

Bolivia. Evo Morales: from the Rainy Place to the Burnt Palace — and back again

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After weeks of protest, Bolivia's first indigenous president has been ousted in a coup, bringing a dramatic end to his thirteen eventful years in power.

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Back in 2005, Evo Morales, then still a poor coca grower, set off on his journey from the Chapare — a lush region in central Bolivia known to the Incas as *Ancha Para*, or the “place where it rains a lot” — to the “Burnt Palace,” as Bolivia’s government palace is popularly known since it was almost completely burned down during a popular uprising in 1875. Last weekend, he found himself back in the Chapare once again, seeking refuge after being ousted in a military-backed coup following weeks of opposition protests. He has since fled the country and taken up asylum in Mexico.

The fall of Evo Morales marks the end of an era for Bolivia — and for Latin America as a whole. Morales’ rise to power in the early 2000s was part of a broader wave of social movement organizing and popular mobilization that eventually led to the election of progressive and social-democratic governments in Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay and Venezuela.

This surge of left-wing political forces across the continent has since become known as the Pink Tide. Pink, because it was not “red,” but radical enough to overturn the neoliberal doctrine that took hold of Latin America after the Mexican debt crisis of 1982. The Pink Tide governments moved their countries away from US influence and the structural adjustment policies of the World Bank and IMF, eventually managing to improve the lives of millions of poor, rural, indigenous and working-class people. As a result, most of these left-wing governments secured broad support among their respective electorates.

Over the past few years, however, many of them have come under severe pressure, losing elections in Brazil, Argentina and Ecuador, and facing US-backed coup attempts in Venezuela and now most probably in Bolivia as well.

THE RISE OF THE COCALEROS

Morales’ rise to power was always an unlikely one. His native Chapare region has long been isolated, despite its location at the very heart of this landlocked country. The tropical vegetation, the lack of proper infrastructure and the many rivers that cross the region were the main reasons for its relatively late colonization by — and submission to — the Bolivian state. The first road that

connected Villa Tunari, the province's unofficial capital, with the rest of the country was not constructed until the late 1930s, and since then the Chapare has always been a safe haven for indigenous Bolivians — Quechuas and Aymaras — fleeing the harsh conditions and exploitation on the *haciendas* and in the mines.

Over time, a de facto autonomous zone was established in the Chapare by the indigenous coca growers and their trade unions, the *sindicatos*, which effectively became the governing bodies of the region. Chapare farmers cultivated subsistence crops like yucca and bananas and they grew coca in abundance, even though it took some decades for the latter to be commercialized due to the poor infrastructure that hindered market access.

After 1985, some 20,000 former miners moved to the region in search of a better life after the government closed down Bolivia's tin mines. Eventually coca leaf cultivation became the main source of income for farmers and miners alike, and the *sindicato* became the main civil authority and provider of basic social services like health, schooling and conflict resolution. The state remained largely absent from the region, basically surrendering authority to the *sindicatos* in a silent pact. The *sindicatos* had the obligation to register land parcels with the National Agrarian Reform Service, and collect taxes and transportation fees on behalf of the central government.

This silent pact between the coca leaf growers, the so-called *cocaleros*, and the state eventually broke down in 1998, when — under pressure from the United States government — the Bolivian state violated the *de facto* autonomy of the Chapare in order to regulate the production of coca leaves, which were believed to be destined for the US drug market. Militarized police was sent to the region, coordinated by the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). This blunt display of imperialism on the Chapareños' doorstep moved them to take a strong anti-imperialist stance in their politics.

Discussing how to respond, the *cocaleros* initially considered launching a guerrilla campaign [1]. In the end, however, they decided to form what they called a "political instrument" in alliance with the country's wider *campesino* movement, and to compete for electoral office — first at the local level and later at the national. That was the moment Morales began to rise through the *cocalero* ranks, first as a football-loving young *dirigente*, and then as the undisputed leader of the Six Federations of Coca Growers of the Tropic of Cochabamba, the confederation of the *cocalero* unions.

Since political parties were largely delegitimized in Bolivia after two decades of financial crisis and unpopular neoliberal reform, the *cocaleros* called their "political instrument" the Movement Towards Socialism (*Movimiento al Socialismo*, MAS). Between 2000 and 2005, the MAS rode a wave of popular mobilizations that lasted for five years and forced the resignation of three presidents, including Carlos Mesa, Morales' main opponent in the 2019 Presidential elections. It also contributed decisively to the overturning of the privatization of natural resources like gas and water.

In 2006, the MAS eventually became Bolivia's ruling party and Evo Morales the country's first-ever indigenous president. For the following 13 years, he held power and enjoyed enormous popularity — until November 10, when he was forced to resign by his own military command following weeks of opposition protests, culminating in the sacking of Morales' personal home in Cochabamba.

