

Bolivia in crisis: how Evo Morales was forced out - The Two Bolivias

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Evo Morales has left Bolivia on a plane for Mexico, a day after he resigned as president. Morales and his vice-president, Álvaro García Linera, stood down from office on November 10, following a suggestion by the head of the military, Williams Kaliman.

Met with jubilation and despair by different sectors of Bolivian society, the resignations were the culmination of weeks of unrest following presidential and parliamentary elections on October 20. Morales initially appeared to have won in the first round, but the whole process was overshadowed by accusations of electoral fraud and the spectre of military intervention.

Nothing at the moment is black and white. The events represent both a military coup d'état and a moment of mass protest that unseated the government.

For and against Morales

The social base of Morales's political party, Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), are the peasant organisations of the Andean highlands *altiplano* and the semi-tropical valleys of Cochabamba, alongside a group of unions and federations which represent peasants and rural proletarian labourers. They have an organic relationship with the MAS [1] and as such will all turn out to vote for and defend it on the streets.

This hard core of social support is complemented by those who work in sectors that have benefited from the politics of the MAS. These include swaths of the informal petty commodity producers and hidden wage labourers found in the popular economy, miners employed by both the state and cooperatives, and sections of the lower middle and professional classes who feel Morales has reduced the stigma they confront in their day-to-day lives. These groups, as I examined in my own PhD research [2], felt excluded and unrepresented within the liberal parliamentary democracy before the election of Morales in 2006.

The opposition to Morales is also comprised of multiple different - and contradictory - currents. First, there is a group concerned with the abstract notion of representative democracy, comprised of the urban middle-classes and university students. This is probably the largest opposition group and is found in all nine departmental capitals.

The second are indigenous groups which do not share the developmental agenda of the MAS government, and are in the pathways of extractive or large-scale infrastructure projects. The most visible of this opposition has come from the lowland indigenous groups, particularly those in the Isiboro Sécure National Park and Indigenous Territory and groups in the Chaco regions affected by hydrocarbon extraction. Others include groups in the Madidi national park opposing the megadams Bala and Chapete and the *ayllus*, socio-territorial units of Aymara indigenous communities, of North Potosí.

Increasingly powerful regional opposition groups are also concerned with the distribution of power and resources within the country. The indigenous opposition to Morales in the city of Potosí can be categorised as part of this group, as can the civic committees of the departments of Beni, Pando, Santa Cruz and Tarija.

Coup d'état?

Time accelerated in the period following presidential and parliamentary elections in Bolivia on October 20, with a decade's worth of political events unfolding in the space of a couple of weeks, reorienting the political terrain. Yet time has also slowed down, with observers from afar looking on as if at a car crash in slow motion.

That Morales and García Linera stood down at the behest of the military is no surprise, and the possibility of a coup became increasingly likely in the days of protests and civic strikes between election day and November 10.

But the story of a coup d'état is by no means the whole story – and the ability of the three opposition groups to construct a multitude of popular forces powerful enough to direct the political currents in this moment has been astounding. In the wake of the election, the city of Santa Cruz was shut down for weeks by a general strike – the longest in the city's history – while the streets of La Paz, Oruro, Potosí and Cochabamba were also barricaded.

The disorganised masses who congregated and burnt down vote counting stations in Oruro, Potosí, Santa Cruz and Tarija following the suspension of the quick count broadcast on the night of October 20, coalesced into a movement strong enough to coordinate and sustain political activity against the MAS government.

During Morales's final days in office, they were joined by social groups once supportive of the MAS, including the Bolivian Workers' Central [3]. In this sense, the resignation of Morales and García Linera follows weeks of massive social protest.

Probably the most remarkable dynamic in this sped-up unfurling of history is the emergence of Luis Fernando Camacho, head of the Pro Santa Cruz Committee, from the backwaters of regional, right-wing politics in Santa Cruz to a political figure on the national scene. The arrival of the evangelical right to Bolivian politics – first in the form of presidential candidate Chi Hyun Chung and now in the figure of Camacho – has been a long time coming, but is nothing to celebrate.

