

BOLIVIAN LEADERS FIND THEIR PROMISES ARE HARD TO KEEP

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LA PAZ, [Bolivia](#), Sept. 24 — Vice President Álvaro García Linera could not have been more explicit in a fiery speech last week calling on Bolivia's indigenous groups to defend the government "with your chest, with your hand, with your Mauser."

Mr. García Linera, an urbane sociologist normally known for his moderating influence, promptly apologized and said his comments had been misinterpreted. But his remarks underlined the heightening tension that is once again threatening to tip this Andean nation into turmoil.

Many Bolivians had hoped that the election last year of Evo Morales as president would put an end to the instability marked by seven presidents in six years and angry protests by the country's indigenous majority, who had been sidelined from power since Spanish rule began in the 16th century.

The country's first indigenous president, Mr. Morales promised to end what he had called the looting of the country's natural resources by foreign companies, and quickly sought to nationalize Bolivia's energy sector.

But just nine months into his term, Mr. Morales, like his predecessors, seems similarly beset on all sides as the realities of governing have pulled him closer to the political center.

On one side, the president is now being portrayed by some former supporters, whose expectations he had stoked, as a lackey of foreign interests and the country's light-skinned elite.

His popularity rating, though still high, has taken a quick hit, dropping to 61 percent from 81 percent in recent months, according to polls here. A line scribbled on a building a block from the headquarters of the national energy company captured the disillusionment. "Evo, traitor," it reads, "don't give away Bolivia's gas."

On the other side, the president faces fresh unrest in the restless lowland provinces in the east, where the elite of mostly European descent have been unnerved by his election and are pushing for more autonomy.

Groups in the eastern province of Santa Cruz, and neighboring provinces, have been chafing at efforts to rewrite Bolivia's Constitution in an assembly that would give Mr. Morales's supporters more decision-making power.

They have also been wary of his plans to build two new military bases in the lowlands, with financing from Venezuela, a move seen as a way to increase the government's authority in the region.

Mr. Morales's government, meanwhile, charged business leaders in Santa Cruz with "racism" last week after they decided not to invite him to the city's main business fair.

Mr. Morales's supporters have also been holding protests. They want the president to stick to the promises that got him elected, among them liberalizing laws on coca cultivation and spreading wealth toward the poor.

Yet, despite a steady stream of militant talk, officials in the new government seem to have arrived at a grudging recognition that Bolivia must cooperate with the very investors and lending organizations that are despised symbols of foreign influence among many of Mr. Morales's supporters.

Nowhere is this apparent contradiction more vivid than in relation to Mr. Morales's most ambitious project, the nationalization of Bolivia's energy resources, which seems to be in danger of not meeting initially lofty expectations. The government has recently backtracked on several key measures, ceding ground to Brazilian and European energy companies.

Mr. Morales's negotiators, for instance, have temporarily reversed a move to take control of Bolivia's two main oil refineries from Brazil's state-run energy company, Petrobras, and have failed to provide regulations so the nationalization can move forward. The government has about a month left to act on the nationalization decree issued in May before it expires.

The government also overrode a move this month by its energy minister to exert almost total control over extraction of oil and natural gas reserves. Adding to the disarray, the minister, Andrés Soliz, angrily resigned and was replaced by the more moderate Carlos Villegas.

Carlos Alberto López, an independent energy analyst here, said, "It's obvious the government has bitten off more than it can chew, but it doesn't want to reveal this reality to the population."

Mr. Morales, an Aymara Indian and former coca farmer, has largely left carrying out the nationalization and other economic projects to subordinates as he seeks to maintain a revolutionary image.

Mr. García Linera, the vice president, has emerged as a key intermediary between the government and investors. "These last couple of weeks have been the most challenging of our government," Mr. García Linera said in an interview.

Mr. García Linera reached out to the United States in a trip to Washington in July, attempting to win support for renewing trade preferences from the Bush administration.

In an effort to soothe tension between the government and business interests in Santa Cruz, the capital of the eastern province, Mr. García Linera brokered an agreement last week with regional political leaders to avert a full blockade of roads into the city.

Still, tension persists between La Paz and Santa Cruz. One graphic symbol of the dislike many Cruceños, as the people of Santa Cruz are called, harbor for Mr. Morales is in the form of a photomontage some people there have downloaded to their cellphones. It shows the words "Viva Santa Cruz" written above an image of the president with a gunshot wound.

Such examples of polarization have arisen in response to radical proposals discussed in the constituent assembly, like changing the country's name to Qollasuyo, an indigenous word invoking the Inca empire.

These ideas contrast with quiet efforts by Mr. Morales's government to lure foreign investment and improve ties to lending institutions like the [World Bank](#) and the [International Monetary Fund](#).

"Seen together, these actions show that the changes actually put forward and implemented by the government are very superficial," said Carlos Arze, director of a research organization here that studies development issues.

Meanwhile, recognition that Bolivia is dependent on Brazil, the largest buyer of its natural gas, is encouraging a much softer nationalization stance. Mr. Villegas, the new energy minister, said in an interview, “We want a rational redistribution of petroleum income in the country, while also telling foreign companies that we want them to profit.”