

Reach a compromise

Opinion
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LA PAZ -- Bolivia faces a serious threat that recent civil unrest, which already has cost two lives and injured dozens, could spiral into widespread violence even as President Evo Morales, the nation's first indigenous president, this month celebrates the first anniversary of his inauguration.

Sitting in the central plaza of this two-mile-high capital city recently, after Morales had urged his followers to surround the Congress to force recalcitrant senators to support a land-reform bill, I marveled at the changes occurring in this Andean nation.

After some 500 years of political exclusion, a 70 percent indigenous majority -- largely Aymara and Quechua peoples -- had used the ballot box to catapult Morales and his Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) Party into the presidential palace. Morales had campaigned on revolutionary steps -- for Bolivia -- to end ethnic and class inequalities. After three years of instability and stalemate, he won on the first-round with support from some voters even beyond his indigenous and *cocalero* base.

The polarization of society did not end with Morales' election, and in the last two weeks the violence has escalated among protesters supporting and opposing the state governors' championing regional autonomy against the Morales administration. Some protesters actually set fire to the state capital building in Cochabamba. Clearly, the government and the political opposition need to sit together, drop their rhetoric of mutual menace and seek compromise rather than confrontation.

Morales is being pressured by MAS militants to reject any concessions on the profound socio-economic changes that his campaign promised. The political opposition and the eastern-lowlands civic groups, which represent large landowners and the region home to much of the country's natural-gas and oil wealth, have responded with equal inflexibility.

Both sides should remember the win-win lessons of compromise in last October's negotiations on oil and gas "nationalization." The Morales government achieved a midnight-hour compromise with the foreign hydrocarbon companies. They agreed to pay much-higher royalties and give up "ownership" of the reserves in exchange for the long-term right to develop them.

On the current disputes, the government and its opponents adhere to diametrically opposing views with almost religious fervor.

- **Land reform.** The government used its majority to ram a land-reform bill through the Congress. Some large farmers in Santa Cruz told me that the law will be used to justify land occupations, then "urban" reform will come next and they will lose their homes. They have started to arm their own workers -- who could easily turn into militias. Meanwhile, the indigenous groups claim that any modification in the law will stymie their effort to end centuries of discriminatory land ownership patterns.
- **The Constituent Assembly.** The government demanded a voting formula enabling a simple majority to approve amendments to the Constitution while the opposition argued that the law convoking the assembly had called for a "two-thirds" majority. A reasonable compromise was rejected by the presidential palace at the last minute.
- **Regional autonomy.** A July referendum, originally supported by Morales, on granting greater autonomy to newly elected prefects or governors passed by a landslide in four of nine regions -- all in the eastern

lowlands -- but the overall national vote was negative. Santa Cruz, Tarija and the other eastern regions believe that their existence is threatened by the national government's decision to pursue congressional impeachment powers against prefects.

After talking with leaders on both sides of a very real political divide, I believe that Morales can achieve the bulk of his objectives if he turns away from the radical extremes, internally and externally. Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez has his own objectives, and he and his ambassador's hard-line public call for Morales not to give an inch are not going to help Morales achieve his goals of reducing Bolivia's 80 percent rural poverty.

- **First**, all sides must condemn and reject violence. The Morales government should stop using an anti-Santa Cruz discourse to rally its supporters. The eastern regional civic groups also should stop brandishing secession threats to defend their political positions.
- **Second**, a mediator, international if possible, should be called to assist the two sides in unblocking the procedural standoff at the Constituent Assembly.
- **Third**, bridge-building needs to take place on land reform. The government's land-reform institute desperately needs mediation and conflict-mitigation training and counseling. A bipartisan U.S. Senate delegation just returned from La Paz. It could encourage the USAID and U.N. and OAS mediators to foster that cooperation.

New rounds of violent social instability in this desperately poor country serve no one's interests, least of all the indigenous communities.

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