Camacho, who speaks of bringing the bible to Bolivian politics, has been one of the more prominent figures calling for military intervention. The far-right currents in the opposition movements have created the conditions that allowed more extreme opposition groups to burn down the houses of several prominent MAS allies during the night of November 9.

These acts of violence, coupled with the initial findings of an audit of the election by the Organisation of American States of the elections [4], led Morales to call for new elections, overseen by a reconstituted Supreme Electoral Tribunal. But by the day of Morales's resignation the demands of many protesters had surpassed the call for new elections and now only Morales's exit would do.

Power vacuum

In the wake of the resignations, both Carlos Mesa, Morales's main electoral opponent and Camacho demanded new elections without the participation of Morales. The urban support base of the MAS took to the streets in violent protest.

The preliminary report from the OAS audit into electoral fraud – whose methodology has been questioned by some experts [5] – stated that even though there were numerous voting irregularities, it's highly probable that Morales would have captured the largest share of the vote anyway.

Without Morales on the ballot paper in a future election, a large section of the electorate will not be able to vote for their candidate. This is a situation that some will call justice, given the way Morales skirted around the constitutional term limits, but that will leave a large, mainly rural, indigenous section of the population disenfranchised. Such frustration will lead to further violence if left unresolved.

The resignation of Morales and García Linera has now left a power vacuum. The deputy head of the senate, Jeanine Anez, is likely to step into the breach as interim president, but the route to new elections under a reconstituted Supreme Electoral Tribunal remains far from clear.

In 1983, Bolivian social theorist René Zavaleta Mercado noted the inability of Bolivian democracy to represent its *sociedad abigarrada* – its motley society. In 2019, the route forward appears to be the exclusion of a large proportion of Bolivians. The *wiphala*, the square banner that has long been a symbol of indigenous peoples and resistance, has been torn from government buildings and unceremoniously burnt.

If Camacho's proclamation that "Pachamama (indigenous people) will never return to the palace. Bolivia is Christ" is anything to go by, Bolivian democracy remains incapable of managing the country's motley society.

Angus McNelly

- The Conversation. 12 novembre 2019, 14:01 CET:
<https://theconversation.com/bolivia-in-crisis-how-evo-morales-was-forced-out-126859?utm>
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The Two Bolivias

Controversy over Bolivia's election reflects deep fissures in the country.

Preliminary results suggest that Evo Morales secured victory in Bolivia's presidential elections on Sunday. While he didn't win an absolute majority, with 95.6 percent of the vote counted, Morales has 46.9 of the total. His closest rival, Carlos Mesa, is at 36.7 percent. If Morales's advantage stays over 10 percent, he'll avoid a potentially tricky runoff.

However, opposition parties are accusing the government of vote rigging, continuing a string of controversy that has surrounded the election since a 2016 referendum, which proposed constitutional amendments to allow Morales to run for a third term. When the president narrowly lost that referendum, he refused to recognize the result, relying on the country's supreme court to make the constitutional change regardless, removing all presidential term limits.

The governing Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) argued that fake news about a phantom child belonging to the president swung the referendum vote [6], while an enraged opposition called for a coup d'état if Morales were to win October's election.

It's just the latest saga in fissures that threaten the country and its experiment in popular left-wing governance.

Democracy in the Two Bolivias

Between Bolivia's return to democracy in 1982 and the election of Morales in 2005, no presidential candidate was able to win a majority. The country's political parties were barely distinguishable, each garnering around 20 percent of the vote at elections. Governments were made through pacts brokered behind closed doors with little popular input.

In 1988, Jaime Paz Zamorra won the presidential elections despite only having the third-largest share of the vote. If the Bolivian right today declares itself committed to liberal democratic institutions, in practice it has done little to foster them.

Between 2009 and 2016, Bolivia enjoyed a period of political and economic stability — a rarity in a tempestuous country that is also the poorest in South America. Despite a couple of disruptions — notably the 2010-11 struggles that sought to block the construction of a highway through an indigenous territory (TIPNIS), as well as the removal of gas subsidies — Morales has maintained a high level of popularity amongst large sections of the population.

