

A Who's Who of Bolivia's Tumultuous Elections

written by Stasiek Czaplicki Cabezas | August 9, 2025



The official inflation rate in Bolivia—which is a “modest” 18.5 percent year-over-year—increasingly resembles the contrived script of a grotesque political soap opera. The number is scandalous not because of what it reveals, but because of what it tries to hide. Like a bad daytime TV actor, it performs without conviction.

In reality, inflation in Bolivia is much higher than the official rate. Bolivians feel this in the price of the imported products—including medicine—that are still available; in the drastic reduction in the availability of public transportation and in food prices, which rise weekly. Some items, including basic foodstuffs like rice, now cost twice as much as they did a year ago.

Gas stations have become altars in our national drama: everyone competes for the last dregs of subsidized diesel, including the agro-industrialists and mining company workers, who devour subsidies. Like any good catastrophe, the crisis presents “opportunities:” developers clear land as a new refuge for capital, creating a promise of profits for the fortunate few who benefit from dispossession.

Those who live on Bolivia's minimum wage—which increased 10 percent this year—are barely surviving. The 85 percent of Bolivians who work in the informal economy don't even have that statistical consolation.

Meanwhile, the market for the parallel dollar—a street oracle—has taken control of the economic narrative. It goes up and down like a fever: from the official 6.9 Bolivianos per dollar to the street rates: today at 16, tomorrow 20, later, who knows?

The truth is that the Boliviano has lost nearly 60 percent of its value since March 2023. That translates into a brutal hike in the cost of living, insufficient incomes, savings going up in smoke, and other, apparently non-economic consequences like a rising rate of high school dropouts.

Campaigns and crisis

Amid this collapse, in which President Luis Arce Catacora has distinguished himself only for his ineptitude, and in which Vice President David Choquehuanca seems to inhabit an alternate cosmic-pachamama-infused reality, Bolivia is in campaign mode. This is not just any election campaign: it features low-budget TikTok videos, recycled soap opera actors—almost all of them from the 1990s—and a political narrative that offers no redemption but promises dire consequences.

The familiar neoliberal script has returned: slash the state, deregulate the market, assume massive debt and hope that lithium, soy, and gold will do the dirty work.

In its death throes, the “left-wing” Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) survives only in hollow speeches. We are told over and over, almost as dogma, that shock therapy is the only way forward and that the reins on savage extractive capitalism must be loosened even further, as if we were not already far enough adrift. All of this is once again presented as inevitable.

Bolivians find ourselves in a fiercely contested and fragmented electoral contest, with a wide array of pro-government and opposition candidates. Like many other regions of the world, voters are inspired primarily to act against one side or candidate, rather than in favor of an idea or political project. The first round of elections will occur on August 17. If our general confusion translates into the national vote, and everything suggests that it will, we will return to the polls for a second round on Oct. 19, 2025.

Let’s take a look at the cast of this presidential tragicomedy, from the most pro-government presidential candidate to the most oppositional.

Eduardo Del Castillo

Del Castillo was Minister of Government. Now he is at the top of the MAS ticket. He is a technocrat of repression, a mini-leftist Bukele, and a puppet of the Arce Catacora camp with no charisma whatsoever.

Del Castillo is the nemesis of Evo Morales, whom he essentially accuses of being a drug trafficker. He promises no change in course or fundamental renewal: his candidacy is the sterile extension of a failed project, where governance is confused with the inertia of power. However, even as a “socialist” candidate, Del Castillo proposes substantial cuts to the state’s budget, which he euphemistically calls “optimization.”

With no project and no soul, his candidacy is irrelevant, sustained only by the institutional machinery that pushes him forward.

Andrónico Rodríguez

Evo Morales’ favorite son, Rodríguez, is now on the verge of becoming Brutus—that is to say, of betraying his father.

Young, handsome, and discreetly silent, Rodríguez is president of the Senate, and he’s made a career out of one unique virtue: no one hates him. He is a virtuoso in the art of never getting his hands dirty.

Rodríguez presents himself as the MAS “renewal” candidate, although his proposals fluctuate between continuity and modest symbolic ruptures. He has suggested cutting back the state and seeks to appeal to the business sectors and informal mining cooperatives that support him.

His team seems to have come out of a local crime thriller: there are links to drug traffickers, allegations of sexual harassment, and public defense of femicides. Hardcore supporters of the now moribund MAS support Rodríguez, which has allowed him to secure the highest polling numbers among the candidates to date.

Eva Copa

Copa is the mayor of El Alto, the country's second-largest and poorest city.

A former MAS senator, Copa is now running with her own party, MORENA, but she has no proposals on the table. Her candidacy seems more like an attempt to gain visibility than to help Bolivia move forward.

Jorge Richter, a former spokesperson for Arce Catacora, joins her on the ticket. He is infamous for changing allegiances as often as he changes his jacket: he was formerly the spokesperson for Manfred Reyes Villa but now hopes to reinvent himself as a centrist operator and as Copa's vice presidential candidate.

Samuel Doria Medina

A longtime businessman and center-right candidate, Doria Medina opposes the MAS. His total—truly total—lack of charisma plays against his multimillion-dollar family fortune, which he uses to attract allies and build teams of technicians.

