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Bolivia's political limbo

In the run-up to the elections in October, Bolivia is more polarised than ever. It's not clear whether that will change after

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'Animals' and 'hordes' versus 'fascists' and 'rebels': That aptly sums up the political mud-slinging in Bolivia these days. The protests and riots that led Evo Morales, the country's first indigenous president, to resign in November 2019 after 13 years in office created serious rifts between his supporters and critics – reflecting ethnic, cultural and regional divides that have only deepened since.

The opposing sides attack each other in public debates and in day-to-day politics as well. Interim President Jeanine Án□ez, who bitterly opposes Morales, makes no effort to calm the tensions. Instead, she exacerbates them, while the security forces seek to intimidate supporters of Morales's party, the Movement for Socialism (MAS). Since Án□ez entered the presidential race, her transitional government has begun legal proceedings to exclude MAS from the elections. Án□ez is also warning that 'animals' – representing Bolivia's indigenous majority – could return to power.

MAS still holds a two-thirds majority in parliament, however, and doesn't want Án□ez to win any successes that could help her campaign. Thus, the legislative and executive branches barely cooperate: Parliament blocks government plans and the government refuses to implement laws passed by parliament.

The dire state of Bolivia's healthcare system

In such a situation, the interim government has very little scope for fighting the coronavirus pandemic. It also does not want to cooperate with other socio-political actors or regional and local authorities despite needing to do so in light of its own dubious legitimacy. Án□ez's

conservative party won just four per cent in the October 2019 election that was subsequently annulled. Support for her interim government has been further eroded by charges of corruption in the purchase of ventilators.

The pandemic has more or less caused Bolivia's health system to collapse. A lack of test materials means that many people suspected of being infected cannot be diagnosed and ill people receive no medical care. The dire situation has pushed many of the sick to self-medicate or use traditional remedies. Relatives of people who died at home are having a hard time burying their dead or having them cremated because cemeteries and crematoria are overstretched.

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None of this is reflected in official statistics, however. An article in the New York Times puts the real number of Covid-19 victims in Bolivia at five times the official tally. Trust in the health system and science-based medicine has plummeted. One dramatic result is the popularity of using chlorine dioxide, a disinfectant and bleach, to prevent and treat Covid-19. In fact, chlorine dioxide is unsuitable for human consumption, has no medical benefits and can cause organ failure and death. Nonetheless, in a hugely irresponsible – or ignorant – act, the Bolivian Parliament authorised the sale of chlorine dioxide to treat Covid-19.

The election question

Added to Bolivia's critical health crisis is the dispute over the elections, which represent a crucial first step towards resolving the country's other crises. The original election day in May 2020 was postponed three times because of the high risk of infections and is now set for 18 October 2020.

The two most promising candidates for the presidency are the former Minister of Economy and Public Affairs Luis Arce (MAS) and ex-President Carlos Mesa, who made the second place in October 2019. Despite losing support, MAS remains the country's strongest political force, while the anti-MAS camp has fractured during Ánez's presidency. Three different groups appealing to different voting blocs want to prevent MAS returning to power – but are fighting amongst themselves.

Carlos Mesa is an intellectual who represents political moderates and the

educated urban middle classes. He favours dialogue and rapprochement and rejects Án□ez's authoritarian excesses. However, Mesa is extremely unpopular in the eastern lowlands around Bolivia's largest city and business centre, Santa Cruz. That's where Án□ez and Luis Fernando Camacho, who spearheaded the anti-Morales protests, have their most ardent supporters. Representing the traditional elites (of European descent) and agrobusiness, Án□ez and Camacho are competing for the same conservative and religious voters.

Given MAS's strength, opposition candidates can only win by uniting in a broad anti-MAS coalition in the second round. Án□ez and Camacho are considered unlikely to go that far. While alliances could still be forged before the election, no presidential candidate wants to throw in the towel because that would lower their chances of winning seats in parliament. Thus, the 2019 scenario will probably be repeated with the MAS candidate and Mesa finishing neck and neck.

Conflict within MAS

For its part, MAS is being torn apart by questions of leadership and the future of Evo Morales. One group wants to keep Morales as an influential figure while others are reconceiving MAS without Morales. The ex-president's image has been badly tarnished by the recent revelation of his relationship with a 19-year-old that allegedly began when the woman was a minor.

In virtually all media outlets, Morales's adversaries accuse him of sexually abusing minors and paedophilia. Some opponents seem more interested in damaging Morales's reputation than in the victim's well-being – as shown by the way they've published numerous photographs that identify the victim, produced detailed reports about her private life and launched a campaign defaming her family.

These uncertainties and risks regarding the electoral process, as well as the many challenges to Bolivia's governability, result from its weak institutions and caudillo culture.

There is also tension in MAS's previously close relationship with the COB trade union congress and its grassroots organisations. The latter protested nationwide against the election-day postponement and are deeply dissatisfied with the interim government. But lengthy negotiations and Morales's personal intervention persuaded them to abandon their demands and stop protesting – without having gained any tangible results.

Both Morales and the MAS presidential candidate Arce accepted the

postponement of the elections, with Morales fearing that social instability created by the protests and blockades could cause the entire electoral process to collapse. But Morales's and Arce's approval created serious rifts between the social movements and MAS. Once a functional unit, this time around, the social movements opposed the party position and called its elites 'traitors'.

The electoral process

Although the 18 October 2020 election date is set, voter turnout might be low because of the pandemic, with polling stations possibly not opening because of a lack of election workers and problems transmitting the results on election night. These are just some of the risks that could make it hard to have the results recognised. The losing side will always find reasons to contest the result and call on its supporters to protest. This is considered likely in Bolivia no matter who wins. All observers note great potential for election-related violence.

Then, after the election, it will be difficult to insure a minimum of governability. For the first time in many years, there will probably be no clear parliamentary majority, meaning that hostile groups will have to reach agreement. A formal governing coalition is unlikely. Instead, the parties will have to hash out specific agreements on specific pieces of legislation.

These uncertainties and risks regarding the electoral process, as well as the many challenges to Bolivia's governability, result from its weak institutions and *caudillo* culture. They are also an expression of the deep societal divisions that could be covered over in boom times but are now reappearing in full force.



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