THE MORALES ERA

Before that, Morales had come out victorious in three subsequent presidential elections, winning the popular vote with 53 percent in 2005, 64 percent in 2009 and 61 percent in 2014. Meanwhile, he organized a Constitutional Assembly that provided Bolivia with a new progressive constitution in

2009 and that transformed the country into a plurinational, secular state, which — at least in theory — would also guarantee legal rights to *Pachamama*, or Mother Earth. As president, Morales also significantly reduced poverty levels, increased levels of education, and made Bolivian society more inclusive overall.

At the same time, however, he also distanced himself from the social movements that had originally swept him into power. Over the years, many Bolivians came to feel slighted by their president, who certainly did not always respect the rights of workers, indigenous peoples or *Pachamama* as he claimed to.

Nevertheless, Bolivia made important progress under Morales' successive administrations. According to the World Bank, the percentage of the population living below the poverty line dropped from 59.6 percent in 2005 to 38.6 percent in 2015. This is a drop of 20 percent over the course of a single decade. Official government statistics present a similar picture: extreme poverty fell from 38.2 percent in 2005 to 20.9 percent in 2011. Literacy rates have also reached an impressive 99 percent, according to UNESCO. These achievements should be credited to the MAS governments.

In the process, Morales and his allies did partially overturn some neoliberal policies, such as the privatization of natural resources pushed by previous administrations. But when it comes to the overall economic model, the MAS governments maintained a generally neo-extractivist and neo-developmental logic. What set Morales' policies apart from those of his predecessors was that his model of "Andean-Amazonian capitalism" had a more a more human face and a more redistributive character. As Jeffrey Webber notes in *The Last Day of Oppression, and the First Day of the Same* [2]:

"One redistributive channel of rent to the poorest sectors has been a series of targeted cash-transfer programs, which now reach roughly 33 percent of the population — Bono Juancito Pinto (funds to encourage children to attend school), Renta Dignidad (a small monthly payment to the elderly poor), and Bono Juana Azurduy (funds to improve healthcare for expectant mothers, as well as postnatal medical care)."

These type of redistributive policies can hardly be described as anti-capitalist. They were rather a very clever way of improving the conditions of the poorest members of the population — and in doing so, securing their future support for a government that provided them with something, where previous administrations provided nothing. This in turn maintained the stable economic and social conditions for continued capitalist development.

Morales' redistributive policies were also a way of empowering the poor, without having to disempower the rich. Their relative success made Evo incredibly popular, especially among the poorest of the poor. He was, after all, still one of them: an indigenous person in an extremely racist country that has always been run by a rich, white minority of Spanish descent.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

In recent years, however, Morales faced growing opposition, not only from the racist and reactionary right, but also from workers, feminists, environmental activists and indigenous movements to the left of the MAS. Many inside Bolivia came to be disillusioned with the president for not being as radical as he had promised, and for compromising with the country's agribusiness elite. Yet what cost Morales most during his thirteen years in office was the one-time presidential re-election limit established in the new constitution of 2009.

After having served three terms as president — with the first under the old constitution, which

therefore did not count towards the re-election limit — Morales decided to run for a fourth term in 2019. In order to lend legitimacy to this re-election bid, he organized a referendum in 2016 proposing a constitutional amendment that would allow him and his vice-president Álvaro García Linera to run for a “third” term in office. It would turn out to be his first political defeat: Morales very narrowly lost the referendum, with 51 percent voting against the constitutional amendment.

Realizing that there was no candidate charismatic enough to replace Morales, the MAS decided to dispute the referendum result by appealing to the Supreme Court, whose judges — appointed by the president himself — eventually ruled in his favor, abolishing constitutional term limits on the grounds that they violated human rights. This marked a decisive moment in Morales’ political career. He had decided to go against the will of his own people as well as the spirit of the new constitution he himself had championed. It proved to be his biggest mistake: it gave his opponents — the right-wing political opposition and Bolivia’s white economic elites — the opportunity to seriously dispute his moral authority and political legitimacy. This marked the beginning of the end.

Coinciding with these developments, a significant part of Chiquitania — a tropical region near Santa Cruz — was destroyed by a number of forest fires. Some indigenous groups attributed this disaster to a Presidential Decree (Decreto Supremo 3973) that Morales had issued to allow controlled forest fires in the region, favoring Santa Cruz’s agribusiness elite by freeing up new land for cultivation. This further fueled popular discontent with the president.