A minister in the 1990s, Doria Medina is an ally of the agro-industrial right in Santa Cruz and the old mining industry. An admirer of Bukele and a friend of thrice-failed Peruvian presidential candidate Keiko Fujimori, he would sell his soul to the devil to sit in the president's chair.

Doria Medina's platform combines stale technocracy with empty promises to resolve the crisis in 100 days and to reorganize the Bolivian economy so that it resembles the agro-industrial, elite-controlled department of Santa Cruz. He commands the largest share of the fragmented opposition vote.

Manfred Reyes Villa

Reyes Villa is the four-term mayor of Cochabamba and a former military officer, who was "exiled" from the MAS due to corruption cases. His father was Interior Minister during one of the country's bloodiest dictatorships, and he has a history of vociferous misogyny and loyalties to far-right presidents of the 1990s.

Today Reyes Villa promises to rule with an "iron fist" and suggests he can perform miracles, such as sell gasoline without subsidies at a lower price than it costs on the international market. Even so, he's attracted part of the traditional right, especially in his stronghold of Cochabamba.

Jorge 'Tuto' Quiroga

Quiroga, with his educated demeanor and republican nostalgia, represents the far right. In the 1990s, he served as vice president under Hugo Banzer, the little-man general whose hands were stained by dictatorship. Today, Quiroga presents himself as a modern statesman, although he lives off a state pension provided to him by the regime that he helped sustain.

He proposes taking a massive loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), blowing up what's left of the state, and "individualizing" Indigenous and peasant communal lands and handing them over to the market, where they can be sold.

Quiroga is an ally of the far right in Santa Cruz, and his recipe for eastern Bolivia is straightforward: "Make it Paraguay." This is code for more deforestation, more concentration of wealth and more inequality.

Quiroga presents all this in the language of digital modernity, even though he seems to forget that the technological divide excludes half of Bolivia—especially in rural areas—from the future he promises. He is Samuel Doria Medina's main competition for the opposition vote.

The Uninvited Guests

There are several other candidates, but most are not seriously in the running, mainly because there is no political party willing to rent them their name (parties sell their political initials to the highest bidder).

Among the uninvited guests is Jaime Dunn, a former Wall Street financial analyst, who presents himself as a sanitized Milei: a libertarian in a suit who exudes subdued rage and promises efficiency. There's also Chi Hyun Chung, an evangelical pastor of Korean origin, who is proudly misogynistic and punitive, and who says he wants to "put Bolivia to work" with the Bible in one hand and a whip in the other. In 2019, he won a disturbing nine percent of the vote.

But no figure weighs more heavily on this election than Evo Morales. Once the MAS' historic leader, he became the declared enemy of his successor, Arce Catacora. He's transitioned from being a romanticized caudillo to a political threat.

A decision by the Constitutional Court forced Morales out of the race. He promises to retaliate by getting his supporters to set up road blockades across the country, even if doing so fuels violence and results in deaths among his allies and police. Self-exiled in Chapare, he rants compulsively on loyal radio stations, denouncing conspiracies with a quasi-religious fervor. Each appearance leaves Morales more isolated, closer to caricature than myth. He is wanted on charges of pedophilia: a public truth that no one denies anymore.

Marcelo Claure is another key figure in this election. Claure is a Bolivian tycoon, who cannot run for office due to a lack of residency in the country, but who, from the United States, promises—like so many before him—to do everything he can to dislodge "socialism" from power.

Claure announced that he will sponsor the opposition and has already financed a forum at Harvard with leading presidential candidates, representatives of the economic elite and well-groomed influencers. The goal was to consolidate the idea that only shock therapy will save Bolivia from becoming "the next Venezuela."

At Harvard, absurdity became doctrine, especially for those elites who are still ashamed of the country that birthed them and who continue to plunder it. Although Claure dresses like Steve Jobs, he is more like Elon Musk: obsessed with lithium, enamored with easy solutions and a fervent admirer of Milei and Trump.

His unofficial slogan—"Make Bolivia Great Again"—raises a disturbing question. When does he think Bolivia was great? Was it during the hyperinflation of the 1980s? Or was it before during the golden age of enlightened plundering?

Voting for collapse

The real drama of this election is not about who wins, but rather the fact that no one is proposing a plan to prevent the collapse. We are only allowed to choose how it happens: an orderly collapse, a quick collapse, a privatized collapse, or a collapse in the name of sovereignty. But there will be a collapse nonetheless.

There is no discussion of national projects or reflection on deeper issues, such as plurinationality or

the meaning of the state. Public debate seems to have been reduced to a menu of immediate “bailouts,” as if everything will fall into place once the crisis is averted.

The candidates talk about the administration of ruins, while hoping against hope for miracles.

Of course, in this vacuum, what does find fertile ground is the articulation of agendas tailored to the tastes of the economic power groups that are already discreetly lining up behind the candidate of the moment. If the future doesn’t matter, the present is all business.

Do we want to get ourselves into debt with the IMF up to our necks? Or would we rather give away our resources to China and Russia in exchange for half-built factories? Do we want subsidies without a planned budget or a free market without a safety net? More land cleared? Or to hold out for the discovery of increasingly elusive gas?

These questions are absurd. But today, in Bolivia, it seems they are the only ones left on the table.

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