

# Impasse in Bolivia

Friday 27 December 2019, by [HYLTON Forrest](#) (Date first published: 22 November 2019).

**Many of my friends and colleagues who live in La Paz are in hiding. Some have received death threats, while others are afraid to communicate via WhatsApp. One is in exile after vandals burned her house down. Because of shortages, the price of eggs has risen from less than one boliviano (11 pence) to 2.50, chicken has gone up from 15 to 35 bolivianos a kilo, beef from 30-40 to 90-120 bolivianos. Queues to buy chicken are interminable, and uncollected garbage piles up. Protesters have cut the capital off from its supply lines, and fuel is running out. Bolivian friends and colleagues who live abroad say they've experienced some of the worst days of their lives.**

We seem to be witnessing a return to the dark times of 2003, when the government of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada massacred dozens of unarmed civilians protesting against the privatisation of Bolivia's natural gas supply. Sánchez de Lozada was subsequently overthrown in a nationwide insurrection that forced him to flee to Miami. Evo Morales, the leader of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) and Bolivia's only indigenous president, was elected two years later with 54 per cent of the vote. He raised taxes on the gas industry, increased spending on social programmes and reduced Bolivia's dependence on the IMF and the United States. Having overseen the drafting of a new constitution, he was re-elected in 2009 with 64 per cent of the vote on an 85 per cent turnout, and in 2014 with 61 per cent of the vote on a 90 per cent turnout.

Standing for a fourth term last month, he won around 47 per cent of the vote, just over 10 per cent more than his nearest competitor, the centrist Carlos Mesa (who had been Sánchez de Lozada's vice-president). Mesa's supporters cried fraud, and protests broke out. Morales agreed to new elections and stepped down on 10 November. He is now in Mexico. His vice-president and the MAS presidents of both houses of Congress also resigned. Jeanine Añez, a senator for the right-wing Democrat Social Movement, declared herself president. Her party got 4 per cent of the vote on 20 October. Mesa is currently missing in action, having been discarded by the paramilitary, Christian-fundamentalist right now in power.

In the violence since the election, at least 26 people have died and hundreds have been injured. On 15 November, in the town of Sacaba, outside Cochabamba, the police and the army massacred nine coca growers, with shots to the head and neck, and injured at least 115. Article 3 of Supreme Decree 4078, passed in secret the previous day, granted the perpetrators immunity from prosecution. It reverses a law enacted in 2005 that bound the armed forces to follow detailed written instructions from the president and minister of defence regarding the use of force against civilians.

The decree was made public on 16 November, first on social media, then in the international press and finally in the national press, which is now largely censored. The media blackout is intense: many journalists are in hiding after the new minister of communications, Roxana Lizárraga, declared on 14 November that 'seditious' reporters, especially foreigners, would be prosecuted (she quickly recanted). Not to be outdone, on 17 November, the minister of government, Arturo Murillo announced that new 'special units' of the attorney general's office would begin arresting seditious MAS congressmen and women on 18 November. This has not happened yet.

Lizárraga is a political ally of Carlos Sánchez Berzaín, who, as the minister of defence under Sánchez de Lozada, directed the repression of unarmed civilians in 2003. The author of *Castrochavismo: Organised Crime in the Americas*, he now lives in Miami, though he is wanted for extradition to face charges to Bolivia. As in 2003, we are being told that the FARC (a guerrilla insurgency whose existence is now largely nominal) is directing and financing the protests in league with the Cubans (224 Cuban medical personnel were deported, and four arrested for sedition on 14 November) and Venezuelans (eight of whom were arrested for sedition on 16 November). Venezuelan embassy personnel have been asked to leave to make way for representatives of the self-proclaimed Venezuelan president Juan Guaidó.

As well as mourning the dead, the people who want Añez to go, and the military and police to return to barracks, continue to march, protest and blockade the roads. MAS leaders initially called for a halt to the mobilisation to allow for negotiations between MAS and the new government. Their requests fell on deaf ears and the protests multiplied, with 71 road blocks throughout the country. Today, in the Senkata neighbourhood of El Alto, La Paz's sister city, the police and military, breaking the fuel blockade, murdered three unarmed protesters of indigenous descent and injured at least 22 others. The same thing happened under Sánchez de Lozada and Sánchez Berzaín in October 2003, and helped trigger their overthrow. In both cases, deaths of innocents were foretold.

Until January 2020, MAS holds a two-thirds majority in both houses of Congress, and therefore holds the keys to accepting Morales's resignation, appointing new electoral authorities, and calling new elections. Only MAS can guarantee the façade of constitutional legitimacy the new regime wishes to claim. (There is no provision in the 2009 Constitution for presidential succession once the president, vice-president and heads of both houses of Congress have resigned: Añez's shaky claim to the presidency rests on her former position in the Senate hierarchy.) The contradiction would seem to be insuperable, which may explain Murillo's threat to arrest MAS members of Congress. Rumours are also circulating in La Paz that Congress is about to be shut down; they've gained traction since the negotiations over new elections between the coup government and MAS parliamentarians have stalled.

The latest events in Bolivia are best viewed in the context of other, more or less simultaneous developments in South America – the recent elections in Argentina, which the right lost; the liberation of Lula in Brazil; national-popular uprisings against neoliberal authoritarianism in Chile and Ecuador – and the historical backdrop of a Cold War that never ends. In its crusade against '21<sup>st</sup>-century socialism' – i.e. neo-developmental social democracy – the Latin American right has nothing to offer but the restoration of neoliberalism and the strengthening of repressive police and military powers in alliance with the US. Yet the ghosts of Cold War counter-insurgency – which take the concrete forms of militarism, paramilitarism, far-right strains of Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism, and media censorship and disinformation campaigns – recall Ronald Reagan's murderous efforts in Central America. The last time reactionaries combined forces on this scale in Bolivia and Brazil was the 'cocaine coup' that brought General Luis García Meza to power in La Paz in 1980 – a coup so criminal that even the Reagan administration refused to recognise it.

The definitive end of the Pink Tide in Latin America has been gleefully trumpeted, but without Morales and MAS, there can be no legitimate way out of the impasse the coup government has created. The entire neoliberal edifice – not one aspect of it or another – is now in question in various Latin American countries simultaneously; but the spectre of dictatorship has also arisen in Chile, Brazil and Bolivia. The situation is fluid, and could remain that way into 2020. One only hopes it does not lead to racialised civil war in Bolivia and what Marx once called 'the common ruin of the contending classes'.

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