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Political Cleavages in Motion: Bolivia in 2021

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## Political Cleavages in Motion: Bolivia in 2021

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### Abstract

We analyze recent developments in Bolivia's politics through the lens of political cleavage theory, in particular cleavage displacement. Bolivia's current party system is characterized by a stable and dominant MAS at one end of the spectrum, and at the other a fractious, unstable collection of parties, movements, and other vehicles that have failed to articulate a coherent set of political ideas. It emerged when the previous party system collapsed in 2003-05, shifting politics from a conventional left-right axis of competition unsuited to Bolivian society, to an ethnic/rural vs. cosmopolitan/urban axis closely aligned with its major social cleavage. But society did not freeze in 2005. We analyze the deep roots of Bolivia's current politics, and explore emerging or changing generational, ethnic, urban-rural, regional, class, and religious divides. Understanding how cleavages interact to determine political outcomes allows us to make sense of the deep tensions and sources of instability that both Bolivia, and the MAS internally, currently face, and to shine a light on major coming challenges.

**Keywords:** Cleavage theory, political parties, ethnicity, Bolivia, Latin America.

### Abstract

El presente artículo analiza los recientes eventos políticos en Bolivia, a través del prisma de la teoría de clivajes políticos, con un énfasis especial en el desplazamiento de clivajes. El sistema de partidos boliviano se compone, en la actualidad, por un Partido estable y predominante a un lado del espectro (MAS), mientras que en el otro extremo encontramos una colección inestable y fragmentada de partidos, movimientos y otros vehículos que no han podido articular un marco coherente de ideas políticas. Este sistema emergió cuando el sistema de partidos anterior colapso entre 2003 y 2005, cambiando la dinámica política de una convencional disputa sobre el eje izquierda-derecha, a una situada en el eje étnico/rural vs. cosmopolita urbano, mas alineado al clivaje mas importante en el país. Sin embargo, la sociedad boliviana no se congeló en 2005. En este artículo analizamos las raíces profundas de la política boliviana, rastreando la emergencia y transformaciones en las divisiones generacional, étnica, urbano-rural, regional, de clase y en torno a la religión. Entender como los clivajes interactúan a la hora de determinar tendencias políticas nos permite aprehender las principales tensiones y fuentes de inestabilidad que Bolivia y el MAS, internamente, afrontan hoy en día, ilustrando a su vez las potenciales rutas de importantes retos por venir.

**Palabras clave:** Teoría de los clivajes, partidos políticos, etnicidad, Bolivia, América Latina.

## **About the authors**

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## I. INTRODUCTION

On the surface, 2021 was the year Bolivian politics returned to calm after an extended period of conflict, violence and instability. The October 2020 election had been won by Luis Arce of Evo Morales' Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), although it lost the two-thirds parliamentary majority that the party had held between 2009-2019. A period of consolidation beckoned in which the principal challenges facing Bolivia de-escalated from, 'Was Morales deposed in a coup d'état or did he commit electoral fraud? Might the country descend into civil war?' to the more mundane, 'Will Arce govern, or will Morales pull the strings from the shadows? Will the MAS continue as a hybrid social and political movement, or transform itself into a modern political party?'

The latter questions dominated the foreground of political analysis in 2021. But beneath the surface, Bolivia's tectonic plates continued to move in far more fundamental ways. In this article we first briefly summarize key national and subnational developments in Bolivia, going back to the seminal October 2020 election. We then analyze the deeper drivers of political and social change in Bolivia, of which these events are some of the most visible manifestations. Some of these correspond to deep, slow-moving, bottom-up demographic and social factors, like ethnicity, urbanization, and rising education levels. Others move faster and are more top-down, like the politicization of religion, a long-standing social characteristic suddenly activated by politicians seeking electoral advantage.

We analyze each of these in detail, focusing on how emerging cleavages interact with existing ones to affect electoral outcomes and political stability. We conclude showing how our analysis can explain the deep roots of Bolivia's current political pathology: weak democratic competition characterized by an entrenched, dominant and stable MAS alongside a fractious, unstable, incoherent opposition.

## II. RECENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

In March and April 2021, Bolivia carried out two rounds of regional and local elections in its nine departments and 336 municipalities. The results of these elections show that the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) is still the largest party in the country, and the only one that retains a territorial presence nationwide. On the other hand, the party struggled in urban areas, losing Bolivia's four largest cities: Santa Cruz, El Alto, La Paz and Cochabamba, and seven of nine departmental capitals in all. Its defeat in El Alto, the second largest city and one of its historical strongholds, was particularly notable and, for the MAS, painful.

Decreasing support in urban areas drove similar results at the departmental level, as the MAS lost elections for Governor in six of nine Bolivian departments. It is notable, however, that in four of these cases, the MAS won the first round against a divided opposition. The anti-MAS vote only converged on a single option in the second round.

These elections took place only 5 months after the MAS convincingly won the national elections of 2020, with 55% of the vote. That election was notable for two big reasons: (i) it was the first time the party presented a candidate other than its traditional leader, Evo Morales; and (ii) it was the first election following Morales' resignation, in November 2019, in the wake of mass protests. The latter were triggered by irregularities in the electoral count on the evening of a highly contested national election, and further boosted by an Organization of American States (OAS) preliminary report and subsequent electoral audit of the October 2019 general election, which concluded that electoral results had been manipulated to favor Morales. Morales, the MAS, and their supporters contend that

what happened in reality was a *coup d'état*. Amongst Bolivians, who vividly remember the 2019 protests, there is no consensus on the matter.<sup>1</sup>

In his new role as head of the MAS, Morales had to convince its grassroots organizations to, in some cases reluctantly, accept Luis Arce as its 2020 presidential candidate. Arce had served as Economics Minister under Morales, presiding between 2006-2014 over a vigorous cycle of economic growth and poverty reduction. Runner-up in the 2020 election was Carlos Mesa from *Comunidad Ciudadana* (CC), with 29% of the vote. Luis Fernando Camacho, a civic leader from Santa Cruz who led the 2019 protests against Morales, obtained 14% with his newly-formed party, *Creemos*. Although many grassroots organizations, especially in Aymara regions in the highlands, strongly supported former Minister of Foreign Affairs David Choquehuanca, Morales chose Arce because of his track record as Minister of Finance and his middle-class urban background, more appealing to middle-class voters, who ended up defining the electoral result.

In 2021, Morales tried once more to impose top-down candidates. But these were now sub-national elections, and the dynamics proved very different. In the departments of Beni, Pando and Chuquisaca, grassroots organizations had already selected candidates for governor and mayor. In El Alto, grassroots organizations had similarly nominated Eva Copa, former head of the Senate for the MAS, as mayoral candidate. In all of these cases, Morales promoted different candidates chosen by the party leadership. The result was that local leaders with strong grassroots support abandoned the MAS in favor of other, hitherto marginal, parties. This is how the MAS lost the departmental governments of Chuquisaca, Pando, and Beni, the capital cities of Pando and Beni, and the city of El Alto.

These events mark a significant departure from the more consensual practice of sub-national coalition-building dissected by Anria (2013) and Zuazo (2009), in which local parties and social movements allied to the MAS were given significant leeway to compete in local elections as distinct movements with their own candidates, so long as they re-coalesced under the MAS umbrella for national elections. As 2021 advanced, the MAS rigidified from the top down. Increasing tensions became evident between 'the party outside government', which sought centralized control, and 'the party in government', which – paradoxically – did not. These tensions point to growing factional conflicts within the MAS, some of which reflect generational, regional and – to an extent – ethnic divides. Finally, it is worth remembering that, with the exception of the Governorship of Santa Cruz, won by Camacho with 55% of the votes, both CC and *Creemos* performed poorly in sub-national elections.

