

Bid to move Bolivia capital draws scorn

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LA PAZ, Bolivia --

Hundreds of thousands of people packed the streets of La Paz on Friday to protest efforts to relocate Bolivia's capital in one of the largest demonstrations in the history of the Andean country.

Aerial television images showed city residents and Aymara Indians bused in from the surrounding countryside standing shoulder to shoulder along miles of city streets, waving both Bolivian and La Paz state flags.

La Paz state Gov. Jose Luis Paredes told The Associated Press that the crowd surpassed a million people.

"The response of the people has been greater than we thought," Paredes said.

La Paz is home to the government's executive and legislative branches, while Sucre, a sleepy colonial city 255 miles to the southeast, houses the country's highest courts.

Sucre's delegates in an assembly rewriting Bolivia's constitution are pushing to move the entire government seat to their city, site of Bolivia's founding in 1825 and its sole capital until losing a brief civil war to La Paz in 1899.

The demand has fueled regional rivalry between President Evo Morales' supporters in the Bolivia's poor western highlands and his opponents in the more prosperous lowland east

"We have come to tell those who want to separate us, who want the division of our country, that their attempts will not succeed," La Paz City Council President Luis Revilla told the crowd.

But some marchers demanded that even the courts be stripped from Sucre and moved to El Alto, the poor satellite city outside La Paz where much of the march took place.

Eastern states argue that Sucre, nearer the country's center, can better represent the entire country than La Paz, which is on Bolivia's far western edge.

La Paz backers say switching the capital from Bolivia's largest city, with a metropolitan population of 1.7 million, to Sucre, population 250,000, would be expensive and divisive.