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IRI in Bolivia

[Latin America and the Caribbean](#)



political overview

President: Carlos Diego Mesa Gisbert (since October 17, 2003)

Recent Elections: Presidential- June 30, 2002

Upcoming Elections: Municipal- December 5, 2004
Presidential- June 2007

project overview

Program Grantee/Grant Source: U.S. Agency for International Development

Dates of Project: November 2003- November 2004

Project Focus: Civil Society Strengthening

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background

After more than a century and a half of independence, Bolivia has been witness to nearly 200 coups and counter-coups. Although a process of democratic consolidation was begun in the 1980s, this turbulent history continues to make its mark on Bolivian politics. In October 2003, President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada resigned just 14 months after taking office. Ethnic conflicts, coupled with controversial plans for a tax hike and gas exportation, led to deadly riots in February and October 2003 and Sanchez de Lozada's eventual resignation.

Former Vice President and current President Carlos Mesa Gisbert is now balancing the demands of the Bolivian population with harsh reality that Bolivia faces: economic recession, high ethnic tensions, and deep skepticism of government. Central to Mesa's governing plan are a referendum on gas exportation and a constitutional assembly; two measures that directly address a need for citizen discourse. IRI believes that preparing Bolivians to participate in civic exercises such as these is vital to the long-term health of Bolivian democracy.

A 2002 democracy study conducted by University of Pittsburgh Professor Mitchell Seligson reveals an overwhelming call for dialogue. When asked whether they were more in agreement with a leader who ruled with a strong hand or with a leader who knew how to communicate with all sectors of the population, a resounding 70.5% percent of those polled agreed that they believed dialogue was key to good governance. Unfortunately, the same research shows that three quarters of the population was not aware of any way to communicate with their elected leaders. In these circumstances, communication with political parties is also compromised.

The IRI-Bolivia program aims to help bridge the communication gap between civil society, elected officials, and political parties.

current program

IRI opened its doors in La Paz in March 2003. The program's goal is to strengthen civil society by helping citizens engage in the democratic process and its institutions. The project is a multilateral campaign in civic engagement that uses current affairs, such as the July 2004 referendum and municipal elections, as the platform for activities that include:

- Departmental Forums

IRI coordinates with civic organizations, NGOs, foundations, and other civically active groups to organize departmental forums throughout Bolivia. The forums include members of civil society, elected officials, and party representatives and serve as an opportunity for citizens, elected officials, and party members to interchange in a positive, constructive environment.

- Radio Programs

IRI has launched radio programs in each of Bolivia's nine departments. The purpose of the radio programs is to provide citizens an accessible, informative, and interactive medium in which to discuss relevant issues. Political analysts, political party leaders, and civic leaders are invited to discuss issues on live broadcast and field questions from an audience of citizens.

- Media Trainings

With the 2004 municipal elections approaching, effective reporting is essential. IRI trainings underscore the critical role of the media in a democracy, specifically the links between media, political parties, and healthy democracies. This message is delivered through training to encourage election coverage that focuses on candidate, party, and voter issues, as well as citizens' priorities and concerns.

IRI developed the framework for a series of four seminars that will bring together some of Bolivia's leading politicians, representative press members, and civil society representatives to debate the role of the press in democratic political processes. The first seminar was held in Santa Cruz on June 12, 2004.



Congresswoman Roxana Sandoval (MNR) and Maggy Talavera, Director of "El Nuevo Dia", Santa Cruz

- High School Civics Initiative

Bolivia's educators are preparing to revise the curriculum through the high school level, with special emphasis to be given to promotion of democratic knowledge, skills, and virtues.

IRI will bolster this reform effort by developing materials that teachers and students can use as they explore the history of democracy, the role of the responsible citizen and elected officials, and specific themes such as authority and responsibility.

By preparing citizens to acquire the knowledge, skills, and virtues of an informed and active public, and additionally provide the venues in which to exercise them, IRI hopes to help Bolivians become stockholders in their own democracy.

publications

program highlights

- **11/8/2004** [Civic-education manual developed for Bolivian students](#)
- **9/16/2004** [International Conference on Education Reforms](#)
- **7/19/2004** [Referendum education program](#)
- **3/31/2004** [Politics and Politicians in Bolivia](#)

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