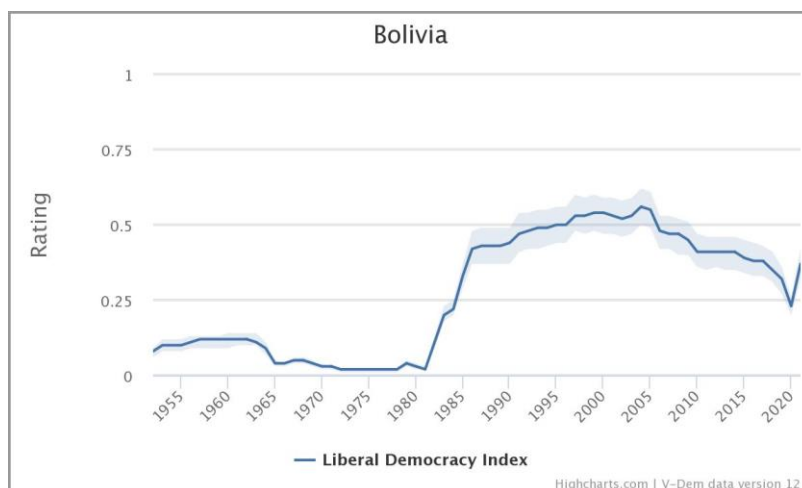
Against this backdrop, former interim President Jeannine Añez was detained in March 2021, accused of orchestrating a *coup d'état* against Morales in 2019. She has been in "pre-emptive detention" for almost a year, along with several members of her Cabinet, while others have fled the country. The government has also indicted Camacho and, in December, detained Marco Pumari, a former *Creemos* candidate for Vice President and civic leader from Potosí. The former Mayor of La Paz, Luis Revilla, is currently hiding in an undisclosed location. All of these leaders are accused of orchestrating the violent events that preceded Morales' fall. This has the look of retaliation for Añez's prosecution of Morales and many members of his administration for sedition, terrorism and genocide during her interim tenure.

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<sup>1</sup> There is no consensus within Bolivia about a number key facts concerning the events of that evening and the politically charged days that followed, much less about how to interpret them. We do not attempt to resolve these disagreements here. For a carefully researched and argued analysis, see Wolff (2020b) in a previous *Anuario*.

All of the above speaks of a deep polarization playing out in different dimensions, which has severely impacted Bolivia’s democracy and its institutions of state. Data from the Varieties of Democracy project in Figure 1 show Bolivia’s democratic quality descending sharply from a global high of 0.55 (on a 0-1 scale) around 2004-05, to half that level, 0.23, in 2020. The latter is the lowest Bolivia has scored on this measure since 1984, when it was emerging chaotically from a military dictatorship and hyperinflation. Sadly, these numbers ring true to informed observers. The use of the judiciary to prosecute opposition leaders shows serious decay in the institutions of democracy. A recent report by an Interdisciplinary Group of Experts (GIEI 2021) on the events of 2019, commissioned by agreement between the Interamerican Commission for Human Rights (CIDH) and the Bolivian government, corroborates this. It points to a lack of independence, transparency and objectivity in the exercise of criminal prosecutions, often deployed against political opponents, as a structural and endemic problem of the Bolivian judiciary.

**Figure 1.** The quality of Bolivia’s liberal democracy



Source: Varieties of Democracy project: [https://www.v-dem.net/data\\_analysis/CountryGraph/](https://www.v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/)

In this context, it should not be surprising that COVID-19 imposed heavy costs on Bolivian society. To a large extent, this can be explained by a historically poor and underinvested health system. But polarization has greatly exacerbated the country’s slow, fumbling response (Bonifaz and Lea Plaza 2020; Velasco Guachalla et al. 2021). This was made yet worse by record low hydrocarbons prices during the pandemic, following on from a long decline beginning in 2014. Oil and gas are key export earners for Bolivia, and so a downturn in fiscal revenues only made a bad situation worse.

### III. POLITICAL CLEAVAGES IN BOLIVIA

Much recent literature examining the state of Bolivian politics and society has examined the implications of the fall of the Morales regime after the failed elections of 2019, either in its own right (Souverain and Exeni et al. 2020; 2022; Barrios 2021), or in combination with the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 crisis (Bonifaz and Lea Plaza 2020; Velasco-Guachalla et al. 2021). This debate has been both thematically focused and ideologically charged, gravitating around narratives that characterize the crisis of 2019 as a coup d’état (Mayorga 2020), versus those who depict it as a social mobilization aimed at redirecting Bolivia’s democratic process away from an authoritarian path (Barrios 2021). These studies tend to adopt political/strategic, institutionalist or electoral approaches. Much less has been written analyzing these and other events as shifts in the structure of Bolivia’s

political cleavages. It is our contention that the conflicts unleashed in 2019, as well as many other apparently disconnected or even contradictory phenomena, are best understood as manifestations of shifting cleavages. The rest of this paper seeks an integrated approach that analyzes the most important recent developments in Bolivia as both causes and consequences – stimuli and responses – of underlying cleavage displacements.

### **Political cleavages<sup>2</sup>**

But first it is useful to quickly review what cleavages are, how they shape political systems, and how they can shift. The concept of political cleavage was introduced by Lipset and Rokkan (1967), who define it as a division of society based on social, economic, or cultural characteristics, which separates people into distinct, more-or-less coherent groups and defines its major axes of contestation. People involved in such divisions are typically aware of their collective identity, and willing to act on the basis of that identity.

An example is clarifying. Lipset and Rokkan argue that in Western Europe, national revolutions produced cleavages between: (i) centralizing nation-builders vs. distinct communities (ethnically/religiously/linguistically) in the periphery, and (ii) between the central state vs. the supranational Roman Church. And the industrial revolution produced: (iii) an urban/industrial vs. rural/landholder cleavage, and later (iv) one between workers vs. owners. Any particular society will contain other cleavages of varying importance and depth. But across Western Europe, these are the key conflicts that defined political competition from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century until at least the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>.

Lipset and Rokkan's key insight is that a political system that reflects the dominant social cleavage that characterizes a society will constitute a stable equilibrium. To understand this, begin at the micro level. A political party will adopt positions that appeal to voters on one or another side of a particular cleavage. Its various positions across different cleavages should be internally coherent if the party is to succeed. The system of parties that emerges in this way should align along an axis, for example Left vs. Right, that mirrors or in some way aggregates key cleavages. Powerful evidence for this view is that throughout Western Europe over the past 150 years, different countries' political systems have had striking underlying similarities – because the societies they represent are shaped in similar ways by the same broad historical processes: the national and industrial revolutions.

Because the cleavages that divide voters are systematic, their preferences are durably connected in multidimensional policy space. Hence 'issue coherence'. Parties thus make programmatic commitments across different issues that are self-reinforcing. This implies punctuated processes of party system change in response to external shocks, causing sudden jumps between equilibria, or a lurch away from equilibrium altogether (Hooghe and Marks 2016).

This view posits an alternative to the fluid, continuous adjustments proposed by Downs' (1957) market-like mechanism, where politicians and parties re-position themselves in response to changing voter sentiment through a never-ending series of micro-adjustments. Party systems anchored in socio-political cleavages are instead characterized by ideological and organizational 'stickiness'. Political cleavages can become 'frozen' even as underlying social characteristics change. Hence adjustment, when it happens, is potentially more dramatic than in a Downsian world of gradual adjustment (Hooghe and Marks 2016).

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<sup>2</sup> This section makes extensive use of Faguet (2019), which analyses the collapse of Bolivia's party system in 2003-05 in much more detail than we have space for here (also available in Spanish as Faguet (2022)).



