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## Research Report

Bolivia after the 2020 general elections: Despite the return to power of the MAS, a new political era could be about to begin

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# SWP Comment

NO. 55 NOVEMBER 2020

## Bolivia after the 2020 General Elections

Despite the Return to Power of the MAS, a New Political Era Could Be About to Begin

*Claudia Zilla and Madeleyne Aguilar Andrade*

On 8 November Luis Arce and David Choquehuanca took office as the new president and vice-president of Bolivia, respectively. Less than a month earlier, they had won the elections in the first round with more than 55 per cent of the vote. Thus, the Movement towards Socialism (*Movimiento al Socialismo* or MAS) was returned to power and obtained an absolute majority in the parliament after a one-year interregnum following the fraudulent ballot in 2019. This outcome can be attributed not only to the desire of the people for economic and political stability as well as social peace but also to the poor performance of the transitional government of Jeanine Áñez and the opposition's fragmentation and polarizing campaign. The dethronement of Evo Morales and the current adverse conditions – not least Covid-19 – are among those factors that will make it impossible for the MAS to conduct business as usual.

It was a long and extremely difficult path to the October 2020 general elections, which were a re-run of the annulled October 2019 ballot. Evo Morales had pushed through four presidential mandates in a row by means of violating constitutional provisions (2009), ignoring the results of a plebiscite against his re-election (2016) and obtaining both the Constitutional Court's recognition of re-election as a human right (2017) and the Supreme Electoral Court's authorization of his repeated candidacy (2018). In last year's general elections, serious accusations – both in Bolivia and elsewhere – of electoral fraud were made after Morales's lead had grown significantly following an interruption in the speed-count. By 25 October 2019, when the Supreme Electoral Court officially declared Morales's victory in

the first round of the elections, Bolivians for and against him had already taken to the streets. In its final report, published in December, as well as in its preliminary reports of October and November, the electoral observation mission of the Organization of American States (OAS) testified to significant irregularities in the counting of the votes. On 10 November, as the protests continued unabated and became more violent, Morales had initially announced both the replacement of electoral officials and the holding of repeat elections, only to resign a couple of hours later. That step had been suggested – separately and in front of the cameras – by both the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and the chief of police (see SWP-Aktuell 69/2019). Moreover, members of the police force had joined in



the mutiny against the government and left sensitive public buildings unprotected.

## Transition as Prelude to a New Order

Jeanine Áñez, Senator for the conservative Social-Democratic Movement and second vice-president of the upper chamber, assumed the interim presidency of Bolivia on 12 November 2019. She was the highest political authority to remain in office after the president and vice-president of the country, the presidents of both the upper and lower chambers, and the first vice-president of the Senate had all resigned. For this reason, Áñez assumed first the presidency of the Senate and then the interim presidency of the state, which was possible only at a joint session of the two chambers of the Plurinational Legislative Assembly attended exclusively by parties in opposition to MAS. A first attempt to hold a session in the Senate had failed owing to the absence of MAS members, who held a majority of two-thirds and had prevented a quorum.

On the night of her inauguration, Áñez entered the presidential palace holding up a huge book in front of the cameras and exclaiming “God has allowed the Bible to re-enter the Palace. May He bless us!” This pseudo-religious scene contrasted with Morales’s policy of the secularization of the Bolivian state. Áñez’s restorative emphasis anticipated the approach of her one-year transitional government, which showed signs of seeking revenge against the MAS and its supporters, saw itself as the precursor of “post-MASism” and cultivated ambitions of pushing through long-term policies. From the very beginning, officials embarked on a campaign of defaming and stigmatizing the previous government, which was persistently labelled as *narco-terrorist*. Several members of the new cabinet, first and foremost Government Minister Arturo Murillo, even promised that (violent) enemies would be “hunted down”.

Considering himself to be in danger, Morales first went into hiding in Bolivia, then flew

to Mexico to seek political asylum and finally settled in Buenos Aires, along with his vice-president, Álvaro García Linera. Argentina is the country that has the largest Bolivian diaspora, including numerous MAS supporters. From there, Morales coordinated political activities and gave press conferences until his return to Bolivia on 9 November 2020.

