Bolivia’s Elections

written by Bret Gustafson | January 14, 2021



Bolivia has given the world an impressive lesson in democracy, but reactionary sectors of the country are once again revealing their anti-democratic impulse. On October 18, 2020, the country went to the polls for the second time in a year. Despite the pandemic and intense polarization, they delivered 55 percent of the vote to Luís Arce, the candidate of the left-leaning MAS (Movement to Socialism) party. That would not be so remarkable, given that the MAS party had overseen 14 years of economic growth. But in the wake of the turmoil that followed the 2019 elections—a process that saw massive protests of fraud and, in the end, a military-backed ouster of then President Evo Morales—many thought that the time of the MAS had come to an end. They were wrong.

Evo Morales, despite his critics, had managed 14 years of economic stability and prosperity. He did so through a pragmatic rapprochement with capital—especially the natural gas industry and domestic business interests, in particular the agro-industrial elites. Frugal management of foreign reserves earned from gas exports and a generous dose of public spending had allowed for a bank full of dollars, a stable exchange rate, economic growth, and poverty reduction. To be sure, corruption cases were common, as they have long been in Bolivia. Critics also pointed to Evo’s contradictions. He spoke of Mother Earth while pushing for more mining and gas drilling. He touted Indigenous revitalization while running roughshod over Indigenous organizations opposed to certain state development projects. And he embodied a hyper-masculine mode of politics amidst a rising crisis of violence against women and refusals to move forward on issues of abortion rights and sexual equality. Evo and the MAS had managed to maintain hegemony by offering concessions to agro-industry as well, putting the brakes on land reform and limiting Indigenous autonomy projects to a handful of municipal restructurings. Yet all of this was countered by relative economic well-being and a deep layer of grassroots support, strong in all parts of the country.

There was, as well, widespread discontent. This was to be expected from sectors of the far right, strongest in the eastern Bolivian city of Santa Cruz. Even though banking, construction, and big ag had done well over 14 years, the end of the gas boom was near and agro-industry, in particular, was looking at serious challenges. They want more genetically modified seeds, more land, more tax breaks, more subsidies (in the form of cheap fuel and state loans), and more protection from peasant organizing. Already shaped by deep racism against Andean peoples, their opposition to Evo Morales—despite the overtures to their elites—was intense. Even before the October 2019 vote, this opposition had declared its intent, with echoes of Trump, to declare fraud if Evo was elected.

In the more moderate sectors of the urban middle classes, and even among many in the Bolivian left, there was also exhaustion with Evo Morales. Morales had deepened the country’s dependence on natural resource extraction and used those revenues to expand a patronage-based political system that was increasingly seen as decadent and degraded. Despite much ideological enthusiasm in the

early years of the MAS (an enthusiasm still voiced by many leftists who live outside of Bolivia), it was increasingly clear to many that there was very little left of the revolutionary core of the MAS project. The concessions to big business and, of late, a series of legal measures that approved new GMO seeds and incentivized clearing of new agrarian lands in the east suggested that Evo was as much in support of big capital as of any revolutionary agenda. And finally, Evo's maneuvers to change the constitution and allow himself a third term rubbed many the wrong way, reminding Bolivians of their intense distrust of dictators and those who want to perpetuate themselves in office. Many of these moderates also opposed Evo's candidacy and were deeply suspicious of the electoral process itself.

The events that followed the 2019 vote are still being debated. Some say there was fraud and no coup. Others (including myself) say that evidence for widespread fraud is thin, while the appearance of a coup is practically undeniable. At any rate, with thousands of people in the streets and the military suggesting he step down, Morales left the country. What followed was a year-long interim government characterized by corruption, brutality, and incompetence in the face of COVID-19. Perhaps for these reasons, much of Bolivia apparently changed their minds when they went back to the polls a year later and sent the MAS back into office with a near historic turn out and an overwhelming majority for Luís Arce.

What happens next is the main challenge. The new president and vice president reflect the power of the MAS to build coalitions but also hint at its internal schisms and contradictions. Arce, an economist who does not self-identify as Indigenous, is associated with the technocratic side of the MAS coalition. David Choquehuanca, the vice president, is Aymara and is highly respected as a leading intellectual of Indigenous thought, including its critiques of rampant extractivism and Western-style patriarchy and power. At their inauguration ceremony on November 8, Arce's speech was focused on economic recovery. Choquehuanca's included an admonition (not so veiled) against continued abuse of power, the politicization of justice, and colonialist patriarchy. This does not suggest any deep division, as Arce has also embraced indigeneity and its key symbols, and Choquehuanca, clearly on the left, said that "power, like the economy, has to be redistributed." Nonetheless, some parts of the MAS coalition who identify more closely with the Indigenous position thought Choquehuanca should have been the president. Nonetheless, Evo Morales himself is said to have pushed Arce forward, hoping to appeal to the urban middle classes by positioning a "white" Bolivian at the top of the ticket. Whether that explains the electoral victory or not, the combination is for the moment creating positive reactions. Acquaintances who were increasingly disillusioned with Morales have expressed some hope that Arce and Choquehuanca can avoid falling into the seductions of power. Whether Choquehuanca's thoughtful critiques of the old way of doing politics can carry weight remains to be seen. He himself was somewhat marginalized during the latter years of the Morales government, having been unwilling to fall in line with some of Evo's more egregious errors.