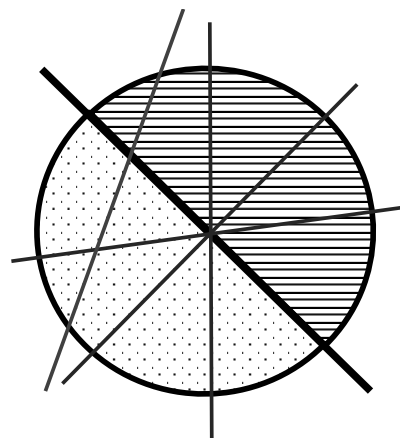
These ideas, perhaps clear in the abstract, can be difficult to apply in practice. What exactly is a cleavage, and what is it not? A cleavage is not a constituency nor an electoral coalition. It is not, for example, 'Protestants + the old'. It is, rather, a division in issue space that largely defines a society's interests, in the sense of expressing an important underlying conflict that it must overcome. Hence, for example, the lingering effects of the Protestant Reformation, and the status, rights and resources that should accrue to different religiously-defined groups. Cleavage theory holds that parties are organized, and articulate policies, around that underlying conflict. Voters then decide how to vote. The latter is not determined by the cleavage. At different moments as circumstances change, voters may choose to group themselves in different ways around a given political cleavage. Over time, different coalitions may emerge to drive forward different policy agendas, even when the underlying political cleavage is static.

Hence the MAS's declining urban vote between 2005-2019 is not *prima facie* evidence that urban/cosmopolitan-rural/ethnic divide no longer matters for Bolivia, but rather of voters across this divide choosing to vote differently for parties that array themselves clearly along it. Indeed, it can serve as evidence in favor of this cleavage. Much anecdotal evidence suggests that in 2005, many urban, non-indigenous voters sought to acknowledge and begin overcoming Bolivia's deep ethnic inequalities by voting for its first indigenous President. This coalition was multi-ethnic and multi-generational as well, embracing a broad, cross-cutting swathe of Bolivian society. The MAS gradually lost this constituency over the following 14 years through practices that were seen as anti-democratic and even authoritarian, reducing the party to its rural, highland-indigenist core.

### Cleavage shift

How do political cleavages shift? The first thing to understand, as Schattschneider (1960) points out, is that any society has many cleavages – many fault lines that divide people into coherent groups. These manifest themselves as competing priorities over values and resources, and hence distinct alternatives in policy space. A stylized society might look like figure 2 below, defined by a major (diagonal) cleavage, for example ethnicity, but also subordinate cleavages, for example region, urban-rural, religion and class. Some of these cleavages are major, and most are minor. They might be of many different sizes; we have drawn only one as a clear majority-minority split, but that is arbitrary.

**Figure 2.** Major and minor social cleavages



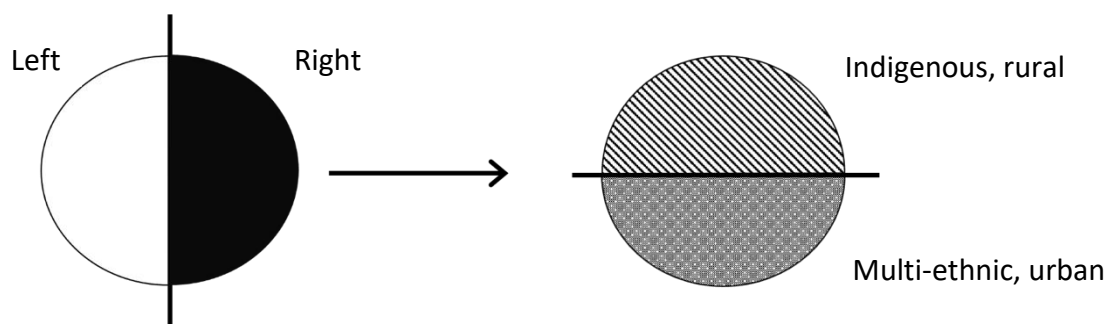
Source: Authors

Cleavages are turned into parties, party systems, and major axes of competition by political entrepreneurs, who choose to activate a particular cleavage politically in the sense of founding parties and articulating demands and political discourses grounded in that divide, while ignoring or attempting to subsume others. This often happens at critical junctures, when existing elites are weakened and power is in effect redistributed amongst social groups. The cleavage chosen by particular entrepreneurs may, or may not, be the country's primary social divide. But it is likely to be convenient to the actors who choose it.

How might cleavages shift? Consider the left-hand side of figure 3, which depicts a political system aligned along a classic left/workers vs. right/owners cleavage. In such a system, a party invests resources and effort convincing floating voters not only that one side of the dominant divide is superior, but that *it* represents that position best. Politicians invest to acquire vote-winning abilities in contests so defined, and their implementational skill in related policies once in office. Emerging rivals who compete with established actors on these terms are ultimately incrementalists, even when they succeed.

Schattschneider argues that the definition of alternatives is the supreme instrument of power, and hence the most devastating strategy is the substitution of conflicts. This implies that rising political entrepreneurs can vanquish established parties not by beating them at their own game, but by substituting dominant conflicts with a new set, representing different cleavages in a different dimension. We might read figure 3 as the substitution of left-right political axis with, as in Bolivia, one based on ethno-linguistic identity. Dimensional replacement destroys the political capital, reputations, and ideological assets of established parties not by discrediting them, but by making them irrelevant in a new politics that divides voters in a completely different way.

**Figure 3.** Shifting political cleavages



Source: Authors

Faguet (2019) builds on these ideas to explain the collapse of Bolivia's party-political system at the start of the new millennium, and its replacement by a new set of parties competing in a fundamentally different issue space, and with strikingly distinct organizational characteristics.<sup>3</sup> The collapse of the old system is all the more remarkable for having endured 50 years of shocks on a scale unknown in

<sup>3</sup> Faguet (2018) extends this analysis to draw lessons and predictions for Europe and North America based on the Bolivian experience.

most countries, including repeated military coups, hyperinflation, international price collapses, and guerrilla insurgencies.

Faguet argues that in Bolivia's weak, under-institutionalized democracy, political parties were not organized around its major social cleavage. Politics reflected, instead, a subordinate left-right cleavage that mimicked more developed countries, but was relevant for only a minority of Bolivia's population (García Linera 2007). How did this come about? It was imposed from above by triumphant leaders of the 1952-53 revolution, and maintained thereafter by their descendants. Elites in effect tried to rewrite the identities of rural Bolivians as industrial laborers rather than indigenous farmers (García Linera 2005). In the context of a low-income country with partial democratic incorporation, this cleavage became 'frozen', sustained by electoral laws and a fiscal architecture that facilitated elite dominance of the country's politics.

Institutional reforms triggered 'revolution from below' (Faguet and Shami 2021). Bolivia's 1994 decentralization had the unintended effect of unmasking the underlying ethnic and regional conflicts that define Bolivian society (Zuazo et al. 2012). And electoral reforms broke the oligopoly that upheld the left-right system. Subnational elections in the 1990s and early 2000s laid bare this misalignment, and helped bring forth a new generation of leaders from the grassroots of society (Mesa 2012). And so Bolivia's parties – indeed its entire political party system – collapsed under the weight of their irrelevance. They were replaced by the MAS, its various offshoots, a still-forming urban/cosmopolitan opposition, and a huge number of local and regional mini-movements that are organizationally and ideologically quite different to what came before. These actors define a system that pits rurally-based, culturally-defined parties that govern in ways that transcend the old left-right divide, against an urban opposition that is less interested in a particular ethnic identity, but which is still trying to find itself.

The emergence of this new politics has been richly analyzed by Anria (2013), Anria and Cyr (2017), Cyr (2015), García Linera (2005 and 2007), Morgan (2011), Van Cott (2005 and 2009), and Zuazo (2009 and 2012) to name just a few. But the past decade has been a period of rapid social and political change in Bolivia, ramping up pressures on its political system that have come to a head between 2019 and now. The new politics analyzed by those authors was still in formation, and the underlying cleavages on which it was based continued moving. It is our view that things have evolved significantly during even the past 2 years. The following section describes how some of these pressures came to a head in 2021, and uses cleavage displacement theory to analyze both their provenance and their effects.

