales' Movimiento Al Socialismo finished less than 2

percentage points behind the winner, following inflammatory statements by the U.S. ambassador that boosted Morales from 4th to 2nd place days before the poll. A second indigenous candidate, former guerrilla and national peasant confederation leader Felipe Quispe, won 6.1% of the vote heading his new Movimiento Indígena Pachakutik (MIP). The success of parties that champion the demands of the indigenous majority is revolutionary in a country where no indigenous party had won more than 3 percent of the votes in a national election. While Morales and Quispe hold radical economic and cultural views that will seriously impair governability in the near term, the political representation of the ethnically subordinate and impoverished majority is encouraging. Upon the installation of the new government, Bolivia's major papers and political leaders applauded the new more representative legislature, which included the nation's first female president of the Senate and two indigenous representatives in the leadership of the lower house. As Chamber of Deputies president Guido Añez said in his inaugural speech, "This Congress is, finally, the reflection of our motley national reality; the expression of a Bolivia that is diverse, contradictory and, thus, fecund and possible." Moreover, Morales's and Quispe's refusal to ally with neoliberal parties represents a disruption of the long-standing practice of opportunistic alliances that have no ideological or policy coherence. It is more admirable than the current behavior of the UCS, which is negotiating the exchange of its support for as many positions in government as it can wheedle out of Goni.

The two indigenous leaders will be joined in the opposition by third-place finisher Nueva Fuerza Republicana, which has formed a pact with Morales to block passage of the pending Law of Constitutional Reform and other measures. Their block of 10 senators and 51 deputies will be joined by 7 deputies representing the MIP and Partido Socialista (PS), as well as at least 3 allies from the NFR's loose coalition. This unstable balance of forces will make it difficult for Bolivia to continue its pro-U.S. coca eradication and economic policies, or to resolve polemical issues such as the location of and terms for the construction of a natural gas pipeline. The opposition's disposition to obstruct government action was demonstrated on the second day of sessions when the MAS and MIP led a marathon series of speeches denouncing the governing coalition that pushed the pro-forma presidential vote from Saturday morning into Sunday afternoon. We can expect deadlocks within the legislature, and between the legislature and the executive, as well as continued massive demonstrations by highly mobilized social and economic sectors.

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