The composition of Áñez’s first cabinet did not serve to integrate and pacify a country in turmoil but rather signalled an anti-MAS approach at the political, social, regional and ethnical levels: that is, its members came from the opposition, the upper classes and mainly eastern Bolivia and were predominantly white. Two politicians who had run for the presidency in the 2019 elections were also included in the interim president’s cabinet. All in all, she made around 15 ministerial changes in her one year in office; high-ranking (political) appointments continued to take place just one week before Luis Arce’s inauguration.

In a similar way behaved Karen Longaric, a lawyer and expert in international law from Sucre, who was appointed minister of foreign affairs and had already held various positions at the Foreign Ministry. She was soon making public announcements and decisions that revealed her intention to overhaul Bolivian foreign policy in terms of both content and personnel: around 80 per cent of ambassadors were replaced and diplomatic relations with the United States restored following an 11-year interruption.

## The ‘Adaptability’ of the Institutions of Law and Order

Remarkably quickly, the (old) judiciary and security apparatus adapted to the new narratives and policies of the civilian transitional government. In breach of constitutional provisions, it was the head of the armed forces, Williams Kaliman, who placed the presidential sash on Áñez at her inauguration ceremony. The following day, Áñez replaced the military leadership.

The police and military operations undertaken to restore public order were by no

means free of excessive use of force. On 16 November the transitional government passed Supreme Decree No. 4078 to exempt the armed forces from any criminal liability for the consequences of their actions. The interim president denied that any repressive abuses had been committed against civilians by the law enforcement agencies. While the Bolivian Prosecutor-General's Office supported her claim, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) documented several fatal incidents in which the state security forces had been involved. In a report released on 10 December following an IACHR observation team's visit to Bolivia, the commission noted the deaths recorded on 11 November in the Pedregal neighbourhood of the South Zone of the municipality of La Paz, the massacre of Sacaba, Cochabamba on 15 November and the massacre of Senkata, El Alto on 19 November. These repressive actions targeted MAS protestors and local residents and took place under the implementation of the immunity decree. The interim president eventually repealed that decree on 27 November, arguing that it was no longer necessary as social peace had been restored. For its part, the IACHR not only condemned racist acts against the indigenous people but also criticized plans of the parliament (in which the MAS had a majority) to grant amnesty to former President Morales and former Vice-President García Linera. Thus, the transitional government squandered the opportunity to establish judicial independence. Instead, it put pressure on prosecutors and judges to conduct criminal investigations against more than 100 people, including Morales himself and others linked to his government, for sedition and/or terrorism.

## The Corruption of 'Others'

As the government was confronted with the challenge of stabilizing the country and of organizing new elections at the same time, it soon had to deal with yet another daunting task — gaining control over the spread

of the coronavirus. On 10 March 2020, Bolivia reported its first two confirmed cases of infection. A state of national sanitary emergency was declared under Supreme Decree No. 4196 on 17 March. Four days later, lockdown was imposed throughout Bolivia (Supreme Decree No. 4199). Thereafter, Interim President Áñez introduced successive complementary measures aimed at pandemic containment.

As early as May 2020, the transitional government, which had vocally decried the Morales administration for corruption and clientelism, found itself involved in a scandal over the alleged purchase of 170 respirators from Spain at inflated prices. The incident led to the resignation of the Bolivian minister of health. Moreover, the equipment turned out to be unfit for its intended purpose as it was not suitable for use in intensive care units. Further corruption cases (some 24 in total) engulfed the interim presidency, including those related to the state-owned telecommunications (Entel), oil (YPFB), electricity (ENDE) and aeronautic (DGAC) companies.