#### **IV. MULTIPLE CRISES, SHIFTING CLEAVAGES, POLITICAL EROSION**

The most recent analyses of Bolivian democracy tend to polarize on the issue of coup vs. fraud, but are almost unanimous in pointing to the 2019 crisis as only the most recent stage in a long-term process of political erosion. This process began with Morales' decision to ignore the results of the 2016 referendum in which a majority rejected his bid to scrap term limits and allow him to run again for President. After the referendum, which was meant to be binding, the MAS turned to the Constitutional Tribunal (CT), questioning the legality of term limits. The CT concluded that term limits did indeed violate Morales' human rights as enshrined in the 2009 Constitution. Both referendum and the bar on re-election were set aside, Morales ran again, and Bolivia's political time-bomb began ticking.

One view, expressed forcefully by Barrios (2021), is that although the interruption of Morales' mandate represented a disruption in the formal rules regulating the election and replacement of presidents, it was in reality a redirection of the constitutional process back towards democracy. Its aim was to change the course of events away from the establishment of an autocratic regime, a course

set in 2016. Other authors, such as Mayorga (2020) evaluate the military's "suggestion" that Morales resign, along with other legal irregularities leading to the assumption of the presidency by Añez, as clear evidence of a constitutional rupture, and hence a coup. Rather than attempting to resolve this debate here, we point to the various ways in which cleavage displacements drove the progressive erosion of Bolivia's political system. In the run-up to 2019, parties that had emerged two decades earlier struggled to adapt to new and re-surfacing cleavages in Bolivian society.

There are echoes of the previous breakdown. By the late 1990s, a party system that had matured during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century struggled to contain rural/urban, ethnic, class and regional cleavages. These were partly the product of old, unresolved tensions in Bolivian society, as well as accelerating socioeconomic, demographic and institutional changes. Between 2000 and 2005, the system exploded and a completely new one rose out of its ashes. In the following sections we will analyze how these cleavages have interacted with newer factors such as a renewed interest of the young in politics, increasing use of social media, and the unprecedented politicization of religion and environmental issues, to paint a much more complex picture. The new party system in place since 2005, largely defined by the predominant MAS and a volatile and divided opposition, is struggling to accommodate these changes. As Mayorga (2022) points out, relations between the party in government and the opposition are becoming more complex as Bolivia's politics pass from an almost bi-polar dynamic between 2006 and 2019, towards a multi-polar dynamic, driven by internal changes in both camps. We argue that, although the country is polarized between two broad socio-political camps, changes in the structure and dynamic of social cleavages have kept them from crystallizing in a more institutionalized bi-partisan system. Some of these cleavage shifts are rooted in slow, deep socio-demographic change, while others are more top-down, responding more quickly to short-term political strategies.

### **A growing generational divide cutting across long-standing cleavages**

This new cleavage is the product of long-term generational change combined with the rapid spread of social media throughout Bolivia in recent years. During the referendum of 2016, younger generations mobilized to oppose Morales' proposed constitutional changes, founding what are now known as civic platforms, which make extensive use of social media channels (Torres 2020). Some of these platforms also actively opposed approval of a new criminal code in 2018. Civic platform activists claimed victory in both instances, as both the constitutional and legal reforms proposed were rejected. Indeed, even Morales blamed his defeat in the referendum of February 21, 2016 (21F) on a social media "dirty campaign" (Quiroz and Machaca 2020). Civic platforms were able to galvanize popular support and mobilize masses against Morales in the run-up to the 2019 elections, and especially during the 21 days of protests that led to his resignation.

Mayorga (2020) considers Morales "indispensable" because he acted as the focal point of political decision between 2006-2019, balancing government, party and the social organizations that constitute its key support. He fully occupied the Bolivian political stage as perhaps no other leader before him had, not even Victor Paz Estenssoro. The effect was not only to repress potential opposition figures, but also to stymie the emergence of younger leaders in his own movement. Much of this was no doubt unintentional, a competitive dynamic surrounding a very large, charismatic leader. But to some extent it was also deliberate, as the MAS assigned rising young leaders to subordinate offices in government and the movement, reserving the most prominent positions for loyal lieutenants.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

After his fall, Mayorga (2022) claims, Morales assumed a different role as head of the party. First from Mexico and then from Argentina, Morales sought to adapt the MAS to a new electoral challenge and a changed political context, including reinvigorating it as an instrument of grassroots social movements. And he was crucial in the selection of Luis Arce as presidential candidate. But these twin tendencies quickly came into conflict.

Consider the 2021 sub-national elections mentioned above. The MAS decided in December 2020 that candidate selection should follow two criteria: “the renewal of leaders and the election of candidates in assemblies carried out by grassroots social organizations” (Mayorga 2022: 74). In many municipalities, grassroots groups met, debated, and nominated candidates. But Morales ignored many of these, imposing candidates of his selection. This led to numerous defections from the MAS, related electoral defeats in several departments and the important city of El Alto. Zegada and Arequipa (2022) characterize this process as renewal at lower and intermediate tiers married to stasis at the national level. Indeed, the defection of leaders ahead of the 2021 sub-national elections shows a generational clash between emerging and traditional leaders.

The departure of Eva Copa from the MAS deserves special attention. Born in El Alto, she is a new generation of leader, not yet 33 years old when Morales resigned. As the second youngest President of the Senate in Bolivia’s history,<sup>5</sup> she helped approve important laws, including those calling for the 2020 elections. She led a strong parliamentary opposition to Añez. These experiences made her top choice of dozens of social movements aligned to the MAS for mayoral candidate for El Alto. But Morales decided, against the will of these grassroots, to select a different candidate: Zacarias Maquera. Copa then left the MAS and ran with another party, Jallalla, led by well-known Aymara leader Felipe “El Mallku” Quispe, who was running for Governor.<sup>6</sup> “Renewal!” chanted her supporters, waving Jallalla banners. Copa won with almost 69% of the vote (France 24)<sup>7</sup> the highest electoral support in any major city; Maquera trailed far behind, with only 19%. Copa’s discursive appeal to the need for generational change, as well as to her Aymara identity, speak of a revival of ethnic tensions within the MAS, and a growing generational divide. Although other young leaders such as the president of the Senate, Andrónico Rodríguez, remain in line with the mainstream of the party, this is the first time that generational tensions have resulted in a rupture within the party.<sup>8</sup>

## Ethnicity

Ethnicity is a very long-standing factor in Bolivia that erupted into political dominance around 2003-05, and has since matured as a political cleavage in interesting and unexpected ways as it interacts with other large cleavages, especially the generational divide. Since 1952, ethnicity had been repressed by Bolivia’s established, mainstream parties. The MAS chose to activate it in a relatively

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<sup>5</sup> The first was Adriana Salvatierra, also MAS, who resigned with Morales.

<sup>6</sup> Felipe Quispe died before the election and was succeeded by his son, Santos, who won the Governorship of La Paz against the MAS.

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.france24.com/es/am%C3%A9rica-latina/20210316-eva-copa-bolivia-aymara-evo-morales-alcaldesa-el-alto>

<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, there are no data on the age structure of MAS-*oficialista* vs. MAS-dissident supporters, so it is impossible to test this theory directly. We base this conclusion, instead, on the central appeals made by Eva Copa and other dissidents. They based their campaigns fundamentally on ‘*Renovación de liderazgos políticos*’. She and other MAS dissidents defined this as breaking the hold of the MAS’ founding generation on the party and opening spaces for younger generations with fresh ideas to rise up and become MAS leaders, something they claim had become impossible under the ‘iron grip’ that Morales and his coterie maintained on the MAS. Examples of two articles by her group that articulate this argument clearly are: Prensa Renueva (2021a; 2021b). See also Eva Copa’s blog, [Renovación Eva Copa](#).

open, pluralistic way designed to appeal across Bolivia's 30+ indigenous groups. It required only a small extension to make it open to mestizos and whites as well. The strategy succeeded, and the majorities that supported Morales and the MAS between 2005 and 2014 included large components from urban areas, middle class professionals, whites, mestizos, and all of Bolivia's indigenous groups.

