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# Bolivia's presidential race: Evo 4.0?

## Despite his controversial candidacy, Evo Morales will likely be re-elected — thanks to a strong economy and a split opposition

*Read this article in German.*

For the fourth time in a row, Evo Morales might well be elected president of the small Andean nation of Bolivia in the 20 October elections. What seemed practically impossible a year ago could now actually happen – as a result of a divided opposition and the country's economic stability.

In 2005, Evo Morales was elected President of Bolivia for the first time – in a period when various left-wing parties were scoring electoral victories in Latin America. Bolivia was part of the alternative bloc ALBA and Morales often travelled to Cuba and Venezuela to present himself as a member of the 'Socialism of the 21st Century' group. In the meantime, however, there has been a shift to the right in the region and Morales is the only representative of this generation of politicians still in power. In Bolivia, the problem is that the stability and continuity of his project depends very much on his persona.

Polls indicate that Morales might get just over 40 per cent of the votes – and win the first round. Morales would have to lead by at least 10 percentage points – but with the opposition divided into two large camps, that's indeed possible. A unified opposition would have far greater chances of pushing Morales out of office after 14 years. So, during the crucial phase of the campaign, the government is doing everything it can to avoid a second round. That could work – provided it doesn't make any major blunders in the last week before the election.

The devastating forest fires in the eastern lowlands appear to not be affecting the election because all the candidates have indicated similar concern and commitment. The hard-core supporters of the ruling party, 'Movement for Socialism' (Movimiento al Socialismo, MAS), come from the highlands, rural areas and poor city neighbourhoods.

The urban middle class that grew with the country's economic upswing and stability has become increasingly critical of MAS and will likely vote for the strongest opposition candidate, Carlos Mesa. A well-known intellectual, Mesa was president once already – during the political crisis of 2003 to 2005. His association with that difficult past could work against him.

## What's at stake

The opposition considers the election to be about saving Bolivia's democracy from authoritarianism, restoring the independence of state institutions and reorganising the state after years of clientelism. The 'Citizen Community' (Comunidad Ciudadana, CC) civic platform headed by Mesa was created during the mass protests against Evo Morales' renewed candidacy.

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In early 2016, the MAS government narrowly lost a referendum to abolish presidential term limits. For the first time in 10 years of political hegemony, it suffered a defeat at the ballot box. However, in late 2017, the Constitutional Court ruled that, in principle, term limits violate the human right to freely exercise political mandates. At the end of 2018, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) validated that decision, clearing the way for the contested candidacies of Evo Morales and his vice president Álvaro García Linera.

The ruling effectively launched the election campaign, with primaries held for the first time in early 2019. Since then, the government has been using its authority and state resources to advertise the progress and stability of recent years. However, for months, the opposition has been discussing the possibility of election fraud and the population deeply distrusts the state electoral bodies.

Nevertheless, national and international experts assume that it would be difficult to manipulate results on election day. So, aside from questions about the legitimacy of Morales' candidacy, the elections will appear to be relatively free – albeit with very unequal preconditions and considerable power asymmetries.

## A divided opposition

The opposition parties have not been able to agree on a joint candidate and are siphoning votes from each other. Although Evo Morales has the lowest approval ratings since his first election victory in 2005, the opposition have not been able to channel popular criticism into the desire for a change in government. However, a second round would most likely feature an alliance of Carlos Mesa and Oscar Ortiz, which would have good chances of winning.

Óscar Ortiz, the candidate for 'Bolivia Dijo No' ('Bolivia Says No'), has thus far insisted on his independence. In view of the regional and local elections in April 2020, Ortiz's party wants to hold on to its dominant position in the prosperous city of Santa Cruz. Yet Ortiz's resistance to combining forces with Mesa could keep the latter lagging far behind and hand Morales victory in the first round.

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In elections for the national legislature, which will also be held on 20 October, MAS is expected to lose its two-thirds majority and thus be forced to cooperate more closely with the two largest opposition parties. While that might initially affect the country's governability, it could also help reduce polarisation and see the return of meaningful political debates.

In any case, after the elections, MAS and CC will have to unite their large party blocs beyond strong personalities like Morales and Mesa – while also facilitating processes of renewal. As MAS has taken to presenting itself as an actor of the centre and the guarantor of stability, some observers have begun to talk about the end of the 'progressive cycle'. Compared with the rest of the region, that's coming a bit late in Bolivia.

## Morales is a pragmatist

Despite his initial radical rhetoric, Evo Morales has largely taken pragmatic decisions over the years, especially with regard to the country's economic development. During the boom years, Bolivia accumulated large currency reserves, was able to invest counter-cyclically as commodity prices fell and for years enjoyed the region's lowest inflation and highest growth rate.

The Bolivian government is playing with the fear that a change of government could trigger a crisis similar to that in Argentina or Ecuador.

Meanwhile, Morales is not basing his foreign policy on ideology: despite its far right-wing President Bolsonaro, Brazil remains Bolivia's most important trade partner and Morales and Macron combining forces on climate policy has boosted both leaders' images internationally.

Much of Bolivia's population really is doing better than 15 years ago. Poverty has been sharply reduced and the plurinational country has managed a big leap into modernity. The MAS government's 'Process of Change' has boosted Bolivians' self-esteem, which can inspire other developing countries. The opposition does not generally question this achievement. It wants the gas industry to remain in state hands and to maintain the social programmes that nationalisation made possible.

On 20 October, Bolivia's economic stability could tip the election in favour of Evo Morales – despite his controversial candidacy and thanks to the divided opposition. Unless, in the final leg of the campaign, the opposition manages to convince the majority of undecided voters to vote for Carlos Mesa.

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