

Bolivia's Ongoing Coup

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Faced with a victory for Evo Morales' MAS party, the Bolivian government has postponed elections once again - the latest attack on democracy by a coup regime which Western powers supported in its name.

When the Bolivian government's electoral authorities nervously announced to the nation that elections were to be suspended for the third time in four months, the fear instilled in many seemed to suddenly melt away. It was replaced by a fury of a country whose working-class districts and rural areas were led to believe that free and fair elections, on September 6th, would provide a peaceful route of the country's dramatic economic collapse.

The hope was that these elections would mark the end of authoritarian rule at the hands of an unelected regime, who stand as proof of how the US rules its 'backyard' and the ease with which neoliberalism dispenses with its purported values when facing down those who call for national sovereignty and public control of natural resources.

When elections were suspended last week Bolivia's indigenous and trade union leaders - most of whom have charges hanging over them - announced mobilisations on a scale far outstripping the mostly disorganised resistance to the November coup. The coming week will see those social movements launch what is probably a final fight for democracy; if they are defeated, a brutal persecution awaits.

The endless postponement of the presidential elections hasn't been met with much criticism from those in the English-speaking media and NGO world, many of whom praised the coup as a triumph of democracy that would usher in fair elections. Of course, even *The New York Times* now admits that initial allegations of fraud which legitimated the ouster of Evo Morales [were false](#).

At the time, liberal journalists such as Yascha Mounk wrote in glowing terms in *The Atlantic* about the ["real prospect of free elections"](#) and Human Rights Watch director Ken Roth naively spoke about [how](#) "the most important thing now in this transitional moment for Bolivia is ensuring... fundamental rights, including to protest peacefully and to vote in transparent, competitive, and fair elections."

Those aware of what really happened in November 2019 have always known that the current regime never had any intention of instituting democracy. The government, led by the self-declared President Jeanine Añez, was borne out of a military coup that celebrated its triumph by burning the indigenous *wiphala* flag in public squares, followed by the killings of indigenous pro-democracy protesters in Sacaba (Cochabamba), and Senkata (El Alto), which the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights have [labelled](#) as massacres.

The persecution which followed that initial repression has been just as fierce. Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) presidential candidate, Luis Arce, has been pursued with [politically-motivated charges](#), and now the regime is pressuring the electoral council to [ban him](#) from standing altogether. Almost all union and indigenous leaders have similar charges being brought against them, mostly for 'sedition'.

The station I work at – *Radio Kawsachun Coca* – has had to labour under this climate. My colleague Landert Marca was [arrested](#) a few months ago while reporting on an event held by the trade unions from the *tropico* of Cochabamba. Our [radio signal](#) has been jammed or taken altogether in numerous areas, and our offices in the city of Cochabamba torched by far-right gangs a day before the coup.

Jeanine Añez's government declared itself to be an 'interim' one whose only task was organising elections. But they had other priorities. Its first changes were to foreign policy, ripping up Evo Morales' integrationist and anti-colonial approach and immediately re-establishing diplomatic ties with the US and Israel, as well as turning its back on Latin American integration through institutions like UNASUR.

The State Department got their delegate into the presidential palace to help manage this endless 'transition.' Erick Foronda, chief advisor to the US embassy in Bolivia for twenty-five years was appointed as private secretary for President Añez. Foronda's leading role in managing the country can be seen in the fact that Añez's [own ministers](#) bemoan the manner in which he overruled government departments and cut off their access to the President.

The government has also prioritised economic 'reforms' over holding elections. The IMF has returned to the country with a huge \$327 million loan. To accommodate this, the regime has [paralysed](#) the large state development projects that had been unveiled by Evo Morales. The plans to process the country's lithium supplies within Bolivia itself have been suspended. The contract with the German company ACISA which gave Bolivia's state firm the majority share was quickly scrapped after the coup. The processing plants that Morales opened have also had their gates shut since his ousting.

The huge Urea and Ammonia plant opened in the Cochabamba region, a jewel in the crown of the state gas company, has suffered the same fate. The new overground tram system for the city of Cochabamba was almost complete, all the stops and tracks had been built and the carriages manufactured. All that remained was paying the Chilean border agency to release them from customs and transport them to the city. The regime refused to pay and now the Chilean agency is selling the carriages at auction.

The deliberate sabotage of Bolivia's economic development has been a key plank of the new government. This policy has had dramatic consequences for the ability of the country to weather the economic impact of Covid-19. [38%](#) of the country has lost the entirety of their income, while 52% have lost a part of their income. The deliberate retreat of the state has meant that the 90% who are suffering during quarantine haven't received any income support, the only gesture has been a one-off universal payment of US\$70. In April, to last four months of lockdown.

In the face of this desperate situation, voters were looking forward to ending the eight month coup experiment at the ballot box in September. Polls show that MAS is on course for a first-round victory, with Añez trailing behind in a distant third. It might have been a peaceful end to a violent period. However, determined to cling on to power whatever the cost, the regime is using Covid-19 as an excuse to postpone those elections. Claiming that elections would spread the virus, even as public transport and most of the economy re-opens, they have pushed for further delays.

October 18th is the new date. But civil society has lost faith that it will be respected. In a highly organised manner, trade unions, indigenous groups and neighbourhood associations in the working-class districts have formally announced indefinite mobilisations to demand the right to vote.

In November, the indigenous groups affiliated to the MAS were mobilised, blocking roads in rural areas and some joining protests in the cities. But the movement is much broader now. The national

trade union federation (COB) is [mobilising](#) all of its member unions at a national level for a mass protest on Tuesday at which further actions will be announced. They didn't mobilise at all in November. In the indigenous city of El Alto, adjoining La Paz, the federation of neighbourhood councils (FEJUVE) is mobilising in every district. In November, the leaders of that federation were jailed and forced into hiding, meaning anti-coup protests were largely spontaneous. Now they have a systematic approach.

The movement is also strengthened by the fact that demands are not just about democracy, but also against the neoliberal economic measures that have affected every part of society. When announcing the demonstrations, COB leader, Juan Carlos Huarachi, explained: "We need a democratically-elected government so as to discuss new policies, not just for social issues, but also for economic issues... in eight months we've seen the collapse of our country. Sadly, this is the reality, with recipes from the IMF, by blackmailing the people, by blackmailing the legislature."

The Bolivian resistance movement is powerful, but that's no guarantee of victory. The two massacres in November are proof that the government is prepared to see blood in the streets, and support from Western powers has been key to propping up a regime that is languishing at sixteen percent in the polls.

Bolivia shows how the ideologues of the free market are more than happy to toss out any semblance of democratic rule if they feel threatened. It also exposes the true character of interventions by governments like the US and UK in international affairs to 'promote democracy.'

If the rest of us want to ensure that their coup in Bolivia doesn't result in the end of democracy for good, those demanding free, fair and immediate elections will need all of our solidarity.

Oliver Vargas is a Bolivian journalist working for *Radio Kawsachun Coca* in the Cochabamba region.

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