But generational pressures began building around 2011, when the MAS faced a challenge from indigenous organizations opposed to the building of a highway across the TIPNIS<sup>9</sup> indigenous territory and nature reserve. As these sectors organized a protest march towards La Paz, they received unexpected support from many civic platforms organized spontaneously by the youth and environmental activists via social media. When the march arrived in La Paz, thousands of urbanites came out onto the streets in support. This episode marked the beginning of a profound break between urban middle classes and traditionalist indigenous organizations, and on the other side the MAS. Thereafter, the party distanced itself from the idea of plurinationalism, prominent during the Constituent Assembly of 2006-07, which had been central to its initial electoral appeal.

One of the main instruments of plurinationalism are indigenous autonomies – indigenous territories governed under indigenous customary law. According to the 2009 Constitution, municipal governments and territories could accede to indigenous autonomy following a process of deliberation and local referenda. According to Exeni (2019), beginning in 2009, 18 municipalities began the process of conversion to indigenous autonomy. Of these, 12 reached the referendum stage. In one municipality, a majority rejected the motion. Upon approval of a motion, a municipality must form a deliberative body, write an organic charter, and approve the charter via a second referendum. At the end of this process, only four indigenous autonomies are fully functional in Bolivia today.

This small number has surprised many. Indigenous social movements are an important part of the origins, legitimacy, and internal functioning of the MAS (Anria 2013). Many politicians and analysts expected a mushrooming of indigenous autonomies. But as Exeni (2019) points out, institutional barriers are accompanied by significant sociological barriers too. One such is regular migrants, who spend part of the year in rural municipalities and another part in large cities. This constituency often opposes indigenous autonomy based on their urban experiences and identities. The young have also, in several prominent cases, challenged indigenous norms that might limit their political leadership, such as notions of seniority or experience.

Politically, the bulk of the MAS has become skeptical of the whole process, especially following internal tensions between peasant organizations and those more inclined to promote indigenous autonomies, such as CONAMAQ and CIDOB.<sup>10</sup> These tensions came to the fore during the TIPNIS conflict, after which each organization suffered divisions between a faction aligned with the government and a rebellious one (Huanca Coila 2022). Institutionally, the subordination of the indigenous system of justice to civil law has also disincentivized indigenous groups from adopting the model. In sum, in addition to political and institutional barriers to adopting indigenous autonomy, generational and urban/rural cleavages in these territories seem to play an important role.

### **Urban/rural**

Increasing urbanization is a well-established, long-term trend in Bolivia (Klein 1992; Mesa et al. 1997), as it is in most of the world. This is a long-term, bottom-up process that depends on the decentralized decisions of millions of Bolivian individuals and families to leave the countryside and relocate to urban

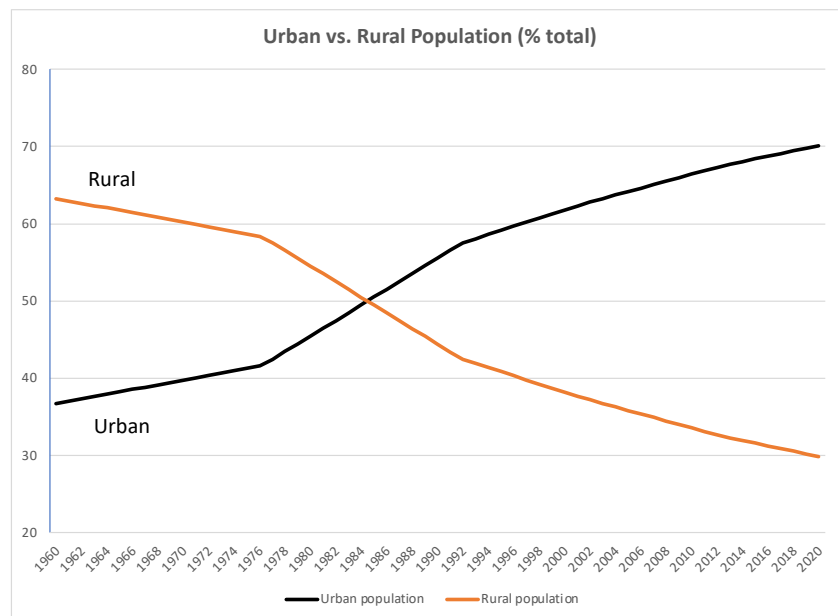
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<sup>9</sup> Isiboro Sécore National Park and Indigenous Territory.

<sup>10</sup> Spanish acronyms for the National Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyu and the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia.

settings. Figure 4 provides data for urban and rural population shares between 1960-2020. The graph shows a clear inversion: Bolivia was a rural country in 1960, with two-thirds of its population living in the countryside. By 2020 this share has fallen to 30%, and fully 70% lives in cities.

**Figure 4.** Urban vs. rural population shares



*Source:* Authors' elaboration based on World Bank data.

The politicization of urban/rural relations has been a key driver framing Bolivian politics during the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As pointed out by Bonifaz (2016) and Bonifaz and Gray Molina (2019), in addition to an accelerated process of urbanization towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Bolivia experienced a politicization of the urban-rural divide at the turn of the millennium. On one hand, socioeconomic changes made the country more urban and inclined it towards its eastern lowlands. On the other hand, politico-institutional changes such as decentralization to municipalities, the election of half the lower congressional chamber in relatively small territorial circumscriptions with a plurality system, and the particularities of MAS leadership, empowered rural sectors (Faguet 2002; Sánchez de Lozada and Faguet 2015) in a way that inclined the country politically towards rural areas and the western highlands.

This urban/rural divide was evident in national and sub-national electoral results of 2020 and 2021. Remember that, although Bolivia has urbanized in recent decades, 30% of voters still live in small towns and rural communities with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants. At the other extreme, 42% of voters reside in three metropolitan areas, with 15% in intermediate cities between 50,000 – 500,000 inhabitants, and the rest in small cities of 10,000 – 50,000 dwellers (Ortuño 2022).

As we can see in Table 1, the MAS won the national election of 2020 with close to 55% of the vote. But the party underperformed in large and intermediate cities, especially the latter, where it obtained 17% fewer votes than its national average. On the other hand, the MAS clearly overperformed in small towns and rural communities, where Arce's vote share was around 9% and 25% above the national average. The opposite can be said of the performance of Mesa's CC, which clearly overperformed in intermediate cities, by 22% above its national average, and to a lesser extent in metropolises. The party obtained almost 8% less than its national share in small towns, and almost 17% less in rural

communities. Creemos overperformed strongly in metropolises, especially its solid victory in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, and interestingly in small cities, where not even the MAS managed to obtain more than its national average.

**Table 1: Share of the votes by political force and type of locality (2020)**

Party (Presidential candidate)	Bolivia	Metropolitan Area	Intermediate City	Small City	Small Town	Rural Community
MAS (Luis Arce)	54.7%	48.1%	37.2%	54.8%	63.7%	80.1%
CC (Carlos Mesa)	29.2%	31.4%	51.8%	25.9%	21.6%	11.7%
Creemos (L.F.Camacho)	14.1%	18.9%	8.2%	17.1%	12.7%	5.6%
Other	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%

Source: Ortuño (2022) based on data from the Bolivian Electoral Tribunal.

Sub-national elections in 2021 were freighted with the weight of the 2020 national elections, and of the political erosion that Bolivia has experienced since 2016. Against this background, there have been three departmental and municipal elections since approval of the 2009 Constitution. In all of these, the MAS experienced a reduction in its aggregate vote share compared to the previous national election, although it remained the largest political force and the only one present across the national territory. At department level, reductions were between 10 – 13%; in municipal elections, reductions varied between 21 – 25%. But it is worth noting that the MAS' aggregate vote share in municipal elections of 2021 was the lowest in the period under discussion, 33.1%, compared to around 39% in 2010 and 2015. More importantly, although the party won in 239 out of Bolivia's 336 municipalities (>71%), these represent only 39% of the population. Other forces such as Jallalla, which won in four municipalities including El Alto, administer the municipal affairs of fully 10% of Bolivia's population (ibid.).

