

# Protesters in Bolivia Seek More Autonomy

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SANTA CRUZ, [Bolivia](#) — Tens of thousands of antigovernment demonstrators flooded the streets of this city and three other provincial capitals on Saturday as four of Bolivia's wealthiest provinces celebrated efforts to seek greater autonomy from the central government.

Backers of President Evo Morales marched Saturday in support of a new charter that would expand indigenous rights.

The protests here in Bolivia's most prosperous city, though they were a direct affront to President Evo Morales, had a festive spirit, as people waved green-and-white flags marked , "Now We Are Autonomous." Many sipped beer or ate ice pops; hundreds danced in a park in the city's center.

"We don't want Bolivia to disintegrate," said Zenon Mita, 46, who runs a construction business here. "We just want Evo to recognize that we have our own priorities."

Although the president sent hundreds of police officers to reinforce security in Santa Cruz and other capitals as fears of violence grew, there were no signs of a major armed presence on the streets. The only violence reported was an explosion on the fifth floor of the Palace of Justice here; no one was hurt.

But in Santa Rosa, an agricultural town near Santa Cruz, local television reported that more than 50 people were hurt in rock-throwing clashes on the main plaza as supporters of Mr. Morales traveled there in buses for a counterprotest.

Morales supporters, meanwhile, gathered in the capital, La Paz, to celebrate a new Constitution aimed at strengthening the rights of indigenous groups.

The passage of the Constitution in a chaotic assembly last week that was boycotted by the president's critics set off the moves to seek greater autonomy in eastern Bolivia. A national referendum will determine whether the Constitution will take effect.

The "autonomy statutes" of the four provinces are the biggest challenge yet to Mr. Morales, who is Bolivia's first indigenous president. The regional charters fall short of declaring independence, but supporters seek to give provincial officials power over natural gas royalties, agricultural policies and police forces.

The regional statutes, which are also subject to public referendum, have not taken effect. But they set in motion conditions for a clash between Mr. Morales and the regions of Bolivia that are richest in petroleum and arable land.

Officials in La Paz have lashed out at the autonomy moves, describing them as racist efforts from largely mixed-race provinces to resist attempts to redistribute wealth

among the country's poor. Grievances against the relatively prosperous east are most intense in the western highlands, home to Aymara and Quechua Indians.

Vice President Álvaro García Linera accused the elite in Santa Cruz, the richest lowland province, of "separatist and racist attitudes," in comments to the official news agency on Friday. Mr. García Linera said Santa Cruz was seeking to limit migration of Indians from the altiplano, or highlands, with its new statute, effectively restricting Mr. Morales's land reform project.

Political leaders here make no secret of their distaste for Mr. Morales's policies. "Evo is putting us on the road to chaos with ideas that discriminate against people who are not indigenous," Branko Marinkovic, the president of the Pro-Santa Cruz Committee, said in an interview. "No one wants to invest or create jobs in this environment."

Leaders in another province, Chuquisaca, said Friday that they would join the four eastern provinces in seeking greater autonomy, putting more pressure on Mr. Morales's government. Sucre, the capital of Chuquisaca, has been engulfed in violent street protests in recent weeks over efforts by its residents to move the capital there from La Paz.

In addition to sending extra police officers to Santa Cruz and other capitals, the central government put the armed forces on alert. Mr. Morales, an ally of [Hugo Chávez](#), Venezuela's president, has also stepped up his criticism of the United States in recent days, accusing Washington of fomenting unrest here.

Mr. Morales spoke before thousands of supporters in downtown La Paz on Saturday, some of whom were waving the wiphala, a multicolored flag representing indigenous people in Bolivia. A few others, presumably supporters of Mr. Morales from Santa Cruz, waved the province's green-and-white flag.

"Don't be scared!" Mr. Morales yelled into the microphone in the televised speech. "We are united and organized!" Silvia Lazarte, the Quechua Indian who presided over the constitutional assembly, stood by the president.

Attempting to show that the armed forces were aligned with Mr. Morales in a country prone to coups in the last century, members of the army, air force and navy appeared along side the president in La Paz.

"Death to the Yankees!" Mr. Morales said, finishing the address with a chant common in the Chapare, the coca-growing region where he commands a strong following, but rare in his speeches before other audiences.

Alex Contreras, Mr. Morales's spokesman, told reporters in La Paz that one option to lessen the tensions would be to have European ambassadors step in to mediate between the government and the provinces. But neither side seemed ready for mediation on Saturday. Attention focused instead on two dramatically different visions for the country's future.

Still, the situation is not so dire for Mr. Morales, who counts on the support of leftist leaders in the region. On Sunday, he will receive Presidents [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#) of

Brazil and Michelle Bachelet of Chile, who are traveling to La Paz to support a road link across Bolivia from Brazil to the Chilean port of Arica.

Even more important for Bolivia's economy, Mr. Lula da Silva is expected to signal new Brazilian investments in the country's energy industry, after months of tension in the wake of moves by Mr. Morales last year to assert greater control over Bolivia's petroleum resources.