## Voting Once Again

On 24 November 2019, Áñez signed Law No. 1266 on the "Extraordinary and Transitional Regime for Holding General Elections", which the MAS-controlled parliament had passed. Among other things, the law provided for the appointment of new judges at of the Supreme Electoral Court, the annulment of the 2019 general elections and the holding of repeat elections in 2020. At the same time, it banned those who had held elected office at the national level during the previous two electoral periods from running for the same office in this year's elections. This provision prevented Morales and his vice-president from running as candidates for the national executive once again. Yet, the MAS nominated Morales as its candidate for Senator for the Department of Cochabamba, but the Supreme Electoral Court ruled that he did not meet the constitutional requirement of hav-

ing had permanent residence in the district for at least two years (Article 149). In this way, Morales was kept out of the running.

As regards the coronavirus crisis, the elections were postponed several times. Social, rural and unionist groups linked to MAS responded to those delays by mobilizing and forming roadblocks to demand an early vote. In the end, Áñez, the parliament and the Supreme Electoral Court agreed to schedule the elections for 18 October.

On 24 January, despite having promised not to participate in the new elections, Áñez announced her own presidential candidacy. This decision drew considerable criticism, even from within the ranks of her own administration, whose cohesion was threatened. On 17 September, after a national survey on voting intentions had revealed that she could expect less than 8 per cent support, Áñez withdrew her candidacy.

Initially, there were eight presidential candidates (six male and two female), highlighting a large degree of fragmentation among the opposition forces to the MAS. After a couple of the candidates had dropped out, the anti-MAS vote was split mainly between two strong candidates: Carlos Mesa of the centre-leftist alliance “Citizens’ Community” (*Comunidad Ciudadana*) and Luis Fernando Camacho of the rightist coalition “We Believe” (*Creemos*). However, even if they had united around a single candidate, the opposition forces would still not have won against Luis Arce, the presidential candidate of the MAS, who was able to claim an easy victory in the first round with 55.11 per cent of the vote (Mesa received 28.83 per cent and Camacho just 14 per cent). Turnout was a record 88.42 per cent (under compulsory voting for an electorate of about 7.5 million people); and the election observation missions of both the OAS and European Union confirmed the integrity and transparency of the elections.

All candidates immediately accepted the election results, as did Interim President Áñez — with the exception of Camacho. The Bolivian Episcopal Conference and some members of the transitional government backed his critical stance and recommended an (international) audit of the elec-

tion results. In Santa Cruz, Camacho’s home region and the entrepreneurial and agricultural centre of Bolivia, the “We Believe” coalition and the civil activist group *Comité pro Santa Cruz* have been organizing protests to contest the election results. Camacho, a right-wing populist and the defender of Catholic-conservative values, heads both of these groups, which are seeking greater autonomy for the region. In the demonstrations against Morales in 2019, Camacho played an important role; and, as the leader of radical regionalism, he will pose a challenge both for Arce’s presidency and Bolivia’s governability.

## The Triumph of the MAS

The MAS has re-emerged as the main political force in Bolivia. It won in six of the country’s nine departments as well as in the diaspora (4.7 per cent of voters live outside Bolivia), thereby securing control of the national executive and an absolute majority in both chambers of the parliament. Poor pandemic management, several corruption cases and repeated derogatory statements about the indigenous and rural populations had undermined the legitimacy of the transitional government. At the same time, its poor performance diminished the appeal of any project of the opposition since most of the opposition forces pursued a common strategy of being *against* the MAS.

While the presidential candidate Mesa received a majority of votes in the departments of Beni and Tarija as well as in most cities, especially among those citizens who have a higher education and are better off, the MAS was able to count on the support of its core voters — namely, the indigenous rural population, the poor urban population and informal workers in the suburbs. Moreover, it seems that it was able to win back the support of those who had distanced themselves from the movement not because of its policies but because of the personalist and hegemonic leadership of Morales.

Camacho, for his part, focused his campaign exclusively on the interests of the

lowlands in the east of the country, thereby fostering a regional-identitarian divide. So, while he won in the Department of Santa Cruz and obtained 51.5 per cent of the vote in its capital city, he received less than 1 per cent in La Paz. During their election campaigns amid the Covid-induced economic crisis and the ongoing political and social polarization in the country, both Mesa and Camacho concentrated on trying to prevent the MAS from returning to power and thereby missed the opportunity to explain to voters how they would seek to resolve the problems of the people.