Many put this down to the perception of a strong economy, with persistent growth, as well as redistributive policies working to reduce both absolute poverty and inequality. The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean (CEPAL) reports that Bolivia achieved the region's greatest reduction in extreme poverty, which dropped from 38.2 percent in 2005 to 15.2 percent in 2018.

At the same time, the country's Gini coefficient has fallen from 58.5 in 2005 to 44 in 2017, reflecting a huge reduction in inequality. As a recent article by Bolivian journalist Fernando Molina demonstrates [\[7\]](#), this is a major factor in Morales's success. Foreign journalists of all stripes agree, praising "Bolivia's remarkable socialist success story" [\[8\]](#) and the Morale government's sound macroeconomic management [\[9\]](#).

For these reasons, Morales's first-round reelection had, until recently, seemed a foregone conclusion, but the recent Amazon wildfires shifted the political terrain. When a devastating blaze spread across the Chiquitania region of Santa Cruz this summer, engulfing three and half million hectares of forest, Morales was criticized for his reaction to the crisis. Lowland communities were angered by the government's slow response, while environmental critics condemned the government's new decrees and laws [\[10\]](#), which saw increased deforestation and slash-and-burn forest-clearing.

This criticism has been picked up and mobilized by the resurgent lowland opposition [\[11\]](#), keen to undermine Morales and his cultivated image as an environmentalist. Though the government's response to the wildfires could have certainly been better, it's clear that the fires have also been used opportunistically by the lowland opposition — themselves longtime proponents and benefactors of deforestation and agroindustry. This insight reveals that the old fractures from the crisis that transformed Bolivia twenty years ago.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, existing divisions between the eastern lowlands and western highlands were hardened, creating the image of "two Bolivias," [\[12\]](#) each premised on ethnic difference. The radical social movements that carried Morales to power had a transformative potential that realized the worst fears of certain sections of the Bolivian elite, groups accustomed to privilege bestowed upon them by land ownership, ethnicity, and family name. Indeed, a major

victory of this decade, realized by social movements under the tutelage of Evo Morales, has been a (still incomplete) breaking down of colonial, racial hierarchies, and an opening up of society to indigenous communities.

Railing against this progress (and the accompanying land reform proposed by the first Morales government), a coalition of lowland regions — Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando, and Tarija — known as the *media luna* (half-moon) has pursued a program regional autonomy. This relied on a racist discourse that cast those in the highlands as barbaric and parasitic, living off the productive modernity of the lowland region. In 2008, it almost succeeded in splitting the country in two.

This attempt failed in the face of a massacre of peasant activists in Porvenir on September 11, 2008 [13], which was met with international condemnation. Nevertheless, the notion of regional injustice, disseminated by the autonomy movement, had been instilled in many of those in the *media luna* popular classes. These ideas are not necessarily articulated in elite demands for autonomy, but are expressed in the everyday lives of people from this region — in their complaints of a perceived regional injustice, and in their gripes about highlanders benefitting off those in the lowlands. These sentiments are normally hidden from view by concessions to agribusiness and the alliance of sections of agroindustrial capital with the MAS.

Old Wounds

This truce, however, is now fraying. After ten years of silence [14], lowland opposition is back. Recently, the Santa Cruz autonomy movement drew over a million people to a public meeting, an enormous turnout reflecting how regional tensions have flared up again in Bolivia. Those protesting on the streets of Santa Cruz should by no means be mistaken for a coalition of environmentalists, pro-democracy forces, and local youths. On the contrary, the old, racist forces of the lowland right are pulling the strings, as revealed this month during the violent clashes in Santa Cruz, which saw the reappearance of the protofascist youth wing of the Comité Pro-Santa Cruz, the Cruceño Youth Union (UJC).

