

A Divided MAS Roils Bolivia

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It is undeniable that Luis Arce, the President of Bolivia, is no longer responding to the demands of his ex-boss, former President Evo Morales. Confrontations between the two men appear to be turning into what in Bolivia we call a *ch'ampa* war.

In Bolivian history, most of what are called *ch'ampa* wars are disputes that escalate into confrontations between powerful men, but that involve different segments of the civilian population, usually in a violent manner.

This most recent conflict does not seem to be the exception.

The struggle for control of the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) and the presidential candidacy in 2025 is taking place in a country ravaged by fires, droughts, and as economic crisis looms large.

Since Arce was elected president in 2020, conflicts within MAS assemblies have been escalating. Two years ago, these conflicts escalated into fights with chairs and a stabbing.

As the finger-pointing grew, each side accused the other of covering up for drug traffickers. Arce's supporters even blamed Morales for creating the conditions that led to his resignation in 2019 so that he could go on to play the victim and install the "*coup d'état*" narrative.

For his part, Morales accused Arce's son of corruption, alleging he is benefiting from negotiations connected to lithium. The pro-*Evista* bench, with the support of the rightwing opposition in congress, censured Eduardo del Castillo, the most influential minister in the Arce administration. Arce went on to reinstate del Castillo, overriding the decision of the legislature.

Morales enjoys strong support from the six coca growers' federations in the Chapare, but appears to be losing the support of social organizations in different regions of the country. To counteract this tendency, and in an effort maintain his control over the party, Morales supporters within the MAS organized a meeting in the Chapare region of Cochabamba without the participation of the *Arcista*

wing.

Those present at the Chapare congress, which was managed and overseen by the coca growers' federations, named Morales the 2025 presidential candidate. Then, Luis Arce, his vice president David Choquehuanca and those from the "renewal" wing—as those who support the current president call themselves—were expelled from the party.

In response, Arce's faction organized a massive rally in the city of El Alto as a way to demonstrate their political muscle. This event had the support of the most important rural organizations in the country, including the Union Confederation of Bolivian Peasant Workers, the Bartolina Sisa Peasant Women's organization, and the Bolivian Workers' Central.

For several years now, the leadership of these organizations have been responding primarily to clientelist logics stemming from their relationships with the government.

In order to stop this demonstration, pro-Morales sectors in the Chapare attacked the buses in which Arce's supporters were traveling to the city of El Alto. More than 20 were wounded in the confrontation. This dispute is in full swing, and both sides are using every possible situation to swipe at their opponent.

Evo Morales remains the "owner" of the Movement Towards Socialism, and has the support of sectors such as the coca growers, who have a great deal of capacity to mobilize as well as economic resources. But Arce has control of the state apparatus, which is hardly a trivial amount of power.

This week, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal annulled the congress in the Chapare organized by Morales. The climate of tension is continuing to rise.

A few years ago, Bolivians watched as Morales' face was systematically replaced by Arce's on billboards and government propaganda. Today we can see that the violence stemming from this ch'ampa guerra has only just begun.

Succession gone wrong

After the political crisis that resulted in the fall of Morales in 2019, the MAS had to choose a new candidate for the October 2020 elections. Morales was not an option, not only because of a constitutional restriction, but also because he was in exile.

Despite the fact that an important faction of the MAS rank and file threw their support behind former foreign minister Choquehuanca, Morales and his inner circle—who legally control the party—opted to choose their favorite, and designated Arce as the official MAS candidate. Arce was the only minister who served Morales' government (2006-2019) faithfully and without complaint. He seemed to be the most desirable option in order for Morales' faction to maintain absolute control over the party.

Choquehuanca, on the other hand, had shown signs of insubordination as chancellor (2006-2017), during which time he gave voice to discontent within the party and demonstrated personal ambitions that concerned the MAS leadership. In 2017 he was banished to Caracas, where he served as Secretary General of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA). Despite this, and due to his own political weight, in 2020 Choquehuanca was named Arce's second in command.

In the context of the "transitional" administration of Jeanine Añez, which was explicitly repressive and right-wing, Arce ended up winning the October 18, 2020 elections with 55.1 percent of the votes.

While it was initially expected Arce would also oversee a transitional government that would open the door for Morales to return to the presidency, the plans of the old guard of the MAS did not pan out as expected. Instead, it became clear that Arce wanted—and wants—to run for president again in 2025.