By contrast, the MAS presidential and vice-presidential candidates had a positive agenda: they argued that the only common enemies were the coronavirus, hunger and income insecurity. Arce summarized his government programme as comprising five short-term measures targeting the people most affected by the coronavirus crisis:

- The distribution of food baskets by the armed forces for people in need
- Prohibition on the dismissal of wage earners in both the public and private sectors, including female domestic workers forced to stay at home
- For the duration of the quarantine, payment by the state of the rents of those with no fixed income
- The formation of solidarity brigades tasked with supporting the elderly and disabled through food and medical deliveries and at-home payment services
- In coordination with municipal governments, the provision of shelters with canteens and medical staff for the homeless.

Moreover, presidential candidate Arce and vice-presidential candidate Choquehuanca were able to personify the renewed hopes of the economically and ethnically disadvantaged. For his part, Arce has overseen Bolivia's economic policies and successes as minister of economy and public finance since 2006 (with an interruption in 2017–18 owing to treatment for renal cancer). He is considered a pragmatic and level-headed politician who represents the urban left. Choquehuanca, an indigenous Aymara, was Morales's foreign minister

from 2006 to 2017 (that is, for most of the time that the latter served as president). He has long been seen as the third most-important leader of the MAS, after Morales and García Linera. He is known as an indigenous and rural activist but is also an intellectual who has theorized on *Buen Vivir* (Good Living), a key concept that underpins the indigenous people's worldview of adequate or harmonious coexistence.

It was, in fact, Morales who pushed through the Arce-Choquehuanca candidacies with the aim of targeting a wider spectrum of voters. Several grassroots organizations of the MAS had originally chosen Choquehuanca as the presidential candidate and Andrónico Rodríguez as his running mate. The latter, who is a young union leader of coca growers in Cochabamba and a rising star within MAS, will now be the head of the new Senate.

Before the repeat elections, Arce acknowledged that members of the MAS had failed to strengthen the party. He promised that they would not allow Morales to participate in the new government and that they — unlike him — would not cling to power. However, in the wake of the MAS's electoral victory, there was already evidence of attempts to preserve the political hegemony of the MAS.

## Ensuring Parliamentary Leverage

Owing to the peculiar electoral system in the context of Bolivian presidentialism, the party of the winner of the presidential election generally secures a parliamentary majority, especially if the candidate succeeds in the first round. Around half of the deputies in the parliament are elected in single-member districts by voters casting one of their two votes, while the remaining deputies run in multi-member constituencies and, together with the candidates for the presidency, the vice-presidency and the Senate, are elected on a single closed party list by voters casting their other vote. Therefore, in the latter case, a splitting of the vote between the executive and legislative branches is not possible.



While Morales secured around 61 per cent of the vote and thereby was able to secure a two-thirds majority in both chambers of the parliament in the 2014 elections, Arce will have only an absolute majority. The MAS-dominated upper and lower chambers responded to this situation by amending parliamentary regulations on 27–28 October – just over a week after the repeat elections and a couple of days before the end of the parliamentary session (on 29 October). They lowered the threshold requirement in both chambers for passing various decisions from a qualified to an absolute majority, a last parliamentary act that drew severe criticism from NGOs such as the Latin-American Network for Parliamentary Transparency and brought some Bolivians out onto the streets.

At its last session, which was held jointly by the upper and lower chambers, the outgoing parliament approved the final report on those who had died during the confrontations between the security forces and MAS supporters in Senkata (El Alto) and Sacaba (Cochabamba) in October 2019. Based on this document, which is to be submitted to the offices of public prosecutor, the attorney-general and the comptroller-general, the parliament adopted a recommendation for the incoming parliament to file a liability suit against Interim President Áñez and to push for criminal prosecutions against 11 ministers of her cabinet.

