



BOLIVIA: TEN MAJOR CHANGES*

Bolivians headed back to the polls on Sunday, January 25, 2009, to vote in a constitutional referendum. A draft "Political Constitution of the State", prepared by the constituent assembly and amended by Congress, was submitted to the verdict of 4 million voters.

President Evo Morales and his government solicited the approval of the draft Constitution while the regional and political opposition campaigned for its rejection.

Here are the 10 key changes proposed by the draft Constitution.



1. Indigenous Power

The status of 36 indigenous groups will shift from being simply recognized to being empowered to effectively participate at all levels of government and in all sectors of the economy.

2. Autonomy

The current Constitution allows for a certain amount of decentralization while the draft Constitution provides for four levels of autonomy—departmental, regional, municipal and indigenous.

3. Land Ownership

The Constitution that is still in force does not recognize large-landed estates but neither does it set a limit on land holdings.

4. Rights

The current Constitution recognizes rights in a general manner while the new version contains a hundred or so articles on the rights of specific social groups such as indigenous peoples, children, families, adults, persons with disabilities, inmates, public service users and consumers.

5. Plural Economy

Evo Morales' government advocates a plural State instead of the capitalistic or mixed model, which has always had the government oversee the economy without playing a role in it.

6. Natural Resources

Article 349 of the draft Constitution stipulates that the country's natural resources are the exclusive and imprescriptible property of the Bolivian people and that it is the duty of the State to manage them in the public interest.

7. Religion

In the draft Constitution, the Catholic religion loses the official status granted it under the current Constitution.

8. Re-election

Under the current Constitution, the President of the country may seek re-election only after stepping down for at least one term. Under the draft Constitution, however, the President may do so immediately for a second consecutive term, which would allow Evo Morales to run for the presidency again.

In addition, the new Constitution calls for a second ballot to be held—rather than a vote by Congress, as had been the case until now—to determine who will win the presidency when none of the candidates secures an absolute majority.

9. Coca Leaf

The current Constitution is mum on the subject of the coca leaf, whereas the draft Constitution stipulates that the State is to protect the native and ancestral coca leaf as part of the country's cultural heritage, as a renewable natural resource and as a factor in social cohesion.

10. Sea Access

On the foreign policy front, the draft Constitution asserts Bolivia's inalienable and imprescriptible right to the land providing the country access to the Pacific Ocean. It also requires that the State obtain the people's consent by referendum on sensitive issues such as the ratification of international treaties. *Source: BBC in Spanish*

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Ecuador's national electoral council, the Consejo Nacional Electoral (CNE), has called a general election for April 26, 2009.

A general election has been called following the adoption by referendum, on September 28, 2008, of the new Constitution proposed by President Rafael Correa.

Close to 6,000 representatives are to be elected, including the President of the Republic. If none of the parties in the race gets an absolute majority, the two political parties that won the most votes will face off in a run-off election on June 14, 2009. The registration period for candidates was from January 5 to February 5, 2009.

TRANSITIONAL REGIME

As a next step toward the adoption of the new Constitution last September, a so-called transitional regime was installed in Ecuador to set standards and make regulations for the implementation of the Political Charter and for the administration of general elections.

According to the election call issued by the CNE, teens aged 16 to 18, members of the armed forces and the national police, people with disabilities, seniors over 65 years of age and nonresident citizens may vote if they choose to, but voting is mandatory for all citizens over 18 years of age and for all inmates who are awaiting trial or currently on trial but have not yet been convicted.



FAILING POLITICAL SYSTEMS, AUTHORITARIAN LEADERS

In Latin America, the convening of constituent assemblies to resolve institutional crises or strengthen the executive broadened from a political phenomenon to a trend in the 1990s.

Stable political systems opt for constitutional amendments to adapt their founding document to circumstances without having to revisit the whole text. In Latin America, however, amending constitutions has traditionally been a way of remedying the weaknesses of political systems inherited from the past, as John Coatsworth, Professor of International and Public Affairs and of History at Columbia University in New York City, put it in a BBC World interview.

The problem is in part due to the fact that, in the 20th century, Latin American countries tended to look to military governments to address both political instability and institutional crises.

PLAGUE OF COUPS



As Arturo Valenzuela, Director of the Center for Latin American Studies at Georgetown University in Washington DC, explained to BBC World, some 40% of the changes of government that occurred in Latin America between 1930 and 1980 were the result of coups d'état, and thus any possibility of democratic consolidation was crushed time and again.

Valenzuela went on to say that the old inefficient political systems, flawed by unrepresentativeness and corruption, spawned new social and political crises, which in turn mobilized the people and ultimately led to the establishment of constituent assemblies to impose a new political order. *Source: BBC in Spanish.*



GENERAL ELECTION IN QUÉBEC



Last November 5, Premier Jean Charest asked Québec's Lieutenant Governor, the Honourable Pierre Duchesne, to dissolve Parliament and call a general election for Monday, December 8, 2008.

In a British-style parliamentary system, it is the Premier who chooses the date on which an election will be called. However, under the Constitution, a general election must be held in Québec at least every five years.

At the time of its dissolution, the 38th Legislature was composed of 48 Members from the Québec Liberal Party, 39 Members from the Action démocratique du Québec and 36 Members from the Parti Québécois. Two seats were vacant. The Legislature was the first in Québec since the election of 1878 in which a party formed a minority government.

