

Ideological clashes delay progress on Bolivian constitution

Disputes are tearing at an assembly elected to write the document

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LA PAZ - Since it convened a month ago, Bolivia's Constituent Assembly has been plagued by conflict, with scuffles on the floor, boycotts by minority parties and general strikes by opponents of President Evo Morales.

Such polarization threatens the ability of the 255-member Assembly to rewrite the country's constitution and could further weaken the stability of a country that has seen four presidents since 2003.

"The assembly is like having . . . a patient on the operating table with 255 surgeons standing around, waiting to cut in," said Eduardo Rodríguez Veltze, a former head of the Supreme Court who served briefly as president until Morales was inaugurated in January.

24-HOUR STRIKES

The political struggles sparked 24-hour strikes Friday in the eastern departments of Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando and Tarija, marked by scattered street clashes between Morales supporters and opponents.

Government and opposition negotiators have continued to meet to try to forge an agreement that would end the struggles over the Constituent Assembly.

At the heart of the unrest is a dispute over how the Assembly will vote: The opposition maintains that each article of the new constitution must be approved by a two-thirds majority, while Morales' Movement Toward Socialism argues the individual articles can be approved by a simple majority, and that only the final document requires the two-thirds vote.

Morales' party has a majority in the assembly, with 137 seats, but falls short of the two-thirds mark. Alliances between parties are weak and tensions high; the assembly has not been able to reach consensus even when voting on basic rules and procedures.

Morales was elected late last year by a large margin after a campaign in which he promised to integrate Bolivia's poor and historically marginalized indigenous majority into the government and the economy.

He immediately started a series of drastic reforms, cutting government salaries - including his own, which he halved -- purging old government officials and appointing indigenous activists and leftist intellectuals to his cabinet.

On May 1 he nationalized Bolivia's natural gas resources, and several weeks later announced the beginning of an agrarian reform in which underused or illegally held lands would be given to landless peasants.

BIG LANDHOLDERS

The departments of Santa Cruz and Tarija, which led the Friday strikes, are home to the majority of the country's natural gas resources. The four departments involved in the strike also hold much of the land the state is eyeing for redistribution.

Large landowners and businessmen in the region, most of whom are not indigenous, strongly oppose Morales' reforms, and many see the Constituent Assembly as a last chance to block them.

These departments also voted for greater autonomy in a July referendum. But the terms of autonomy are among the most controversial issues to be voted on at the constitutional assembly.

Morales dismissed last week's strikes before they took place, saying they would be unimportant and forced by his opponents in those regions. The opposition, however, declared them a success and said they would continue if necessary.

"If they [[Morales supporters] continue dividing the country, and favoring one political party, we'll continue strikes," said German Antelo, a leading Morales critic in Santa Cruz.