

# Flash Report: Evo Morales' Quest For Reelection in Bolivia

Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions  
University of British Columbia  
La Paz, December 2017



Since the election of Evo Morales in 2005, Bolivians have participated in 14 electoral processes. In addition to presidential and sub-national elections, they have voted in several referenda on regional autonomy (2006, 2008, 2009 and 2015), confidence in the president and departmental prefects (2008), and constitutional change (2009). President Morales' electoral vehicle, the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS), has proven capable of managing Bolivia's contentious and well-organized social movements while achieving stable governance through a strategy combining direct negotiation with civil society and recurrent citizen consultations.

The most recent referendum, held in February 2016, asked Bolivians if they approved amendments to article 168 of the Constitution on the limits for presidential re-election. This change, in practice, would allow Morales to compete for a fourth term. In a tight race, 51,3% voted "No," thus depriving Morales of the right to run for the 2020-2025 period. The MAS' party cadres are convinced that none of its members has nearly the same chances to win an election as Morales, and they therefore decided to run a campaign to legally enable

his candidacy for a new term. Their insistence on seeking Morales' reelection, even in the face of an unfavorable popular verdict, makes the MAS seem less responsive to its base, which was originally one of its perceived strengths. Moreover, the attempt by the MAS to change electoral rules by judicial means reveals a tendency on the part of Bolivian politicians to bypass checks and balances and use undue pressure to further political goals. This risks tainting what the government has accomplished in terms of democratic inclusion.

### From inclusion to internal division: the evolution of the MAS' social coalition

In the last twelve years Bolivia has undergone a unique period of bottom-up democratization and broad socioeconomic inclusion. With the support of the *cocalero* movement, the Bartolina Sisa National Confederation of Peasant, Indigenous and Native Women, and the Syndicalist Confederation of Intercultural Communities as its core constituency, the MAS was able to push for a social agenda that empowered historically marginalized actors and incorporated the demands of other sizable groups, such as the worker's movement and mining cooperatives. This process culmi-

nated in the creation of a new constitution that prioritized political participation and social justice. Moreover, with high commodity prices favoring the enactment of strong redistributive policies, sociopolitical demands were addressed, bringing about substantial improvements in the quality of life of the popular sectors.

The referendum of 2016 appeared to show that support for the MAS had peaked. Although Morales' core allies are still supporting his candidacy for a fourth term, other members of the MAS support base have grown critical of the ruling party and have started feeling that their demands had been abandoned. Indeed, in the last few years there has been a growing split within the base of the MAS, with Morales increasingly facing disapproval among former followers. An effect of the referendum was that Morales further lost legitimacy as the only person capable of keeping together the coalition of social movements with disparate and often competing interests. His most valuable source of political capital has been his ability to directly negotiate with different sectors, from the business class of Santa Cruz to the *cocaleros* of the lowlands. The splintering of former supporters,

however, challenged the image of the president as a conciliatory leader.

Moreover, this recent split can be interpreted as a sign that the capacity of social movements to check governmental power has declined. The reaction of the government to the participation of former allies in demonstrations against reelection – such as massive ones held on October 10 – has been to label them “traitors of socialism” and put them in the same basket with the “rightist, neoliberal” adversaries. Although civil society groups exercised some control over the government over the past decade, the aggressive strategy of the MAS towards opposition from social movements suggests that this time the government is willing to disregard the interests of certain constituents. Even a strong civil society cannot, however, act as a substitute for robust institutional checks.

#### The MAS reelection strategy and its implications

The pursuit of Morales’ reelection, despite the negative popular response, stems from the belief that the referendum results were affected by a media campaign against the president. Specifically, this involved various cases that have been hurting the image of Morales, such as an influence-peddling scandal involving the president’s ex-girlfriend and denunciations of corruption associated with the party.

As a consequence, the MAS began to consider the legal route to the



A defaced ballot in Bolivia, 2017

Photo: Henry Gonzales

reelection of Morales. After having discussed options like a constitutional reform through the legislature and an early resignation to enable the president’s candidacy for the following term, the party leadership finally decided to file a formal request to the Plurinational Constitutional Tribunal (TCP) to declare the articles on limits to electoral participation as unconstitutional. To support their claim, MAS legislators referenced the San José Pact and argued for the unconstitutionality of the electoral law on the grounds that the human right to vote and to be elected as many times as desired cannot be subjected to any other rule. The decision to appeal to the TCP was particularly controversial because in April of 2017 the MAS – which holds two thirds of the seats in the Senate – approved new pre-requisites and raised the standards for the selection of candidates to ju-

dicial positions, including the TCP. The opposition read this move as an ill-concealed attempt to elect new magistrates that would favor reelection. On November 28, the TCP enabled the fourth candidacy of Morales to office.

The reelection debate in Bolivia illustrates of the kinds of problems that contemporary Latin American democracies face. While free and fair elections and the protection of civil liberties are generally granted and safeguarded by the state, the separation of powers remains democracy’s vulnerability in the region. In other words, there are major problems with the level of respect that the executive shows for the rule of law and the independence of other branches of government. The lack of adherence to the established “rules of the game” ends up delegitimizing public institutions, which frequently appear



A defaced ballot in Bolivia, 2017  
 Photo: Carly ArCam

to be subject to particularistic interests. In a country that fought for the establishment of a new constitution that would represent previously marginalized groups and uphold social justice, the attempt to alter its rules signifies a step backwards in the country's democratization process.

**Reactions and the lack of alternatives**  
 The TCP's verdict has sparked strong reactions from both sides. Members of the opposition, MAS supporters and various civil society groups organized public demonstrations in the cities of La Paz, Santa Cruz, Sucre and Cochabamba either to celebrate or to condemn the TCP's decision. The national elections of the magistrates in early December became an excuse for public outcry. People's display of discontent was not confined to the streets. In an unprecedented electoral result, null votes exceed-

ed 50% of the total votes in five out of nine regions of the country. Moreover, voters openly defied the electoral process. Pictures of null ballots were circulated on the internet with messages that in a variety of creative ways, served as a declaration: "No is no". At the international level there was also opposition: the government of the United States of America and Luis Almagro – Secretary of the Organization of American States (OAS) – spoke against the TCP's decision and asked the government to respect the popular decision that clearly rejected the reelection.

Despite widespread discontent, the fact that the opposition in Bolivia remains divided and without a clear political project continues to be the biggest advantage of the current ruling party, which has already presented its governing plan for the 2020-2025 term. Indeed, a

poll from Captura Consulting taken between September and October of this year in the main cities of the country, gave Morales the highest vote intention (37%) followed far behind by former president Carlos Mesa (20%). In a different scenario, without Morales' participation, his vice-president García Linera only gets 18% of the vote intention. The results confirm that, although Morales' popularity has decreased, there is currently no other politician from the MAS or the opposition that could gather as many votes as Morales.

This explains the choice of the MAS to reelect Morales at all costs and reveals that Latin American parties still face challenges – even in the most successful cases of party-building – to detach their functioning from the figure of the leader and, more specifically in the Bolivian case, to curb the party's personalistic drift.

At this critical juncture in the history of the country's democracy, Evo Morales and the MAS face a real conundrum: to honor the revolutionary political project that finally vindicates people's will after decades of exclusion, they would need precisely to submit themselves to its principles and accept leaving office. Any other decision would betray the ideals that radically shifted the course of Bolivian history.

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