

Crackup in Bolivia?

Evo Morales's attempt to push through a constitutional rewrite threatens to split the country.

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VENEZUELAN President Hugo Chávez may have been forced to concede defeat in a constitutional referendum this month, but his eccentric project to accumulate power lives on. Mr. Chávez, who according to multiple independent reports announced the vote against his "Bolivarian revolution" only under pressure from the Venezuelan military, has already said he will try again. Meanwhile, two of his populist followers, in [Bolivia](#) and [Ecuador](#), are pressing ahead with copycat constitutional coups. Ecuador's [Rafael Correa](#) and Bolivia's [Evo Morales](#) both say their aim is to give more power and resources to poor and indigenous people. As with Mr. Chávez, that translates in practice into the aggregation of presidential powers and the removal of current limits on their tenures in office.

The power grabs were breeding stiff resistance even before Venezuelans demonstrated that Mr. Chávez's "21st-century socialism" could be rebuffed. Now the focus has shifted to Bolivia -- where Mr. Morales has provoked a provincial rebellion that some fear could lead to a civil war.

A former coca farmer who has allowed himself to be overtly tutored by Mr. Chávez, Mr. Morales convened a constitutional convention 16 months ago, only to see it stall because of strong opposition to his radical proposals to redistribute property and wealth and to potentially make himself president-for-life. Last month, his followers responded by voting through a constitutional draft at a meeting that excluded the opposition; the action provoked demonstrations in which at least three people died. On Sunday, the document was given final approval by another rump session that ignored a legal requirement that a two-thirds majority of the convention vote in favor.

Leaders of four of the six Bolivian provinces with elected opposition governors responded by announcing a plan to declare autonomy tomorrow. The resistance is centered in [Santa Cruz](#), Bolivia's richest city and the center of the country's energy industry. Having just presented the opposition with a fait accompli, Mr. Morales had the nerve to call the autonomy proposals "illegal, unconstitutional and separatist," and his interior minister threatened to use force against the provinces.

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Mr. Morales would be better off absorbing the lesson just taught to Mr. Chávez -- that Latin Americans aren't willing to give up their freedoms for a strongman's socialism. He has proposed holding a referendum on his own tenure in power next month; he should hold it, and put his divisive constitution on hold.

