

Bolivian judge rules Santa Cruz governor to remain in detention



Santa Cruz Governor Luis Fernando Camacho is a leader in Bolivia's far-right opposition coalition [File: Carlos Garcia Rawlins/Reuters]

La Paz, January 20 (RHC)-- A Bolivian judge has ruled that Luis Fernando Camacho, a prominent right-wing politician and governor of the South American country's largest department, will remain in detention as he awaits trial on charges of "terrorism".

The ruling from Judge Rosmery Lourdes Pabon upholds a previous decision, made by a different judge in late December. It called for the Santa Cruz governor to be held for four months in pre-trial detention after prosecutors suggested he could be a flight risk or obstruct the ongoing investigation.

Fernando Camacho faces charges that he helped instigate the 2019 political crisis that resulted in the resignation of Evo Morales, the country's first Indigenous president, after his election for a controversial fourth term in office.

On Thursday, prosecutor Omar Mejillones said Fernando Camacho's actions as a leader in the civil unrest led to a "power vacuum" in the country. Fernando Camacho has denied any wrongdoing, and his sudden arrest in December sparked outrage in Santa Cruz, a relatively wealthy agricultural region that

had already been gripped by widespread protests.

Earlier in the year, demonstrations broke out after the left-wing government of President Luis Arce announced it would postpone the country's census, which was expected to show population growth in Santa Cruz and thereby allot more resources and legislative representation to the department.

Barely a month after those demonstrations ended, Fernando Camacho was arrested, igniting new protests in the region. His supporters called the arrest a politically motivated "kidnapping", designed to silence a prominent voice in Bolivia's far right.

Fernando Camacho, a former presidential candidate who placed third in Bolivia's 2020 elections, rose to prominence during the 2019 anti-Morales protests. A leader of the prominent Christian conservative party Creemos — which translates to "We Believe" — Fernando Camacho was among those who denounced Morales's fourth term in office as "fraud."

Morales had appealed to the country's Supreme Court to abolish term limits that would have prevented his election, after a voter referendum had rejected a previous attempt to end the restrictions. Morales's subsequent victory in the October 2019 presidential elections prompted allegations of malfeasance, particularly among the country's right wing, and an estimated 36 people died in the subsequent protests.

Amid public pressure, Evo Morales resigned and left the country, accusing the opposition of staging a coup. In the wake of Evo Morales's departure, Fernando Camacho arrived at the presidential palace with a Bible in hand to deliver a symbolic resignation letter for the ex-president.

The stunt earned him headlines across Latin America, with the Argentinian newspaper La Nación dubbing him the "Bolivian Bolsonaro," a reference to Jair Bolsonaro, the far-right leader of Brazil at the time. On Wednesday, the Pro Santa Cruz Civic Committee — of which Fernando Camacho was previously a leader — announced it would pause the blockades organised to denounce his arrest as the group considered its next move.

The blockades had left Santa Cruz largely isolated from the rest of the country for more than 15 days as protesters obstructed local highways. The committee said it would hold a town hall meeting on January 25 to continue pressing for Fernando Camacho's release.

The Santa Cruz governor is being held in a maximum security prison outside of La Paz. The news agency Reuters reported that Fernando Camacho appeared calm during Thursday's court proceedings, which he attended via video, occasionally taking a puff from a vaping device.

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