DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 08.08.2025 | Christine-Felice Röhrs

Bolivia's bitter divide

An election without consensus in one of Latin America's poorest countries risks dismantling decades of social progress

Next week, Bolivia is set for historic elections. Twenty years ago, a political project was initiated to bring dignity, rights and co-determination to the indigenous majority in the country. Under President Evo Morales and the Movement for Socialism (MAS) that he spearheaded for many years, poverty, illiteracy and inequality initially decreased enormously. In this election year, the dominance of the MAS is likely to end following years of decline. A political paradigm shift is on the cards — right in the middle of one of Latin America's most serious economic crises.

The MAS's dominance has been on the decline for years, with major consequences for the functioning of democracy in the country. Following disputed elections in 2019, it had lost its two-thirds majority in new elections. It then split into two camps — one surrounding the former President Morales and the other around his successor and current political enemy, Luis Arce. Since then, both groups have been at each other's throats, with no consideration for the consequences. The resulting mutual deadlock in parliament has paralysed the work of the government and created deep divisions in large parts of society. Alongside this polarisation, the justice system has become increasingly corrupt and politicised, and the nation has been hit by a massive economic crisis.

In the meantime, many people have lost patience with their country's plight. Polls prior to the upcoming elections on 17 August indicate record levels of mistrust vis-à-vis the state institutions. For the first time since 2005, no candidate is expected to win the elections with an absolute majority — or at least be able to obtain 40 per cent of the votes and a lead of 10 per cent ahead of the next best placed party. A second ballot in October would then be necessary. Until now, none of the candidates has achieved more than 20 per cent in the polls.

A fragmented picture

On the left, there are currently three separate groups that have emerged from the splintered MAS. First, that of Morales, who has formed his own movement, *EVO Pueblo*. Morales himself was, however, excluded early on from the elections. Critical voices hint at political intrigue, although constitutional reasons would also influence the legality of a further term in office. As a result of criminal proceedings and accusations relating to the abuse of minors, Morales has for months been holed up in his home region Chapare, known for its cultivation of coca, and is complaining about persecution.

Second, there is the group led by Arce that is still operating under the MAS name. Its candidate for the presidency is the Minister of Government Eduardo del Castillo, who has very low approval ratings in light of the government's poor crisis management.

The exclusively male presidential candidates of the predominantly 'white' opposition have again missed the opportunity to acquire broader social legitimacy.

Third, there is the 'crown prince' of the left, Andrónico Rodriguez, upon whom many are pinning their hopes. Formerly the protégé of Morales and a member of the MAS, he is currently the president of the Senate. Rodriguez only recently decided to also stand. He claims that a 'new political project' is needed and is now campaigning for votes with the support of the economics expert Mariana Prado in the so-called Popular Alliance. The Andrónico-Prado team is therefore the only one attempting to build bridges on both the culture/ethnicity and the gender balance fronts.

The exclusively male presidential candidates of the predominantly 'white' opposition have again missed the opportunity to acquire broader social legitimacy. And this despite the fact that one of the greatest achievements in recent decades has been precisely this creation of a so-called 'intercultural and equal' democracy. The composition of these sets of candidates would probably reduce their capacity to reunite the divided country.

In light of the crisis, the more successful candidates in the opinion polls so far are, in particular, those who have espoused the subject of the economy. The wealthy businessman Samuel Dorina Merina refers to his politics as social democratic, which is partly true. Former President Tuto Quiroga is also running with a programme focusing on the economy. Manfred Reyes Villa, the mayor of Cochabamba, is emphasising his

successful city management.

Overall, only four of the 10 candidates are currently achieving noteworthy approval levels. Depending on the poll, either the businessman Medina or the former President Quiroga are in the lead, followed by the left-winger Rodriguez and the mayor Reyes Villa. If this fragmented picture were to continue until polling day, Bolivia might have to put up with a minority government with little decision-making capacity, as was the case between 1985 and 2005. In the current situation, political actors are likely to struggle to form the required coalitions, which could further paralyse the ability of the new administration to govern — despite the huge need for reform in one of Latin America's poorest countries.

Undoing years of reforms

Of particular urgency are economics-related reforms. