BOLIVIAN DEMONSTRATIONS MOST SERIOUS IN FOURTEEN YEARS

The violent antigovernment demonstrations that have erupted in every major city in Bolivia since 21 October represent the greatest challenge to political stability in the fourteen-year rule of the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (MNR).

Both rightist and leftist opposition parties are behind the outbreaks, but they have used their followers in the universities and secondary schools to spearhead their demonstrations. At the outset the primary grievance was press censorship imposed by the government under a state-of-siege declaration issued on 20 September. However, the emphasis has switched to protests against the government's repressive measures which have caused several deaths. The government has granted some concessions to the students, including the revocation of censorship, but enough momentum had already been gathered to turn the demonstrations into demands that President Paz relinquish control of the government.

Paz is apparently determined to stand his ground and put down this challenge to his rule. He is presently relying primarily on the national police, the peasant militia, and loyal MNR militia units to quell the disorders. In the capital, these forces have so far been able to contain the demonstrators. The situation in provincial cities, particularly in Oruro where local miners are now in full revolt, is far more serious, however. Fewer police are deployed in these localities and the loyalty of local militia units is questionable.

The ultimate outcome hinges on whether the armed forces will remain loyal to Paz. At the moment, the military does not seem inclined to shift allegiance, although there are reports that some low-ranking officers are plotting a coup.

Vice President Barrientos is maintaining an ambiguous position. If he came out strongly for Paz, the situation would probably be eased somewhat. His continued silence, however, will encourage efforts to overthrow the government. ████

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