This offers an intriguing window through which to view the current political conjuncture in Bolivia. It appears that the lowland right are regaining political strength, a process helped by the renewal of local leadership [15] in organizations such as the Comité Pro-Santa Cruz and the UJC. The old divisions can likewise be read into the election results, with Carlos Mesa collecting a majority of votes in the *media luna* departments of Beni, Santa Cruz, Tarija, and Chuquisaca.

Morales's campaign visit to Potosí [16] also sparked violence and mass civil disobedience, prompting the president to flee by helicopter. Events there have opened old political fissures in the department, and the demand for federalism — a demand which was at the heart of a month-long civil strike in the city during 2010 — has resurfaced. The Right is on the ascendancy and the Left — independent of the MAS — is nowhere to be seen.

The political wounds opened during Morales's fifteen-year tenure have not healed, as many had assumed, but festered. But these divisions are not found on the terrain of electoral politics — the front-running presidential candidates both hail from either the highland plateau or the subtropical valleys. (The lowland candidate, the autonomy movement leader Oscar Ortiz, finished in fourth place with less than 5 percent of the vote.)

This is not surprising given the weakness of the oppositional parties — negative campaigns have failed to capture the politics of these fissures, and the manifestos of Mesa and the other main candidates confronting Morales can be blithely encapsulated by the slogan “Not Evo!” They encouraged tactical voting not for an alternative but against the status quo.

But looking beyond the ineptitude of opposition parties, these divides run deep, and go beyond the electoral terrain. They play out in the streets, outside of liberal-democratic institutions. Looking beyond the final result of last weekend's election, it is the politics there that will be decisive.

Angus McNelly

- Jacobin, 10.25.2019:

<https://jacobinmag.com/2019/10/bolivian-election-evo-morales-mas-opposition>

P.S.

- Angus McNelly is Lecturer in Latin American Politics/International Development, Queen Mary University of London.

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.cis.gob.bo/publicacion/no-somos-del-mas-el-mas-es-nuestro-historias-de-vida-y-conversaciones-con-campesinos-indigenas-de-bolivia/>

[2] <https://qmro.qmul.ac.uk/xmlui/handle/123456789/60636>

[3] <https://www.paginasiete.bo/nacional/2019/11/10/la-cob-pide-la-renuncia-de-evo-morales-236994.html>

[4] http://www.la-razon.com/nacional/animal_electoral/bolivia-elecciones-informe-oea-irregularidades-manipulacion_0_3255274450.html

[5] <http://cepr.net/images/stories/reports/bolivia-elections-2019-11.pdf?v=2>

[6] <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2016/05/12/jueza-en-bolivia-dice-que-el-presunto-hijo-de-evo-morales-y-su-expareja-no-existe/>

[7] https://nuso.org/articulo/bolivia-es-la-economia-estupido/?utm_source=email&utm_medium=email&fbclid=IwAR37MJUZ0qhTiba4wNCrWFkdc5XfQHG5m65l2pyGiOu2kvhek7poEWBbrXo

[8] <https://www.thenation.com/article/economics-socialism-bolivia-evo/?fbclid=IwAR2bkuqyThcRN6wyeowljv5CNDjfTK9IKAtfUvmBHLKqYr7Ege3Ve4gU95k>

[9] <https://www.ft.com/content/e16c0c7c-e387-11e9-b112-9624ec9edc59>

[10] <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/25/world/americas/bolivia-fires-amazon.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share>

[11] <https://alborada.net/bolivia-morales-election-environment-greenwashing/>

[12] https://elpais.com/diario/2008/05/06/internacional/1210024804_850215.html

[13] https://www.eldeber.com.bo/116134_a-10-anos-de-la-masacre-de-porvenir

[14] <https://www.paginasiete.bo/nacional/2019/10/20/santa-cruz-volvio-rugir-tras-10-anos-de-silencio-sin-liderazgos-234929.html>

[15] <https://www.paginasiete.bo/nacional/2019/10/20/santa-cruz-volvio-rugir-tras-10-anos-de-silencio-sin-liderazgos-234929.html>

[16] <https://www.paginasiete.bo/nacional/2019/10/16/en-el-cabildo-de-potosi-deciden-federalismo-desobediencia-234491.html>