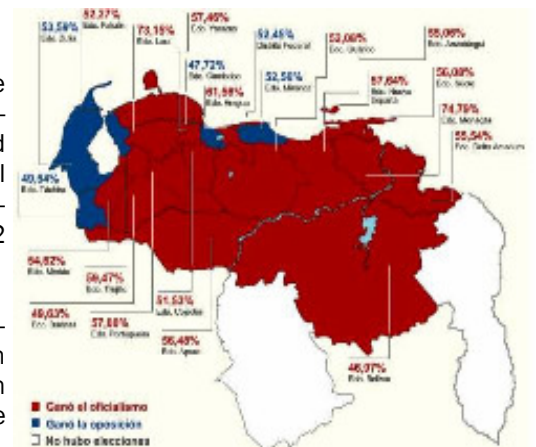
The December 8 poll resulted in the election of the 125 Members of the 39th Legislature of the National Assembly of Québec. According to the preliminary results, the National Assembly will be composed of 66 Members from the Québec Liberal Party, 51 Members from the Parti Québécois, 7 Members from the Action démocratique du Québec as well as one member from Québec solidaire.

Mr. Yvon Vallières was elected President of the National Assembly on January 13, 2009.

ELECTIONS IN VENEZUELA

Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez proclaimed victory in the regional elections, with his candidates winning most states, although the opposition captured most of the more populous and more politically important areas. According to the first official poll results made public by the national electoral council, the government kept its hold on the gubernatorial seats in 17 of the 22 states.

The opposition won the Caracas mayoral office and the governorships in the states of Miranda—which is part of the metropolitan region—and oil-producing Zulia. These are key constituencies in what is called the “electoral corridor” because it is home to the bulk of the population. Antonio Ledezma, an opposition candidate, garnered the Caracas mayoral office, defeating former minister Aristóbulo Istúriz, one of the most popular figures of the Chavist movement.



GOVERNORSHIPS

In the state of Miranda, Enrique Capriles Radonski beat the Diosdado Cabello, another prominent player on the government team, who was seeking re-election. The states of Zulia and Nueva Esparta also went to the opposition. César Pérez, another opposition candidate, gained the governorship in the state of Táchira, which is located in the Andine region bordering on Columbia and also lies in the electoral corridor. In the state of Carabobo, Venezuela's industrial hub, Enrique Salas Feo, yet another opposition candidate, came out on top.

STRONG VOTER TURNOUT

Barinas, a relatively unimportant state from a political point of view but a highly symbolic one, stayed in the hands of the Chávez family, with the President's brother, Adán, following hard in the footsteps of their father, who had held onto the governor's seat for the last decade.

Although the opposition is justified in celebrating the importance of its victories, the candidates of the government party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, who won in their constituencies did so with substantial majorities. According to national electoral council data, voter turnout hovered around 65%, a historically high level for regional elections. *Source: BBC in Spanish*



CHILE AND EUROPEAN COMMUNITY—SEEK UNDERSTANDING



The International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea has agreed to postpone its hearing of the case submitted by Chile and the European Community (EC) on the conservation of swordfish stocks in the southeastern Pacific until January 1, 2010.

Both parties requested the deferral and undertook to reach a bilateral understanding. The case was introduced eight years ago when Chile requested the Tribunal to determine whether the EC was complying with its obligations to ensure the conservation of the species in international waters adjacent to Chile's exclusive economic zone while vessels flying the flag of its Member States were fishing those waters. The EC, for its part, requested that the Tribunal rule on whether Chile was complying with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea as regards conservation of swordfish stocks in the high seas. Source: United Nations System.

ECLAC: POVERTY DROPS IN LATIN AMERICA

The number of people living in poverty in Latin American and the Caribbean dropped slightly last year, but the number of those living in extreme poverty or indigence rose marginally. This is one of the estimates made in a report entitled *Social Panorama of Latin America, 2008*, published by ECLAC, the UN's Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

The report bases its figures on the upswing in inflation since the beginning of 2007 and, in particular, on the increase in food costs. The countries in the region started to feel the effects of the economic crisis toward the end of 2008, noted Martín Hopenhayn, Director of ECLAC's Social Development Division.

He added that the Central American countries will be the hardest hit for a number of reasons, one of them being the slowdown in fund transfers from the United States. Hopenhayn explained that soy-, oil- and gas-producing countries enjoyed higher prices for a year and a half but that, although prices have not returned to their former levels, they are now on a downslide, which will necessarily have an impact on these countries.

The ECLAC report predicts that employment will be stagnant in 2009. On average, salaries will stay at their current levels or will sag slightly, but the income of households that include self-employed or informal economy workers will be the most affected. Source: United Nations System.

WORLD MUST LEARN FROM LATIN AMERICA



The World Bank recently urged the international community to look to Latin America for creative solutions to avert a climate crisis. A report on Latin American responses to climate change explores how the region is testing new technologies and innovative approaches to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Sergio Jellinek, a World Bank official, singled out public transit initiatives underway in Curitiba, Brazil and Bogotá, Columbia, among other outstanding projects.

He also highlighted that Costa Rica is another pioneer in the region in the area of environmental services and that Mexico is now a leader in the same area thanks to its national strategy on climate change, which sets more ambitious targets than the Kyoto Protocol targets.

Jellinek however noted that while the Latin American and Caribbean region is among the regions with the lowest greenhouse gas emissions, it nonetheless suffers serious damage from climate change. Source: World Bank

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