



Interview: FIU's Eduardo Gamarra on Bolivian President Evo Morales' "Riskless" Recall Vote
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In an interview with AS/COA Managing Editor Carin Zissis, Director of Florida International University’s Latin American and Caribbean Center and Bolivia expert Eduardo Gamarra discusses the complex series of referenda taking place in Bolivia. Earlier this summer, four Bolivian departments held votes supporting autonomy; on August 10, in a public referendum, voters will decide whether the president and several governors retain their positions; and a vote on the controversial new constitution is expected within the next year and a half. Gamarra explains what is behind not only the deep political and regional divisions affecting the country, but also the questionable legitimacy of some of the votes and demonstrations. Speaking about Sunday’s election, Gamarra comments that, “The president is basically running a riskless election.”

AS/COA: Bolivia is holding a referendum in August 10 in which the voters will decide whether the president, the vice president, and most departmental governors will stay in office. How does this recall vote work and does President Evo Morales face any real possibility of losing office?

Gamarra: Perhaps I better start by answering the last part. The president is basically running a riskless election. In fact, it is a referendum that can only work in his favor. Now, having said that, at the same time the governors or the prefects—as a result of the autonomy referendums they’re now known as governors—have more to lose than the president and largely because the way in which the law that convokes the referendum is written. To lose, the president needs the majority of people to vote against him. To lose, the prefects do not need a majority; a simple minority could end their terms. The president would then have the right to name the successor rather than calling for a new election. In the case that the president loses, there’s a need for an immediate call for a new round of elections. It is relatively complicated but the point is that the president is risking very little and the prefects have much to lose.

AS/COA: So, just to understand this clearly, the prefects can lose by a minority vote?

Gamarra: Yes. Let’s assume that the prefect won by 48 percent vote in 2005. 49 percent is more than the 48 percent that the prefect originally won by. Therefore the prefect would be recalled. Even though the prefect may win, the no vote actually would be more than the vote that the prefect got in 2005.

That's not the case with the president. In the case of the president, the opposition will need to win the no vote by at least 56 percent. Which means, that the president needs only about 44 percent to ratify himself in the presidency.

AS/COA: Right now, how high is Morales' popularity running?

Gamarra: Sixty-one percent. So, that's essentially why the president wrote the law, and this is one of the strangest kinds of situations because the recall referendum is unconstitutional. It doesn't exist in the old constitution and it's not even in the new constitution. It was something that the president submitted to [Bolivian] Congress in October, largely in a move to block the autonomy movement in Santa Cruz. This was before ratification of the constitution in November, and it was before this current battle that the president has with the prefects. But, nonetheless the president submitted it to Congress, the lower house approved it, and it sat in the Senate, which is controlled by the opposition, until May 7.

Now, why is that day important? On May 4, the first autonomy referendum occurred in Santa Cruz, which the autonomy movement won by 85 percent. Three days later, the main opposition party—Podemos, headed by former President Jorge “Tuo” Quiroga, which controlled the Senate—for some unexplained reason decided to dust off the proposal by President Morales for the recall referendum and passed it.

To me it's one of the most historically significant political blunders that I've seen in my more than 20 years of writing on my country. Why do I say it is a blunder? Because up until May 4, the momentum was all on the side of the autonomy. It looked like Bolivia was beginning to be divided between two major political forces, between the MAS [Movement for Socialism, the Morales-led political party] along with the altiplano departments and the autonomy movement, which is a movement with no real political party linkage. In that battle, it seems to me that Quiroga decided that the only way in which the political party system could again be significant would be by trying to minimize the momentum that the autonomy movement had. This is probably one of the more audacious explanations, because what Podemos has basically argued is that they did it because they assumed that the victory of the autonomous movement opened the road for almost the immediate convocation of a referendum on the MAS' constitution. The opposition has been arguing for a long time—and the opposition in this case is both the political and the regional opposition—that the constitution was approved in an unconstitutional, illegal, and irregular way in the cities of Sucre and in Oruro in November and December of last year.

It's a very convoluted scenario but nonetheless it coincided with this real momentum that had to do with four consecutive referenda on autonomy statutes. In Santa Cruz on May 4, and subsequently in Beni, Pando, and Tarija, culminating in late June with major victories in each case, with over 70 percent for the yes vote.

AS/COA: Bolivia's electoral court denied the legality of those autonomy referenda, so where does that leave those votes? Is there any next step on them?

Gamarra: This is the problem, because in fact President Morales was just quoted in video saying before a crowd of state petroleum corporations, he said basically “look, I know I have

done things illegally but when I do things illegally and then I ask my lawyers—after all they’re studied people—then I ask them to make them legal.” In other words, he breaks laws and then he finds a way to make them appear legal.