Turning to departmental results (Table 2), the MAS lost the election for Governor in six of nine departments. In four of these cases, the party lost the second round after winning the first against divided local forces. According to Bolivian electoral law, if a party does not obtain more than 50% of the votes, or more than 40% with a 10% difference over the second-place party, the top two parties compete in a run-off. The MAS lost all 4 of its run-offs because anti-MAS voters converged behind the opposition.



**Table 2. Sub-national electoral results (Governors)**

Department	First round		Second round (run-off)	
	First place (% obtained)	Second place (% obtained)	First place (% obtained)	Second place (% obtained)
Beni	MTS (41,7%)	MAS (22.2%)	N/A	N/A
Cochabamba	MAS (57.4%)	Sumate (25,1%)	N/A	N/A
Chuquisaca	CST (45,6%)	MAS (39,12)	CST (57,3%)	MAS (42,7%)
La Paz	MAS (39,7%)	Jallalla (25,18%)	Jallalla (55,2%)	MAS (44.8%)
Oruro	MAS (46.3%)	BST (15.6%)	N/A	N/A
Pando	MAS (40.9%)	MTS (38.9%)	MTS (54.7%)	MAS (45.3%)
Potosi	MAS (44%)	PAN-B (22.3%)	N/A	N/A
Santa Cruz	Creemos (55.6%)	MAS (38.2%)	N/A	N/A
Tarija	MAS (38%)	UPT (38%)	UPT (54.4%)	MAS (45,6%)

Source: Authors' elaboration based on data from the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, Bolivia.

It is undeniable that the MAS suffered defeat at the aggregate departmental level, especially considering that the party won six of nine departments in 2015. But it is important to keep in mind that the MAS is either the first or second political force in all nine departments. Its main opposition party at the national level, CC, is completely irrelevant at this level. The third national force, Creemos, controls the departmental government of Bolivia's richest department, Santa Cruz, which elected Camacho as governor with 55% of the vote.

In sum, electoral cycles in 2020 and 2021 show that the urban-rural cleavage is still a key driver of Bolivia's political system. But for an accurate assessment of Bolivia's current politics, we must consider how old and new cleavages interact. Remember that the MAS continues to obtain strong support in urban popular sectors, especially in El Alto, which the party won with over two-thirds of the vote in 2020. But the MAS also lost El Alto in the municipal election of 2021, this time to a young dissident. This speaks of a generational cleavage in the Bolivian electorate, and also inside the MAS. Similar tensions led to similar defeats in the capitals of Beni and Pando, as well as in departmental elections in these two departments plus Chuquisaca – all lost to dissidents pre-selected by local grassroots but blocked by a party elite led by Morales. In all of these cases, a longstanding urban/rural cleavage has been intersected by a more recent generational one.

The rural/urban divide also explains the fragmentation experienced by Bolivia's national opposition, which was unable to perform consistently between national and sub-national elections in 2020 and 2021. Here, regional, generational, religious and ideological cleavages cut across these parties' electorates and internal structures. Between the 2016 referendum and the 2019 election, the political spectrum polarized between those who wanted the continuity of Morales vs. those who opposed it (Zegada 2020). There was much fragmentation amongst the latter, due in part to the variety of issues that digital platforms pushed. Some platforms were formed by young political activists, others by young and old environmentalists, or religious movements opposing abortion, feminists promoting it, etc. Opposition to Morales tended to be the only factor of convergence. Against that, other factors created accelerating centrifugal forces.

One such event was wild forest fires in the eastern Chiquitania region, which started in July 2019 and lasted three months. These were presented by opposition actors as detrimental for nature and indigenous peoples. The government was seen as hesitant and even indolent, as Morales dithered, defended a previous decree allowing "controlled fires", and refused to declare a state of disaster. Many environmental platforms converged with others opposing a re-election of Morales in support of Carlos Mesa's (CC) electoral bid (Zegada and Arequipa 2022). Most of the platforms that aligned

behind Oscar Ortiz, from the Santa Cruz-based party MDS, were mainly concerned with the re-election of Morales. Hence Mesa ended up with more support from young activists and a strong electoral performance, upon which he claimed to be the main victim of the alleged fraud of 2019. Many youth activists from these platforms then ran for Parliament in 2020 and were elected. Indeed since 2020, CC's parliamentary leaders have been two 32-year-old women, one a former member of a digital platform and the other a young internet entrepreneur.

### **The re-emergence of regionalism**

The year 2019 saw a resurgence of regionalism in Bolivia.<sup>11</sup> This was largely a top-down process led by political entrepreneurs activating a cleavage that had gone dormant. To better understand this process, begin with how this cleavage went to sleep.

The *Cruceño* movement of Santa Cruz, historically led by its Civic Committee – an umbrella organization of civil and business groups – succumbed to the MAS hegemony in 2008. This happened when some of its leaders were indicted for terrorism and trying to organize a separatist movement, whereupon the moderate wing secured a pact with the government. This included the constitutional reform of 2009, which increased departments' powers, status and autonomy, including elected governors, legislative assemblies, and far more resources, mostly from gas export revenues. A previous leader of Santa Cruz's Civic Committee, Ruben Costas, founded a political party (MDS) in 2010, and was elected Governor of Santa Cruz in 2010 and again in 2015. MDS allied with the centrist Unidad Nacional (UN) party led by industrialist Samuel Doria Medina, a force with relative strength in the highlands, for the 2014 national elections. Although they obtained less than 30% of the vote, they consolidated their position as the main opposition.

It seemed for a time that the regional cleavage between Santa Cruz and the central government had been absorbed by the party system and the regime of autonomies. The Santa Cruz Civic Committee, which relies crucially upon business and industry associations, grew weaker. This was in large part because of the latter's non-aggression pact with the Morales administration, which left business free to pursue profits in exchange for abstaining from political activism. Separating civic activism from business influence in policy was a way for the MAS to avoid the intersection of regional and class cleavages that had fueled serious conflicts during 2006-2009.

As pointed out by Wolff (2020a; 2020b), *Cruceño* economic elites were cautious and ultimately marginal in anti-Morales mobilizations between 2016-2019. When the Civic Committee called for demonstrations against Morales' re-election, business associations declined, saying they would not intervene in political affairs beyond their mandate. After release of the OAS report in November 2019, they called for peace and a new election. Only the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Santa Cruz (CAINCO) and its young, newly-elected leader, Fernando Hurtado,<sup>12</sup> called for Morales to resign.

But under the Añez administration, Santa Cruz' business sector moved to support her and gained direct access to policy-making, especially regarding liberalization of agro-industrial exports 'temporarily' capped by Morales. Under President Arce, the relation has tensed once more, as the export cap has been reinstated. Tensions were on display in bitter exchanges between Arce and Hurtado during the inauguration, in September 2021, of the Santa Cruz Trade Fair (Los Tiempos).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> By 'regionalism' we mean demands for regional autonomy, as distinct from regional electoral politics, in which parties such as *Demócratas* prospered.

<sup>12</sup> Fernando Hurtado was 37 years old during the crisis of 2019.

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.lostiempos.com/sites/default/files/edicion\\_online/edicion\\_18-09-2021.pdf](https://www.lostiempos.com/sites/default/files/edicion_online/edicion_18-09-2021.pdf)

Almost at the same time that CAINCO elected a 37-year-old President, the Civic Committee of Santa Cruz elected a 40-year-old Luis Fernando Camacho as its President. Although he comes from a family linked to business circles in Santa Cruz, Camacho was keen to re-politicize regionalism and to clash frontally with the Morales administration. The Chiquitania fires provided him with the means. The fact that the fires took place mainly in the department of Santa Cruz re-ignited regionalist sentiments, which overlapped with some of the platforms' environmental and indigenous rights concerns. This helped growing regionalist sentiments overflow the institutional limits set by the constitutional reforms of 2009. This was made possible, we argue, because a new generation of civic and business leaders managed to re-introduce regionalism and class jointly into Bolivian politics. Classic conflicts of class and regionalism were, in turn, intersected by a generational cleavage, which re-politicized regionalism via conflict between Santa Cruz and the MAS-led central government.

