

Armed forces and fascist gangs mobilized against blockades in Bolivia

By Tomas Castanheira
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The blockades of main roads by Bolivian workers and peasants in protest against the postponement of presidential elections are now in their 10th day as the country's political crisis and social conflicts steadily escalate.

The widespread opposition to Jeanine Áñez's de facto government is expressed in the growth of the blockades, erected at more than 100 points around Bolivia, with new social sectors joining in the cities and in the countryside. The demand for the immediate fall of Áñez and the regime brought to power in a US-backed coup in November of last year is gaining increasing popular support.

The growing anger of the population is linked to the government's response to the protests, on the one hand cynically exempting itself from all political responsibility, and, on the other, promoting an escalation of threats, provocations and orders for violent repression.

In an interview with CNN on Monday night, Government Minister Arturo Murillo threatened to drown the protests in blood and to persecute his political opponents.

Responding to journalist Fernando Del Rincon, who asked why he didn't carry out an immediate military intervention against the blockades, the minister said: "We are trying to avoid a civil war in the country ... You're not just going to shoot everybody [although] that would be politically correct."

"If we do not reach an agreement with all those who have created this national disaster in the next few hours, then there will be no other way than to strike with the strongest hand," he concluded.

These threats are not rhetorical. Murillo lies only when he says he wants to avoid a civil war. The path being taken by the hated government in its attempt to remain in power is precisely that of violent repression against the population.

On Monday, the main Bolivian cities were militarized, with troops sent to the streets of the capital La Paz, Cochabamba and Santa Cruz. According to the government they are "guarding public institutions of strategic infrastructure, like airports and gas plants" and waiting for orders for a direct intervention against the blockades.

An ostensive military operation was mobilized to escort trucks carrying medical oxygen by land to different points in Bolivia. A convoy of trucks escorted by soldiers and army helicopters left on Monday to provocatively cross various blockades, even as protesters said they wouldn't block medical supplies.

However, the military is not acting alone. Since the weekend, the so-called "shock groups" organized by fascists, who intervened during the November coup, have been mobilized again in Cochabamba, Santa Cruz and La Paz to brutally attack the protesters.

In Cochabamba, a gang of the Cochala Youth Resistance (RJC) gathered in the neighborhood of Cala Cala and left riding motorcycles

and armed with homemade firearms and sticks to clash with blockades at nine different points in the city. Fascists were joined in their actions by the police, who attacked the blockades simultaneously with tear gas grenades.

In Santa Cruz, the Crucenista Youth Union (UJC), linked to the extreme-right politician Luis Fernando Camacho, launched a brutal attack against protesters, leaving at least 23 wounded, three of them with serious gunshot wounds.

The Bolivian Public Defender's Office issued a statement condemning "a kind of complicity and permissiveness on the part of the state with the violent actions of paramilitary groups that took place over the weekend."

A report published in July by Harvard's International Human Rights Clinic, reporting human rights violations by the Bolivian state during and after the November coup, points to the role of such shock groups.

It states: "Resistencia Juvenil Cochala (RJC) and its *motoqueros* appear to be the most structured and capable of violent mobilization. The RJC self-defines as a policing and control entity ready to respond to 'threats and vandalism.' ... The RJC had roughly 150 members around the time of the October election, but by December 2020 they were believed to have over 20,000 members nationally ... They have reportedly armed themselves with clubs, homemade cannons, bazookas, Molotov cocktails, pellet guns, and firearms. Several interviewees perceived a 'very clear link and coordination' between the *motoqueros* and the police force."

Over the weekend, Áñez farcically called for a "national dialogue" meeting to "confirm the election calendar and suspend the blockades that are impinging on the passage of oxygen to COVID-19 patients [emphasis added]."

Absolving herself of responsibility for the successive postponements of the elections, in which she intervened actively and with the declared support of US President Donald Trump, Áñez refused to discuss the matter and hypocritically criticized the Electoral Court, saying, "Be serious and stop moving the date."

Although the main political actors did not attend, including the presidential candidates of Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS, the party of ousted president Evo Morales) and Corriente Ciudadana (CC), which poll the highest support, Áñez succeeded in using the event as a means of promoting her violent preparations against social opposition, with the participation of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the European Union (EU) as international overseers.

The OAS, which played a central role in preparing the November coup, is supporting the de facto government's fraudulent campaign, accusing the blockades of causing a deadly crisis in relation to oxygen

supplies in the hospitals.