New presidential elections were eventually held on October 20, 2019. To avoid a run-off, Morales needed to secure at least 40 percent of the vote, with a 10 percent margin between him and his closest opponent. It was expected that, should it come to a second round, the opposition candidates would all unite against Morales, significantly increasing the odds of him losing the presidency.

On the night of the elections, with 83 percent of votes provisionally counted and with Morales holding a 7 percent lead (45 percent to 38 percent) over his immediate opponent, Carlos Mesa, everything was pointing to a second round. But then the transmission of electoral results was halted for 24 hours. When it resumed, Morales’ vote stood at 47 percent to Mesa’s 36 percent, exactly the result he needed to win an outright victory in the first round.

Even though this result was in line with the pre-election polls [3], and the final spurt in support for Morales can be explained by the longer time it takes for the majority pro-MAS rural votes to be processed by the quick-count system, the irregularities provided sufficient ammunition to both the opposition and the international media to raise suspicions of electoral fraud.

The whole affair fueled suspicions against Morales across the political divide — from the right, the left, the indigenous movements and feminist groups. The reaction of the Trade Union Federation of the Miners of Bolivia, which has always maintained close relations with Morales, was characteristic:

“President Evo, you already did a lot for Bolivia: you improved education, health; you gave dignity to many poor people. President, don’t let your people boil over, and don’t cause more deaths. Everyone will appreciate you for the position you have to take. Stepping down is inevitable, comrade president. We have to leave the national government in the hands of the people.”

ALL HELL BREAKS LOOSE...

At this point, the reactionary Bolivian right found the opportunity to strike. People like Luis Fernando “el Macho” Camacho [4], an unelected lawyer and thoroughly racist member of the Bolivian business elite who could be seen as the Bolivian equivalent to Venezuela’s Juan Guaidó,

came to the forefront of the opposition protests. Camacho is a fascist, ultraconservative Christian who pretends to speak in the name of the Bolivian people even though no-one elected him. He was seen swearing on the Bible inside the Presidential Palace soon after Evo was ousted while his supporters were outside burning the *wiphala*, the flag of the Andean indigenous peoples.

At the same time, members, deputies, supporters and mayors of the MAS were being attacked in the streets by opposition mobs — just like in Venezuela. The patriarchal attack on the female mayor of Vinto [5], Patricia Arce, was by far the most vicious and disturbing, with masked assailants beating her and forcing her to march barefoot through the streets of the town, covering her in red paint and cutting off her hair.

In this climate of violence and political uncertainty, the police eventually mutinied and took the side of the protesters, calling for the president to resign. Morales finally agreed to hold new elections, but then, on November 10, the army's commander-in-chief Williams Kaliman "suggested" that Morales step down as president. As his home was ransacked by protesters, and with the army refusing to step in to restore order or guarantee his personal safety, Morales was left with little choice but to escape back to the rainy place where his unlikely rise to power had started nearly a decade-and-a-half ago: to Chapare.

Evo has since left for Mexico, and the right-wing opposition senator Jeanine Añez has appointed herself interim president, after all other MAS leaders in line to succeed Morales had resigned. She is now expected to call new elections.

Añez' first move in office was significant and symbolic: she entered the government palace with the biggest Bible she could find, in line with Camacho's demands that Pachamama, the indigenous deity, be ousted from the palace, and that the Bible, as a symbol of the religion of the whites, be restored to its rightful place. Back in 2013, Añez had already openly displayed her racist views by tweeting: "I dream of a Bolivia free of satanic indigenous rites. The city is not for the Indians, who should stay in the highlands or the Chaco!"

Not long ago, Bolivia was a country in which indigenous people, a majority of the population, were not even allowed to walk on the cities' pavements. With an overtly fascist politician now occupying the presidency, many in Bolivia fear a return to this frightful scenario.

This is a coup, without a doubt. Now the first priority, irrespective of one's views of Morales, is to not let Bolivia's racist white neoliberal elites overturn the positive achievements of the country's social movements. These were social demands that were pushed forward by workers, indigenous communities and the poorest of the poor. This is what the struggle is now about: safeguarding those achievements and not letting the US-backed far-right take power. After all, they were outvoted once again.

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P.S.

• ROAR Mag, November 14, 2019:

<https://roarmag.org/essays/evo-morales-from-the-rainy-place-to-the-burnt-palace-and-back-again/>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9783319902029>

[2] <https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745399539/the-last-day-of-oppression-and-the-first-day-of-the-same/>

[3] <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/poll-tracker-bolivias-2019-presidential-race>

[4] <http://www.laizquierdadiario.com.bo/El-macho-Camacho-un-prominente-miembro-de-la-elite-empresarial-y-ferviente-religioso>

[5] <https://desinformemonos.org/bolivia-un-levantamiento-popular-aprovechado-por-la-ultraderecha/>