After 2009, it took the Civic Committee of Santa Cruz a decade to re-assert itself as the legitimate forum to articulate the demands of the region. This was made possible by popular outrage over the Chiquitania fires; led by Camacho, it crystallized three weeks before the 2019 election. Hundreds of thousands gathered again (Pagina Siete)<sup>14</sup> to endorse four key demands: i) respect for the results of the 2016 referendum (21F), ii) civil disobedience in the event of a potential fraud orchestrated by the MAS, iii) scrapping decrees that allowed for controlled fires for agricultural purposes, and – last but not least – iv) a demand to transform Bolivia into a federal country (El Pais)<sup>15</sup>.

Not even during the tensest confrontations between the civic movement and the Morales administration in 2006-2009 did the former venture to frame its decentralization demands under the banner of federalism. Instead, the demand was framed as a proposal that emulated the Spanish model. This is because 'federalism' is highly charged in Bolivian politics. Under the banner of federalism, La Paz started a civil war in 1899 against the central government based in Sucre. La Paz triumphed, but the country did not become federal; instead, La Paz took the executive and legislative branches away from Sucre. Since then, federalism has been associated with regionalism, and even separatism.

Camacho asked the multitude present at a public assembly in 2019, "Are you willing to declare the 4<sup>th</sup> of October as the starting point to fight for our federalist dreams under the principles of equality, unity, and love of Santa Cruz and Bolivia?" (Pagina Siete)<sup>16</sup> After a strong positive response from the crowd and chants of "*Federalismo! Federalismo!*" Camacho promised that the Committee would start working on a proposal. In sum, under a new, young leader, the Civic Committee re-emerged as the main vehicle of the demands of Santa Cruz, re-politicizing the regional cleavage under the banner of federalism. To avoid criticisms of parochialism and excessive regionalism, it engaged with broader issues like demands to defend the democratic process by respecting the results of the 21F referendum, and to be alert about a potential fraud orchestrated by the MAS. But its main objective was *federalismo*.

The fact that the Civic Committee of Potosi (COMCIPO), at the other end of the country, had raised the federalist banner first, in 2016, made it far easier for Camacho to avoid accusations of separatism and argue that he was fighting for a broader cause. COMCIPO proposed federalism after clashing with the central government over regional demands, such as the construction of an international airport.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.paginasiete.bo/nacional/2019/10/4/santa-cruz-levanta-la-bandera-del-federalismo-da-ultimatum-evo-233213.html>

<sup>15</sup> [https://elpais.bo/nacional/20191005\\_cabildo-cruceno-clamo-por-la-chiquitania-y-democracia.html](https://elpais.bo/nacional/20191005_cabildo-cruceno-clamo-por-la-chiquitania-y-democracia.html)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.paginasiete.bo/nacional/2019/10/4/santa-cruz-levanta-la-bandera-del-federalismo-da-ultimatum-evo-233213.html>

When these demands were first ignored, and then ridiculed, by Morales, COMCIPO escalated, joining the 21F mobilizations.

A demand that galvanized support for COMCIPO during 2019, was its rejection of a proposed contract between Bolivia and a German consortium to exploit Bolivia's huge lithium reserves (Torres 2020). It also demanded more mining royalties for Potosi, similar to Santa Cruz' gas and oil royalties, and denounced fraud in the 2019 elections. COMCIPO'S leader, Marco Pumari – 38 years old in 2019 and of indigenous background – joined Camacho during 21 days of protests against Morales. Both leaders reached La Paz the day of his resignation, and were warmly received by a large public. When Camacho founded Creemos, he convinced Pumari to run as his candidate for the Vice-Presidency in 2020; the pair obtained 14% of the national vote. After the MAS took power in 2020, Camacho and Pumari were indicted for taking part in a coup d'état in 2019. Pumari was arrested in December 2021 for allegedly inciting his supporters to burn electoral materials after the 2021 election (Correo del Sur)<sup>17</sup>. The Arce administration seems to be more hesitant regarding a potential detention of Camacho, since he is now the Governor of Santa Cruz and commands much regional support.

### **Class**

Class is a deep divide in Bolivian society which was also largely dormant in the 2000s, but has recently become relevant again through its interactions with other cleavages. Class divides have played out throughout the entire period of political erosion, not only in the eastern lowlands but also in the highlands. During protests against Morales in November 2019, there was an unprecedented mobilization of middle and upper classes, of course in urban centers such as Santa Cruz, but also in all of Bolivia's major cities, including El Alto. As the police seemed to retreat from the streets, popular sectors of the peripheries of cities like La Paz and Cochabamba clashed violently with groups of organized neighbors, often led by young males using fireworks, makeshift shields, and even homemade bazookas (GIEI 2021). In Cochabamba, these groups evolved into a highly coordinated organization of thousands of young bikers, who confronted peasants and miners supporting the MAS days before the fall of Morales. The GIEI report has named some of these groups as violent para-state organizations, and exhorted the government to dismantle them. During the government of Añez, young MAS sympathizers protesting against the suspension of the national election, due to the pandemic, displayed similar tactics of mobilization via motorcycles, carrying rudimentary weapons (Los Tiempos)<sup>18</sup>, and sometimes real firearms (Pagina Siete)<sup>19</sup>.

Confrontations between civilians around economic issues re-emerged during September and October of 2021. The Civic Committee of Santa Cruz, allied with sectors related to the informal economy, managed to successfully block approval of a bill aimed at tackling illicit profits. Mobilized sectors claimed the law would infringe on civil liberties and give the Executive excessive powers to investigate and confiscate families' and businesses' sources of income. Opposition leaders saw it as an open window for political prosecutions. After a defiant Arce claimed that the MAS would defend itself in the streets, opposition sectors organized roadblocks, and popular sectors aligned to the MAS mobilized to confront them and break the roadblocks. These sectors clashed on many occasions as

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<sup>17</sup> [https://correodelsur.com/seguridad/20211210\\_informan-que-marco-antonio-pumari-fue-detenido-en-potosi.html](https://correodelsur.com/seguridad/20211210_informan-que-marco-antonio-pumari-fue-detenido-en-potosi.html)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.lostiempos.com/actualidad/pais/20200812/proliferan-grupos-irregulares-se-exponen-30-anos-carcel>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.paginasiete.bo/seguridad/2021/11/8/grupos-armados-vinculados-al-mas-aparecen-espordicamente-desde-2019-314534.html>

the police retreated or gave coveted support to MAS sympathizers. In the end, Arce withdrew the bill to avoid escalating the conflict.

In the recent elections of 2020 and 2021, class divisions have become evident. Ortuño (2022) shows, for example, that the combined votes of CC and Creemos greatly exceeded that of the MAS in the better-off districts of central La Paz, its residential South zone, and even in wealthy pockets of El Alto around *Ciudad Satelite*. The opposite is the case in popular districts on the outskirts of both cities, where we see overwhelming victories for the MAS. A similar trend was observed in Cochabamba, with the center and wealthy Northern districts dominated by Mesa and Camacho, while the outskirts and popular Southern districts show increasing support for the MAS. In Santa Cruz, the wealthier center and north were dominated by Camacho, the middle-class outer rings of the city show important pockets of support for Mesa, and only in semi-rural districts did the MAS register voting levels around 35%, including some victories with more than 50% of the vote.