The OAS General Secretariat charged that the demonstrators “block the passage of trucks with health supplies to combat COVID-19, at a time when the pandemic has reached its peak in the South American country.”

It also condemned the struggle of the Bolivian population against the hated regime that the OAS itself helped impose as a pursuit of “miserable and petty interests” that violate “human rights and public order.”

These hypocritical statements cover up the real criminals who should answer for the public health catastrophe in Bolivia: not the protesters, but the government itself.

So far, more than 90,000 Bolivians have tested positive for the coronavirus, with more than 3,700 having died from COVID-19. The country’s testing rate is, however, one of the lowest in the world.

The lack of testing not only makes these numbers a gross underestimate, it also prevents any real fight against the disease. This is exacerbated by the lack of the most basic supplies in hospitals.

The weak infrastructure is a result not only of the lack of resources in the poorest country in Latin America. The de facto government has been indicted for the fraudulent purchase of overpriced ventilators that were, moreover, useless for the treatment of COVID-19.

The precarious situation in the hospitals has been denounced by health professionals in protests that have erupted in different cities across Bolivia. They have denounced the government for not providing personal protection equipment (PPE), forcing them to buy it with their own money or to improvise with plastic bags.

These conditions have led to extremely high rates of contamination and death among health care workers, possibly the highest in the world. According to Health Minister Eidy Roca, at least 100 doctors and 100 other health care workers have died of COVID-19 in the past five months.

However, this shocking number was considered a serious underestimate by the president of the Medical Health Branches Union (Sirmes), Fernando Romero. “We believe that at least 400 doctors and 400 other health care workers died nationwide. In La Paz alone we lost 100 health professionals including doctors, nurses and others,” he said.

The widespread contamination of employees has led to temporary closures for decontamination of more than half of the country’s hospitals, accelerating the overcrowding of the health care system and causing incalculable numbers of deaths.

After months of a policy that allowed Bolivians to die in the middle of the streets without assistance, to be treated in precarious health centers with medicines that have no scientific validity for use against COVID-19 and to be forced to starve in the midst of inefficient lockdowns in the absence of necessary testing, the criminal government of Áñez, supported by US and European imperialism, blames the deaths on the social opposition that has emerged against these disastrous conditions.

On Monday, 12 people were indicted by the government as allegedly responsible for the blockades. Among the accused are Evo Morales and the presidential and vice-presidential candidates of the MAS and Bolivian Workers Federation (COB) leader Carlos Huarachi. They are accused of crimes of “terrorism and genocide.”

These absurd accusations aim to criminalize all political opposition to the regime, strengthening its dictatorial power. The attack is particularly directed against the MAS with the aim of outlawing the party.

From Argentina, where he is in exile, Morales is intervening in the Bolivian political crisis in an attempt to sew up a new bourgeois alliance, which involves the actors in the November coup and their international sponsors.

Faced with the growing willingness of the masses of the population to directly confront the regime, Morales is urging the protesters to retreat and accept the terms imposed by the government and its Electoral Court.

Through Twitter, he has insistently rejected the popular demand for the fall of the regime, affirming: “The leaders and the mobilized social ranks must make a responsible choice between the resignation of Áñez, which will further delay our return to democracy, and early elections guaranteed by the United Nations.”

And he affirmed that the “only possible way to solve the tension in Bolivia” is a dialogue between “The Legislative Assembly, the Supreme Electoral Court and the social movements.”

The path suggested by Morales is the demoralization and disarmament of the masses in the face of the fascist threat. It would pave the way for the consolidation of a dictatorship based on the repression of the growing class conflicts under the jackboots of the military.

Unlike Morales, the workers and peasants will not be able to escape by plane; they will be forced to live the consequences of state terror, paying the price with their own blood.

The struggle that the Bolivian workers and peasants are courageously waging can find a way forward only by drawing the necessary political conclusions from the process that led to the reactionary coup in November 2019.

While it is true that the right-wing forces triumphed with the decisive support of imperialism, their path to power was paved by the deep crisis of Morales’ bourgeois national policies, implementing unpopular measures and attacks against the working class.

Bolivian workers must fight for their political independence from the MAS, the COB and the unions that seek to subject them to factions of the bourgeoisie. They can count only on themselves and on the alliance with the rural masses to defend themselves from the state forces and fascist provocateurs.

Above all, it is necessary to build a revolutionary leadership based on unity with the working class in Latin America and around the world, and with a true socialist and internationalist perspective advanced today only by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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