



Bolivia

Government response to COVID-19 to fuel localised civil unrest

 SECURITY CIVIL UNREST LABOUR

COVID-19

The National Health Council (CNS) on 10 February threatened President Luis Arce with an indefinite strike if he fails to address their demands regarding the Sanitary Emergency Law over the next 48 hours.

The development comes after the Bolivian Workers' Central Union (COB) earlier on 10 February also gave Arce a 24-hour deadline to enact the controversial law, further exacerbating tensions.

Unrest risks will also remain elevated due to growing criticism with regards to the government's response to COVID-19, as the country faces a second wave of contagion.

Businesses are unlikely to be directly targeted by protesters, however, disruptions are likely in the capital La Paz (La Paz department) and Santa Cruz de la Sierra (Santa Cruz department).

Ultimatums

The Sanitary Emergency Law was approved by the legislative majorities of the ruling Movement for Socialism (MAS) party at the Plurinational Legislative Assembly (ALP) on 5 February. However, it is pending to be enacted by Arce for its official approval. According to MAS legislators, the law enables the government to provide an efficient response to the pandemic and future sanitary emergencies, as it will facilitate the acquisition of vaccines and medicines (by shortening health registration processes), in addition to streamlining the processes for the hiring of personnel, purchase of equipment, reagents and supplies, among others. However, health workers say that they were not consulted, and that the law prohibits them from conducting protests or strikes during the state of sanitary emergency. Legislators from the opposition also reject the fact that the law enables the government to conduct public procurement processes with confidentiality clauses, undermining transparency and accountability.

Following the CNS' ultimatum for Arce to address their demands, the COB (which are key constituents of the MAS) and pro-government civil society organisations also gave an ultimatum, aiming to pressure Arce to effectively enact the law. According to the COB, health workers' demands have political intentions (implying that opposition forces seek to capitalise on popular support ahead of the 6 March sub-national elections), and aim to protect economic interests over the interests of the public. Tensions are therefore high, and a likely approval of the law by Arce will fuel bouts of unrest by healthcare workers over the next week.

Unrest

The government's response to the pandemic has fuelled opposition in cities facing a second wave of COVID-19, particularly La Paz and Santa Cruz. Almost one month after taking office (Arce took power on 8 November 2020), his government eliminated mobility restrictions, and ordered that all economic, cultural, religious, social, and recreational activities should resume on 1 December, subject to compliance with sanitary measures. Low compliance with such measures (such as wearing face masks), however, as well as low enforcement, has led to a rise in cases. In turn, this has resulted in hospital and funerary services collapsing in some cities, including La Paz. Healthcare workers in Santa Cruz on 8 February held a strike aimed to pressure the departmental government to introduce strict mobility restrictions, in addition to further raising their voice against the Sanitary Emergency Law.

Business implications

Businesses operating in La Paz and Santa Cruz will face operational disruptions as a result of health workers' protests. The vicinity of hospital facilities and departmental government headquarters will likely be key centres of unrest. Protests will be largely peaceful, but will disrupt the efficient and timely provision of healthcare services.

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