

A demonstrator burns a Wiphala Indigenous flag during a protest to demand a census in 2023, in Santa Cruz, Bolivia Nov. 11. For 36 days in October and November, protesters demanded the government carry out a census that would give them a higher budget and more seats in Congress. On Nov. 26, protest leaders agreed to suspend protests. (AP/Ipa Ibanez)



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For 36 days in October and November, a series of protests and road blockades ground daily life to a halt in Bolivia's most populated state, Santa Cruz. Although the leaders of the protest movement agreed on Nov. 26 to suspend their actions, Catholic Church leaders are still struggling with how to avoid playing an active role in the political conflict.

The general strike, as it was called by its organizers, was launched after Bolivian President Luis Arce's administration announced it would postpone a planned national census scheduled for this year until 2024, due to concerns over lingering effects of the pandemic and the challenge of incorporating use of Bolivia's various Indigenous languages.

Santa Cruz, which comprises about one-third of the Southern American nation's territory and is considered the nation's economic powerhouse, is expected to earn more seats in the national Congress and more allocation of development funds after the census is concluded.

When Arce, a leading member of the left-wing Movement for Socialism, announced in July that the census would not happen this year, Santa Cruz's right-wing political leaders saw it as a maneuver to damage their prospects in the 2025 general elections.

The blockades and protests caused financial losses of at least an estimated $780 million. And at least four people died and 178 were wounded in car accidents provoked by the blockades, or in clashes with protesters.

The suspension was declared after Bolivia's lower house passed a bill setting the census for March 2024.

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> — Jesuit Fr. Osvaldo Chirveches
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Juan Carlos Velásquez, a lawyer who serves as a labor representative at the Bolivian Catholic University in Santa Cruz, told NCR that some activists are not abiding by the suspension in protests.

The bill mandates that the 2025 elections will include changes in apportionment from the 2024 census. Bolivia's Senate passed the bill on Nov. 29; and it was signed by Arce on Dec. 2.

Major leaders of the protest movement, including Rómulo Calvo, who heads the Pro Santa Cruz Civic Committee, said they will remain alert and mobilized. They also said they will keep working to achieve more autonomy in the relationship between Santa Cruz and the national government.

In many ways, the crisis in Santa Cruz is about more than the census.

"It is about long-lasting fractures in the connections between the region and the Bolivian State," said sociologist Julio Córdova, an expert in Bolivia's religious dynamics.

Christian — and Catholic — symbology has been an integral part of the protest movement, whose roots can be found in the 2019 demonstrations that led then-President Evo Morales to resign from office.



Juan Carlos Velásquez, a lawyer who serves as a labor representative at the Bolivian Catholic University in Santa Cruz, said some activists are not abiding by the suspension in protests. (Courtesy of Juan Carlos Velásquez)

That year, Morales ran for a fourth term as the nation's leader, even though a referendum in 2016 had limited the president to two terms. The Supreme Court suspended the limit in a highly controversial ruling, and Morales ended up winning the election.

But accusations of voter fraud led demonstrators to the streets all over the country. Cruceños — people from Santa Cruz — played a leading role in the crisis. Some of their right-wing leaders, like Luis Fernando Camacho, gained national notoriety. In 2021, Camacho was elected as Santa Cruz's governor.

The demonstrations in 2019 drew on Christian imagery. After Morales fled the presidential palace in La Paz, Camacho went outside the palace and kneeled before a Bible and the Bolivian flag. He then famously said: "Bolivia for Christ, Pachamama will never again enter this palace," in an allusion to the most important deity for a number of Andean peoples.

Since then, polarization between two political movements has hardened.

On one side is Morales's left-wing Movement for Socialism party, largely allied with the indigenous peoples from Bolivia's Andean Plateau region, with their traditional cosmogony gaining relevance during Morales's presidential tenure. On the other side is the Bolivian right wing, composed mainly of people from white or mixed backgrounds, who have strong ties with Christian churches.



Former Bolivian President Evo Morales speaks during a rally at Plaza San Francisco in La Paz March 29, 2021. Demonstrations over his reelection to a fourth consecutive term led Morales to resign from office in 2019. (CNS/Reuters/David Mercado)

Córdova characterized Camacho as being like Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who mixes Donald Trump-style populist politics with Christian imagery.

In many protests — including the recent strike — Camacho has prayed side-by-side with Evangelical pastors and Catholic Charismatic Renewal leaders. Rallies in front of Santa Cruz de la Sierra's Christ the Redeemer statue have been frequent.

Córdova said the Catholic Church has also appeared at times to give tacit support for Camacho's politics. He noted that a former spokesman for the Archdiocese of Santa Cruz, Erwin Bazán, is now a member of Camacho's party and a congressman.

But the church is trying to avoid portraying an openly favorable stance toward the protesters. Jesuit Fr. Osvaldo Chirveches, who headed an umbrella group

representing Bolivia's Catholic religious orders until April, said the church was accused of helping to force Morales' resignation in 2019 and has since tried to avoid any allegation of political involvement.

"The church cannot be a mediator of political crises anymore. A mediator has to find consensus even when it is impossible," Chirveches told NCR.

"The church is now acting like a facilitator of dialogue — someone who promotes dialogue and then leaves. That is what we learned from the 2019 events," he added.



Heydi Galarza, an expert in biblical theology who studies intercultural, religious and gender equality, said the Catholic Church has been more cautious about public statements during recent protests than it was in 2019. (Courtesy of Heydi Galarza)

Chirveches said the bishops' conference has focused on trying to facilitate discussions between protesters and government officials in Santa Cruz.

On October 19, when the strike was about to be launched, the bishops released a statement asking for urgent negotiation in order to avoid the demonstrations.

"The conference always emphasized the need to keep unity and prevent ancient unsolved problems — regionalism, racism, discrimination — to come to the surface again," Chirveches said.

Velásquez, the lawyer and protest mediator, said the church has "made it clear that it does not organize nor support political parties or movements."

Velásquez pointed to several recent homilies by Santa Cruz Archbishop René Leigue. Although the church leader criticized the national government for "its failure to properly organize the census," he also criticized the protesters for causing interruptions to ordinary life.

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In his homily on Nov. 27, Leigue seemed to be happy about the movement's outcome. He said that there should not have been winners or losers after the protests, but if there is a winner "it was the Bolivian people."

"Santa Cruz has fought for everybody, not only for Santa Cruz. The biggest sacrifice was faced here, but the vision was of a struggle for the country," said the archbishop.

Córdova compared the political polarization between Santa Cruz and the national government to "underground magma rivers."

"Given that we have unsolved fractures, they may erupt at any time again," he said.

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Heydi Galarza, an expert in biblical theology who studies intercultural, religious and gender equality, said the Catholic Church has been more cautious now than it was in 2019, especially in its public statements.

"But all Christian churches must be careful about the combination of religious fervor and politics. That mixture has historically generated violence in our country," she told NCR.

Galarza emphasized that religious symbology has been used to "provoke emotions" and "inspire trust" in the people.

"Political leaders exploit that because they know they will gather adherents to their causes," she said. "The elites are the ones who gain power that way."

Movements like that exacerbate anti-Indigenous and secessionist sentiments among the cruceños, Galarza said.

"It is undeniable that the protests had a valid reason, but religious manipulation always demands caution," she said.

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