Trying to be somewhat balanced in this explanation, it’s also true that in Bolivia if there’s a consensus about anything, it’s a consensus to break the law, because the way in which we seem to be operating these days is if the government violates the law, it’s ok for me to violate the law as well. In the context where everybody wants to refound the country in their own liking, then of course, the only thing that works as legal is “what I say is legal.”

On the other hand, there’s a great drive to make things legitimate by putting thousands of people out in the street. The government has been doing this for many years. Either mobilizing people by force, now mobilizing them by payment or even sanctions—if you don’t join a demonstration, for example, you might be fired if you’re a public employee. I grew up during the military dictatorships; it is so reminiscent of what [former dictators Hugo] Banzer and [Luis] Garcia Mesa and others used to do to demonstrate that they had massive public support.

The difference is that Evo does have massive public support but he still does this kind of mobilization, and it’s led to this notion that if you put enough people on the street then it is legitimate. If it violates the constitution it’s too bad, because the voice of the people is the voice of God in Evo Morales’ view of the political world.

AS/COA: Another way you have all these people out is by having all these votes on both sides, having the autonomy referenda, a recall vote, and there’s probably going to have to be a vote on the constitution. Is there some way that all of these votes can at some point break this deadlock between Morales and the opposition? Is there something that can come out of it?

Gamarra: Well, there’s two ways of looking at it. One is that it is all going to end up in a very Bolivian way, in which we will go to the brink and come back with an agreement that will be nation-saving and where everybody will somehow work out a deal. That’s a school of thought, largely headed by former President Carlos Mesa and several people in the academic and intellectual community in Bolivia that believes that can be achieved. In some measure I identify with that—some way of coming together and forging a middle path between two extremes.

Will these successive rounds of voting get us there? This perspective believes that it will, but there’s also very real risk that it won’t. Especially given what might occur in the next couple of days and weeks where there’s a very distinct possibility that the recall referendum will not occur. If it doesn’t occur then Morales calls that a conspiracy on the part of the oligarchy. Besides that, you take this to the people and to the streets and then you have a very serious unmediated confrontation with Santa Cruz and the autonomy movement.

At the same time, you may say that there is a third scenario, one in which we actually have the recall referendum and that some prefects lose, and Evo ends up with more prefects now than he had. But then in Santa Cruz and in a couple of the other departments, Evo takes a real trouncing and the prefects are ratified not only by the same numbers of votes that they obtained originally

in 2005 but that they gain significantly more. For example, public opinion polls that I've been seeing say that [Prefect] Rubén Costas in Santa Cruz could win by as much as 75 percent. Evo might emerge strengthened from his own recall vote and he might win some additional prefects—maybe Cochabamba, for example. But he will eventually end up in a confrontation with Santa Cruz.

Then it leads you to ask what's next? What follows is the calling of yet another referendum, which cannot be held this year—a national referendum on the ratification of the constitution. The new constitution is problematic because it has numerous articles that are being criticized by Santa Cruz and other autonomy-seeking prefects. There are numerous articles that even middle class Bolivians reject and overall I think it would need an entire revamping. But Morales would be so inspired by his victory that he will be reluctant to negotiate those articles, and in that case I think you would have a rather difficult, highly contested—if not violent—electoral process in the next year or year-and-a-half.

AS/COA: About U.S.-Bolivian relations, there've been some tensions since Morales came to power, but in particular, in the past few months. [Assistant Secretary of the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs] Tom Shannon went to La Paz a few weeks ago trying to patch things up. Do you see any possibilities for strengthening of relations between La Paz and Washington?

Gamarra: My sense is the following: The U.S. has had a policy in Bolivia over the last three years of basically just waiting and seeing whatever it is that Evo is coming up with. I wrote an article for the Council on Foreign Relations in which I argue basically that the U.S. should not wait and see, but should in fact, be proactive in trying to demonstrate that in fact it has a very positive agenda, ready to work with a government like Evo Morales'. That means including and providing extension of their TPA and moving forward on some interesting programs with USAID.

We have a good ambassador [Phillip S. Goldberg] there who has been absolutely hamstrung. It was really quite ludicrous for us to sit back and watch as the embassy was attacked and not really say much. We try to build up an inter-American committee of rules and respect. I think you have to really wonder how serious Bolivia is, and I don't think it is very serious at all about relations with the United States. And I have profound respect for Ambassador Goldberg and Mr. Shannon. No matter how good their offices are, at this point I think the best that the U.S. can do is to continue to wait and see until after our own round of elections for what the new administration can come up with.

I think the U.S. needs to try to find a way to work with governments like Morales' and [Venezuelan President Hugo] Chávez. I don't think that we ought to escalate conflict with him. But at the same time, I don't think that we should take the kind of insults that come with this new pattern of conducting foreign policy by the likes of Morales, Chávez, [Ecuador's President Rafael] Correa, and [Nicaragua's President] Daniel Ortega. I think we should have a modicum of decorum in the inter-American system. We've spent too much time trying to construct these frames for exchange.