Against the backdrop of this legacy, there is a positive feature of the new Bolivian parliament that deserves to be highlighted. Thanks to the stricter implementation of gender parity provisions, the share of women in the parliament has now risen to 51.9 per cent. But outside the parliament, massive gender inequality continues to prevail. For example, Bolivia has one of the highest femicide rates in Latin America and the Caribbean (2.3/100,000 inhabitants) while its abortion regulations and case law are very restrictive. Moreover, the presence of women in politics (descriptive representation) still has to translate into pro-women legislation and policies (substantive representation) as well as a culture of respect.

## The Start of the New Government

After more than 14 years in power followed by a one-year interregnum, a new MAS government was inaugurated on 8 November 2020. Although Arce has engaged in some self-criticism and called for unity in the country, he insists – as do most MAS politicians – that the party won last year's elections fair and square. He characterizes the events that followed the vote as a coup d'état supported by the OAS and calls the transitional government of Áñez a dictatorship.

The mainly socioeconomic government programme of the newly elected president comprises several elements to be tackled in a staggered manner. The short-term measures are a draft law on a new tax on large personal wealth, industrialization through import substitution, achieving security through food sovereignty and promoting domestic tourism. The medium- and long-term measures are the production of renewable ecological diesel to replace fuel imports, the industrialization of Bolivian lithium (in which Germany is involved), and the Mutún project (with Chinese participation), an iron mine through which the country is aiming to launch a steel industry. For this reason, the agenda of the new government focuses not only on the reactivation of public investment but also on the participation of international partners, while ensuring that the Bolivian state retains a share of more than 50 per cent.

For their part, the grassroots organizations attached to the MAS have demanded direct, substantive participation in government. Within the broad and heterogeneous movement, access to public positions has always acted as centripetal force. For the new president, meeting the demands of these organizations by creating numerous ministries pose a challenge in times of crisis, when austerity is called for. One day after his inauguration, Arce appointed 16 ministers – only three of them female. Morales is not a member of the new cabinet, as he and Arce had earlier agreed. Instead, the former president has let it be known that he intends to settle in Cochabamba and work with the social organizations.

Because of a judiciary guided by power politics and that for the past year had been pursuing leaders of the MAS rather than its rivals, Morales currently faces several different criminal charges: electoral fraud in 2019, sedition and terrorism (over the blocking of roads), two cases of statutory rape (because of a relationship with an underage female) and, in a lawsuit filed with the International Criminal Court in The Hague, crimes against humanity. According to Morales himself, there are about 30 trials against him. On 26 October the arrest warrant issued against him was lifted, as a result of which returning to Bolivia no longer meant he could end up in prison. One day later, arrest warrants against former ministers in the Morales administration were lifted, too. Today, Arce acknowledges that it was a mistake of the MAS government to have introduced the popular election of judges and recommends returning to some kind of meritocratic system — but not to party quotas.

Despite its experience in government, a new era in the rule of the MAS could now be about to begin owing to the changed conditions within the country. The political party of Evo Morales was able to win the elections without the former president, its founder and personalist leader, at the top of the electoral list. And it is Arce — who is not a union leader of coca growers but an economist and technocrat — who will govern not during a commodity boom but during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Coronavirus Crisis in a Poor Country

The Covid-19 pandemic reached Bolivia at a time when the country was wracked by political and social fragility under the transitional government. At the same time, the growth of its small economy (GDP per capita of just US\$3,320), which relies heavily on the extraction of natural resources, had been slowing since 2015, mainly owing to the fall in natural gas exports to Argentina and Brazil. After more than a decade of strong

annual growth (about 5 per cent), which, combined with social policy, had led to a significant reduction in poverty, the GDP annual growth rate dropped to 2.2 per cent in 2019. Like many countries in the region, Bolivia had experienced the reprimarization of exports and a growing dependency on imports during the commodity boom (2004–13) — a dependency that continues to this day.

