

Morales, opponents head for a showdown

OUR OPINION: BOLIVIA NEEDS DIALOGUE, NOT VIOLENT CONFRONTATION

Opinion
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When Evo Morales was elected president of Bolivia two years ago this month, his triumph was hailed as a great turning point for South America's poorest country. As the first indigenous leader of Bolivia in modern times, elected by the widest margin of any president since the restoration of civilian rule 25 years ago, he had a lot going for him, including the support of the international community. Alas, Mr. Morales has squandered this goodwill by resorting to heavy-handed political methods and exacerbating racial and economic tensions that could explode into violence this weekend.

Ostensibly, the protest in Santa Cruz, a stronghold of political opposition, is over the approval last weekend of a draft constitution that Mr. Morales has been seeking since the day he was elected. It gives him much greater power, establishes a unicameral legislature and gives him the right to reelection for another five-year term. It creates a "plurinational state" that gives autonomy to indigenous people but undercuts the political rights of Bolivia's traditional provinces.

This is enough to raise questions about whether this is a naked power grab masquerading as constitutional reform. But the real reason for the tensions in Bolivia lies in the way that Mr. Morales has used his power to run roughshod over political opponents.

The draft constitution was passed with the exclusive votes of the president's Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) after opponents boycotted it as "illegitimate." Mr. Morales has excoriated his critics as fascists, oligarchs, sellouts and worse. His confrontational attitude extends to the news media, against whom he has threatened economic reprisals with his usual heated rhetoric.

All this is straight out of the playbook of his great friend, Hugo Chávez, president of Venezuela, whose financial and political support has been crucial. With the help of Mr. Chávez, he has created a kind of indigenous, armed militia that resembles Mr. Chávez's Bolivarian Circles.

Saturday's upcoming protest in Santa Cruz is the culmination of all these tensions. Thousands of soldiers and police have been sent into the city to stop what Mr. Morales sees as an insurrection, but both sides appear to be itching for a fight. The outcome could be worse than the violence that erupted earlier this year in Cochabamba, when a 16-year-old protester was lynched and a Morales supporter was shot and killed.

The best way to avoid violence is for Mr. Morales to take a new direction. Reconciliation and dialogue are better than confrontation and violence. It is not too late for Bolivia to avert the pending disaster -- but the clock is ticking.

