

INTERNATIONAL

Fight for Bolivia's future lies behind referendum

by MIKE GONZALEZ

BOLIVIA IS at a crossroads once again. A referendum last weekend on increased autonomy for the country's largest state had one clear purpose—to undermine the democratically elected government of Evo Morales.

The referendum has no legal status and the result—a victory for those promoting autonomy—was a foregone conclusion.

Many from organisations of the left have abstained. Those who voted did so under the watchful eye of the thugs of the UJC—the neo-fascist youth organization of Santa Cruz province. One man is reported dead and more than 30 injured in clashes on election day.

The eastern half of Bolivia, known as the “half moon”, is the source of most of the country's wealth. The richest of the four eastern provinces, Santa Cruz, contains much of its oil and gas as well as huge soya plantations.

Autonomy

Since the election of Evo Morales in 2005, the elite of the eastern provinces have worked to block every attempt at left wing reform.

They have blocked the Constitutional Assembly and diverted the argument about democracy and social justice towards a campaign for regional autonomy.

But this is no simple bid for devolution—their demand is for a level of self-government that would remove state control and allow the east to run its own foreign policy, build a local army, and administer a separate system of justice.

The referendum was organised to defend the interests of the wealthy landowners and businessmen of the area.

Poor farmers and indigenous Indian communities know that they can expect little in the way of social or economic justice if the elite of the state seizes control of Santa Cruz.

This elite represents the forces that have held power in Bolivia for two centuries.

The Morales government was elected with the promise of challenging these powerful forces in order to redistribute wealth towards those who for

Protesters from El Alto and La Paz demonstrating in 2003 against plans to export natural gas—part of the wave of radical mass movements that swept Evo Morales into power

centuries had been the victims of the exploitation of the country's resources.

Morales emerged from the mass movements from below that have shaken Bolivia since the end of the 1990s.

In 1999 a mass movement in Cochabamba fought successfully against the privatisation of water—dramatically winning it back into public ownership.

From then on, the struggles of communities and mass organisations turned the tide—fighting in particular for control over gas and oil.

The nationalisation of both

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industries was at the heart of Morales' strategy.

Morales is the first Bolivian president from the country's oppressed indigenous population.

Some 65 percent of Bolivia's population come from indigenous cultures—mainly Quechua and Aymara speaking. Yet the rulers of Bolivia—as well as its landowners, businessmen and military commanders—have always come from the white or “criollo” minority.

The white elite's wealth was created by the indigenous miners clawing silver and tin out of the ground at high altitudes for starvation wages.

When the tin mines began to close down in the 1970s, many of these miners, including Evo Morales, moved down into the valleys of Cochabamba to grow coca and some sought work in Santa Cruz and the east.

There they faced the same exploitation and harsh conditions. When that began to

change—with the resistance in Cochabamba—global capital began to prepare its fightback.

Control

The autonomy referendum is part of that fightback by the rich and powerful.

The referendum is intended to ensure that the Morales government, based in La Paz in the Andean highlands, will lose control over the country's wealth and resources.

These will then be placed in the hands of the multinational interests to which the rich and powerful of Santa Cruz are directly connected.

They have justified the campaign with unconcealed racist rhetoric—but behind that are the interests of global capital.

The mass struggles and radical governments of Bolivia and Venezuela have come to represent the cornerstone of an alternative kind of power, based on active communities and mass resistance. It is that

alternative that is now at risk.

The argument that this referendum is an open electoral process is a sham. The resistance of many indigenous and peasant organisations outside the main cities has been fierce, with ballot boxes burned and barricades thrown up.

The stakes are very high. It is not just about the survival of a government, but about the direction of the movement.

For nearly two years powerful capitalist interests have blocked attempts to institute a new radical constitution or full agrarian reforms.

The elite's attacks can only be beaten by Bolivia's mass movements.

They must continue their struggle and they deserve our support.

Mike Gonzalez is author of Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution, available from Bookmarks, phone 020 7637 1848.

For more news from Bolivia, go to www.boliviarising.blogspot.com

IN BRIEF

Anger at Burma storm deaths

STORMS IN Burma had killed tens of thousands, with many thousands more still missing, as Socialist Worker went to press.

Thousands of survivors have fled their homes and are in desperate need of shelter, drinking water, power and communications.

As a poor country with limited infrastructure, Burma is particularly vulnerable to the effects of violent weather but many people believe that the government has not done enough to help.

A retired government worker complained to Reuters news agency, “Where are the soldiers and police? They were very quick and aggressive when there were [democracy] protests in the streets last year.”

Bangladeshi workers win rice

GARMENT FACTORY bosses in Bangladesh have been forced to hand out sacks of subsidised rice to workers in response to a growing strike wave in protest at rising food prices.

The cost of rice, a staple food, has more than doubled in the past 12 months.

Bangladesh's garment factories account for three quarters of the country's export earnings.

The industry makes huge profits for the owners, while workers and their families are forced into near-starvation, and are now estimated to be spending about 70 percent of their earnings on food.

Many say they now no longer eat lunch and most can no longer afford to eat meat, fish or eggs.

A wave of strikes and riots in recent weeks has led to major confrontations with the state.

Farmer suicides rise in India

SHOCKING statistics reveal that the rate of farmer suicides in the Indian state of Maharashtra has gone up in recent years despite continual pledges of state assistance.

The Indian ruling classes claim that wealth generated by the booming economy is “trickling down” to the poor, but thousands of farmers, saddled by debts they cannot repay, take their own lives every year.

According to official statistics, in 2006, 1.3 million out of Maharashtra's 1.76 million farmers were described as “distressed”, of whom 434,000 were found to be under “maximum distress”.

EGYPT

Pay struggles shake regime

THE GOVERNMENT of Hosni Mubarak announced last week that all Egyptian public sector workers would receive a 30 percent wage increase as part of an effort to head off growing militancy. Egyptians who work in the informal sector are not included in the rise.

A few days later the government then issued a new swathe of price rises

on fuel, cigarettes and car licensing.

The decision, announced in parliament and covered by live TV, caused a near riot in the chamber among MPs from the opposition Muslim Brotherhood and independents.

The live broadcast was then cut short.

Even before the latest tax rises the 30 percent increase for public sector workers did little to offset the food price rises that have hit 50 percent, and general inflation of 14.4 percent.

The majority of people, including the middle classes, are struggling to find affordable food.

Fights, and even deaths, are a common feature in the growing queues for subsidised bread.

Meanwhile the government is continuing to crackdown on textile workers' leaders at Mahalla el-Kubra—the Nile Delta town that erupted in riots early last month.

Key militants, including Kamal el-Fayoumi and Tarek Amin, have been

sacked from their jobs at the Mahalla textile mill.

Doctors' leaders have also been seized in the security sweeps against critics of the regime.

As the country's 70 million people struggle to feed themselves, the neoliberal World Economic Forum will be meeting in the Egyptian resort city of Sharm el-Sheikh to plan the next phase of “reforms”.

Among the guests will be Prince Andrew, Tony Blair and US president George Bush.

Riot police attack protest