At any rate, the future will be challenging. President Luís Arce, who had been the minister of economy for most of Evo's 14 years in office, confronts lower natural gas prices and thus shrinking revenues to the state. Arce, like Evo, will have to balance often-conflicting demands from different sectors of society in a context of intense polarization. Right up to the inauguration date, the right-wing extremists of Santa Cruz were mobilized again. Despite all evidence to the contrary, they were saying the election was fraudulent. While there may have been some reason to suspect fraud when the MAS was running the elections last time, this time it is laughable. Salvador Romero, one-time employee of the U.S. government National Endowment for Democracy, was in charge of the process. The coup government oversaw it. And the MAS still won by a landslide. The extremist minorities of the east, much like the gun-toting Trump supporters of the United States, clearly do not believe in democracy at all. With young muscle-bound men in baseball hats and ski masks, they have blocked streets, and many, including those of the evangelical Christian right, are literally praying for a

military coup. On November 3, the unelected civic chamber of Santa Cruz, called the "civic committee," petitioned the constitutional court to suspend the inauguration of Luís Arce and demanded an audit of the electoral process (basically a recount). Not without some humor, the judges have granted the civic committee a hearing, but scheduled it for November 10, two days after the presidency changed hands.

Evo Morales himself may also be a complicating factor. On November 9, the day after the swearing-in of Arce and Choquehuanca, he triumphantly walked across the Argentina-Bolivia border into the far southern part of Bolivia. Greeted by euphoric crowds, he thanked Argentina's president and fellow left-leaning traveler for having saved his life. He planned a two-day caravan to return to the Chapare, his home region in central Bolivia. Publicly, he has pledged to stay out of Arce's way. Yet as the undeniable historic leader of the MAS—and now the president of the MAS party organization—he will surely play an influential role, perhaps more privately than publicly. Many doubtless support this possibility, though some fear that Evo's urge to return to power may somehow derail the Arce-Choquehuanca government. Many former high officials associated with Evo, such as his cabinet members, are being held at arm's length by the new government. Critics and sympathizers alike increasingly fretted about the so-called "invited" ones or the "infiltrators"*—figures who had no deep MAS loyalty or history but who had been given posts by Evo in order to curry political support. Some of these figures, such as former Minister of Government Juan Ramón Quintana, are seen as being among those who had pushed Evo and the MAS away from the more Indigenous orientation. Despite all of these internal politics—and despite his own less than ideologically-pure personal and political style—Morales is still a national and international icon of the left and the Pink Tide. As with Alvaro García Linera, the former vice president who has stayed largely out of public view since their return to Bolivia, Morales may also play a role articulating connections with movements elsewhere. For example, during his return to Bolivia he met with Indigenous and labor organizations from Ecuador and Argentina. With Argentina and Venezuela still standing leftward, Chile having just voted to dump a Pinochet-era constitution, Peru in upheaval, and elections coming soon in Ecuador and in two more years in Brazil, we may see a new Pink Tide or at least a "Pink Flow" returning after its ebb.

The main question remains as to whether Arce will try to challenge the power of capital given that Evo had largely made amends with it. For the moment, it is unlikely. This is partly because of the risks of political and economic instability. The reactionary forces, largely backed by the banking, insurance, and agricultural capitalists of eastern Bolivia, tried to use the spurious fraud claims to counter the overwhelming mandate of the MAS and Luís Arce with a show of regional power. The country has entered into an economic recession for the first time in 14 years. Arce says it may take two years to return to positive growth. Although the left and the environmentalists would like to see a turn away from extractive industries and the destructive power of big ag, Arce may find himself supporting both of these in a bid to get the economy going again. At this writing, he has just visited the Amazonian department of Beni and promised to invest in expanding cattle ranching and agriculture—both deemed problematic by more environmentally-minded observers. Arce, who is more of a Keynesian than a socialist, is unlikely to shift the government radically leftward or to embark on an ecologically radical rethinking of extractivism. While Keynesianism is better than neoliberalism, whether the engagement with capital can maintain the redistributive orientation of the state remains an open question.

A lot will depend on whether and how the working class and rural social movements regroup and reorganize. Before Evo, the movements were militant and at least relatively politically autonomous. During the 14 years of the MAS, many leaders became state officials and the movements were often absorbed into patron-client relations with the state. Those who showed loyalty were rewarded. Those who criticized the MAS were excluded. Recovering some autonomy is crucial to influencing political

change. Now with state largesse in retreat, we may see a reconfiguration of Bolivia's historic movements that sets the stage for a return to a more progressive process of change. For the moment, the serene, serious, and patient exercise of the democratic process on October 18, 2020, showed the country's commitment to the idea of a nation and state—and a form of politics—that is meant to meet the needs of its people. Against the minority sectors voicing racism and exclusionary talk, there is a collective moral consciousness that by-and-large bristles at state violence, military intervention, and injustice. Wherever one stands on Evo Morales, and despite the challenges ahead, it is clear that at least for the moment, Bolivians continue to challenge capitalism and its orthodoxies.

Note

*Nuevo Sur, "MAS prevé limpiarse en congreso político de 'infiltrados e invitados,'" Aug. 29, 2018.