These patterns repeated during the Municipal elections of 2021, and explain the defeat of the MAS in La Paz, Cochabamba and the city of Santa Cruz. In La Paz, the MAS lost to Ivan Arias, former Minister under Jeannine Añez. In Cochabamba, the MAS lost to a longstanding rival, former Prefect and presidential candidate Manfred Reyes Villa. In Santa Cruz, industrialist Johnny Fernandez won a highly disputed election against journalist Gary Añez running for CC. Although the class cleavage is crosscutting in Bolivian society, we have seen that its politicization tends to re-emerge when intersected with regional, urban/rural, ethnic and recently generational cleavages. However, it seems that the more issues intersect at one point, the more intense conflict becomes.

### **The politicization of religion**

Religion is a long-latent factor in Bolivian politics, only recently activated in a classic case of politicians exploiting the opportunities thrown up when two key cleavages intersect.

During 21 days of protest following the failed election of October 2019, the Santa Cruz Civic Committee called for new public assemblies. Apart from re-igniting regionalism, Camacho and the civic movement started to tap into an issue that was not politically divisive in Bolivia's modern democratic history: religion. The politicization of religion started in 2017, during debates surrounding a new criminal code proposed by the Morales' administration. The debate focused on new grounds for the legitimate termination of a pregnancy. Protests opposing these proposals erupted, first led by the National Christian Alliance (evangelical), and then seconded by the Catholic Church in La Paz. Evangelical churches in Santa Cruz were able to mobilize 200,000 people; thousands marched at similar events in La Paz and other major cities (Paz Gonzales 2020). In the end, the Morales administration withdrew the proposed legislation in 2018. These events did not go unnoticed by political entrepreneurs.

For the 2019 election, the UCS ran – unsuccessfully – a religious, conservative, anti-LGBT and anti-gender-ideology campaign led by former Vice President and respected indigenous leader, Victor Hugo Cardenas. The Christian Democratic Party (CDP) put forward Chi Hyun Chung, a Presbyterian priest, for the presidency. Although the results were contested, Chi is thought to have come in third with close to 9% of the votes. Chi ran an openly anti-LGBT and anti-gender-theory campaign: *to put God at the head of Bolivia*, and obtained support across classes, regions and ethnicities. When election results were contested, the Christian Alliance and various evangelical churches joined protests against the alleged fraud, organizing praying journeys as a sign of peaceful civil disobedience, and demanding the resignation of Morales.

Camacho also began tapping into religious symbolism during the public assemblies he organized after the failed election. On October 31, he cited presidential phrases that showed Morales' alleged anti-Christian leanings. Camacho ended the gathering by asking the crowd to fall to their knees and pray *Our Father*. A new assembly on November 2<sup>nd</sup> featured a four-meter-tall crucifix behind the platform from which Camacho addressed the crowd, beside a figure of the Virgin Mary (Paz Gonzales 2020). Camacho gave Morales 48 hours to resign and told the crowd that he would travel to La Paz with a resignation letter to be signed by Morales. He told the multitude that God would bring him back to Santa Cruz safe, and with Morales' resignation letter signed (Zegada 2020). This background helps explain the massive bible that Jeannine Añez showed dozens of supporters gathered outside the presidential palace on the night she was sworn in.

For the 2020 election, a revitalized and re-Christianized CDP allied with UCS to form *Creemos* ("We believe"), giving Camacho a legal platform to run for President and win the governorship of Santa Cruz. Although *Creemos'* main proposal is federalism and the modernization of some democratic institutions, such as prohibiting re-election, it has used religion to mobilize supporters, with slogans such as: *Trust in God and not in your own intelligence* (Zegada 2020). After the electoral results of 2020 and 2021, Camacho has relied less on religious appeals. But it is highly likely that he or another candidate will run an at least partially religious campaign in future Bolivian elections.

It is worth noting that after Arce's victory in the 2020 election, hundreds gathered in front of military bases in Santa Cruz and Cochabamba, praying and asking the military to overthrow the government with slogans such as: *Pray for Bolivia and for a government fearful of God*. Our point here is a basic one: religion, hitherto irrelevant in Bolivia's modern socio-political arena, has become an important issue framing the relationship between government and opposition, and between citizens and the state. It is not salient as an issue in itself, as we see in the way Camacho constructed his leadership, but can become potent when activated alongside regionalism. Indeed, as urban-based parties like the CDP and UCS rely more and more on Christian imagery, the religious dimension can interact with the regional to create anti-indigenous ideas that undermines the 'cosmopolitan' pole of Bolivia's post-2005 major political axis. This points to the dangerous possibility of an overtly racial politics of white vs. brown in Bolivia that is defined by exclusive identities, zero-sum games, and further increasing political tensions (Faguet 2018).

## **V. Conclusion**

Within Bolivia, perhaps the most common explanation for the demise of its political party system is ideological fudging. The argument holds that the '*democracia pactada*' system, which dominated the period between 1952-2002, collapsed in part because the pacts it repeatedly made cut across what was supposed to be its main left-right divide. While acknowledging the descriptive truth of this account, we do not consider it a counter-argument, but rather supporting evidence for the argument we make here. Why could those parties so readily trade away what were supposed to be core ideological principles? Because these 'principles' were artifices unconnected to the underlying society those parties were supposed to represent. Had that not been the case, the new system that rose up to replace them would also have arrayed along a left-right spectrum. But it did not. It organized itself along a completely different axis of competition, and consisted of parties and movements with significantly different structural characteristics to those that came before.

We argue, instead, that the collapse of Bolivia's political party system in 2002-2005 saw the replacement of a conventional left-right axis of competition, which was deeply unsuited to Bolivian society, with an ethnic/rural vs. cosmopolitan/urban axis much more closely aligned with its major social cleavage. In this new politics, the MAS was the predominant party, trailed in distant second

place by a changing series of parties that tried but failed to marshal the forces of opposition into a coherent, stable movement.

Our analytical framework of political cleavages helps explain this outcome. The MAS endured because the coalition it forged was located at the intersection of Bolivia's most salient social cleavages: ethnicity, urban-rural, and to a lesser extent the regional divide. The opposition, by contrast, stuck with a class-based discourse of the old politics, sprinkled with regionalism. Regarding Bolivia's primary, ethnic cleavage, some elements of the opposition refused to engage with it, while others did so in a traditionally right-wing, Eurocentric way that denigrated indigenous culture.<sup>20</sup> Some opposition leaders uttered ethnic slurs from time to time, but unlike the MAS most of the opposition showed little substantive engagement with ethnicity as a deep social signifier or organizing principle of politics. Indeed, the cosmopolitan politics many of them espoused if anything denied the salience of ethnicity in favor of the 'urban, self-defined man', the better to capture the votes of the large and growing group of highland migrants to Santa Cruz and other lowland cities. Both approaches limited their electoral appeal in a country with Bolivia's ethnic makeup. Both strategies were rewarded with failure in election after election from 2005 onwards.

But Bolivia's cleavages did not stand still. The electoral cycle of 2020-2021 shows that after 2016, ethnicity, urban-rural, and regionalism have interacted with emerging divides driven by deep-seated generational and technological changes. These include a growing consciousness about environmental issues, the definition of democracy, and – least predictably – religion. The growing complexity of these changes poses a challenge to the Bolivian political system. If the current party system – including the MAS – fails to absorb them, Bolivia could experience a dangerous process of fragmentation and political erosion.

The Bolivian case highlights the importance of looking beyond elections, electoral rules and political parties, to the deep historical cleavages that define society. The MAS is a consequence of Bolivia's cleavages, but is not immune to changes in those cleavages. Its failure to adapt to cleavage shifts largely explains its recent decline; if continued, this could have severe consequences for itself and, perhaps, for Bolivia. Cleavage analysis emerged to explain European politics, but it is even more important for countries with short democratic traditions and low levels of institutionalization.

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<sup>20</sup> The latter approach was in full view during Añez' Bible-laden inauguration in the *Palacio Quemado*.

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