Although the MAS government has traditionally been seen as prudent and rather orthodox with regard to macroeconomic management, the current state of the public finances is critical. The fiscal deficit has been growing since 2014 and the general government deficit reached 6.9 per cent of GDP in 2019. Currently, state expenditures are rising rapidly owing to the economic aid measures introduced during the coronavirus crisis in the form of income transfers to households and financial support for micro, small and medium-sized businesses. In July 2020, unemployment stood at 11.8 per cent. Meanwhile, the International Monetary Fund estimates that GDP will decline around 8 per cent in 2020.

Although Bolivia was one of the first countries in the region to respond to the pandemic by implementing containment measures, the Covid-19 incidence rate in August 2020 was 850.8 per 100,000 population and the death rate 4 per cent. The precariousness of the country's healthcare system, the qualitative deficit of housing and the difficulty for people living in poverty without savings to adhere to the strict lockdown and refrain from working have all contributed to the spread of the pandemic in Bolivia.

In Bolivia, around 34 per cent of the population has — for various reasons — no health insurance, despite free and (nominally) universal healthcare provided by the state and several private health-insurance schemes. Public healthcare expenditure in Bolivia is the equivalent of 4.4 per cent of GDP (2017), which is just below the Latin American average (4.8 per cent) and far below the 6 per cent recommended by the World Health Organization. Moreover,



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Bolivia's annual healthcare expenditure per capita (US\$332) is one of the lowest in the region. Even compared with other countries in Latin America, there is a low density of doctors, hospital beds and intensive care units in Bolivia, as well as deficits in medical supplies (data in this section are from the UNDP-Report of October 2020 and the IMF).

Amid the ongoing pandemic, Arce will have to demonstrate that he is capable of dealing with a major crisis. It is unlikely that policies that worked in a past characterized by windfall revenues will suffice under the changed national, regional and international conditions.

## Stumbling Into the Future

With regard to what has happened in Bolivia since the 2019 general elections, it is largely one-sided narratives that prevail, reflecting the social and political polarization within the country. Moreover, events often seem to contradict looked through clear-cut concepts, which hampers consensual understanding. According to a widely shared definition, a coup d'état takes place when a state actor removes a head of state or government illegally. Should the suggestion by the commander-in-chief of the Bolivian armed forces and the chief of police that Morales resign be regarded as his de facto removal? On the one hand, it is unlikely that Morales would have been able to continue to govern without the backing and loyalty of the state security forces; indeed, the head of the military placing the sash on the interim president at her inauguration sent a strong message about the political stance of the armed forces. On the other hand, the positioning of the military followed the massive demonstrations against electoral fraud and the umbrella organization of the Bolivian trade unions (COB), which is close to the MAS, demanding Morales's resignation. In this situation, the head of the military, who had been long

loyal to Morales, may have opted to change sides in a timely manner. At the same time, it is unusual for a parliament to continue working in the wake of a coup d'état – even more so when the ousted ruling forces enjoy a qualified majority in the legislature.

Pressure exerted both from below by the mobilizations – which have been called the Revolution of the *Pititas* – and from above by the police and the military put an end to the Morales era. The MAS managed to win this year's elections without the man who until then had been considered the guarantor of access to power. What happened over the past year has weakened Morales's leadership; however, he will remain an important political actor.

The transitional government provided the opposition forces with a stage on which they could have proved that their claims to be more inclusive, democratic and republican than the MAS were justified. But they failed to do so. The institutions of law and order demonstrated a considerable propensity to be swayed by the winds of politics. The politicization of the judiciary and the judicialization of politics create a situation in which the departure from power means loss of immunity and thus exposure to legal persecution and prosecution. Furthermore, corruption increases the vulnerability of actors and institutions; it affects their behaviour twice – when they are bought and when they are later extorted by the threat of denunciation.

All in all, it can be considered a success of Bolivian democracy that the transitional government made possible an electoral way out. Thus, it was no small achievement that a year-long political crisis – one characterized by a high degree of polarization along ethnic, social and regional lines as well as by outbreaks of violence – could be institutionally channelled through free and fair elections amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

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