The distance between Arce and Morales is not about political differences, and does little to alter the continuity of MAS governance. Rather, the conflict is about the desires of two men, their egos, the control of the party, and the question of the next presidential candidate. It is a dispute between strongmen, not a debate about the political project.

The future of the MAS

The Movement Towards Socialism emerged as a political force in the context of social struggles against neoliberalism that took place in Bolivia between 2000 and 2005. These struggles had their roots in neighbourhood councils, peasant and Indigenous communities and in different communal and autonomous ways of organizing life. The MAS was able to take advantage of the strength of the uprising and capitalize in one specific field of struggle: electoral politics.

From the outset, the MAS was built on a broad popular base of articulated social organizations with the capacity to influence the party's agenda and the nomination of candidates, especially for local and regional positions. The party structure, however, was always vertical. It centered on the leadership of Morales and was controlled in large part by organized coca growers.

When the MAS took power in January of 2006, it was under intense pressure from social organizations, which had their own demands for transformation of the state. Measures such as the call for a Constituent Assembly or the adoption of the Agrarian Reform Law were implemented because of popular pressure, as in some cases MAS was reluctant and worked to limit the scope of these measures.

Since 2010, the MAS party structure has become comfortably ensconced in power.

Beyond its revolutionary leftist discourse, MAS politicians forged alliances with the new and old ruling classes of the country and with transnational capital, giving continuity to an economic model based on extractivism. It employed a variety of mechanisms to subordinate and co-opt the leaders of the main social organizations in the country. At the same time, as high ranking party members became increasingly concerned with staying in power, the authoritarian drift of the party became more pronounced.

The disregard of the 2016 referendum, in which Bolivians voted against the indefinite reelection of Morales, created an impasse and gave rise to a highly polarized political scenario. On the one hand, the right wing organized around a utilitarian discourse of “democracy” and gained some popular support. On the other, the MAS showed it was willing to do anything to stay in power.

The political crisis and the wave of violence that broke out after the failed presidential elections in October 2019 was the outcome of this process of political deterioration.

A struggle for power

Given everything else going on in Bolivia, the dispute between MAS strongmen should, in reality, be of little relevance to the public. This is not only because Arce and Morales both represent the continuity of a political and economic regime based on extractivism, but also because there are other, much more urgent problems in the country.

Their confrontation has acquired an unusual relevance because both appear willing to achieve their goals by any means necessary. The Arcista wing, which controls state institutions, has been deploying a variety of strategies to obtain the support of social organizations that have the capacity for large scale mobilization, and which were previously loyal to Morales.

One example of this is the support given to Arce by the members of mining cooperatives, especially those active in gold mining. In exchange, the Bolivian government has been granting gold mining rights in national protected areas. Not only does this generate serious environmental consequences, but gold mining is virtually tax exempt, so it does not even benefit the country economically.

Another example has to do with the “burning laws”, which form the legal basis for major fires that have filled the country with fires and smoke. These regulations were promoted by the Morales government, and Arce’s government has continued to extend them as a bargaining chip with agribusiness and with some factions of the so-called *interculturals*. The interculturals are groups of colonizing peasants—both coca growers and small farmers from other regions of the country—whose economic activities are related to the expansion of the agricultural frontier, in many cases in Indigenous territories and protected areas.

All of this has turned Bolivia into the country with the highest per capita loss of primary forest in the world.

As if that wasn’t enough, in his quest to gain legitimacy, Arce’s government continues to maintain a fictitious “economic stability” based on spending Bolivia’s international reserves, which are close to running out. It is also irresponsibly increasing public debt, which has now reached 80 percent of the value of the national gross domestic product.

In March the country had already shown the first signs of this crisis, which the government has so far managed to contain by selling a large part of the gold in the international reserves. This situation is becoming increasingly unsustainable, and its eventual denouement will impact popular sectors of Bolivian society.

It is important to bear in mind that the dispute within the MAS does not respond to the needs or demands of the population. It is not anchored in class contradictions, nor does it have to do with expanding social justice. This confrontation is one more turn of the screw in the polarizing dynamic that has been setting the tone of official Bolivian politics for some years now. It’s yet another ch’ampa war.

The key challenge today has nothing to do with figuring out which of these two men will emerge victorious from their brawl. Rather, it is to minimize the impacts that this conflict—and the decomposition of the MAS— will have on the rest of the Bolivian population.

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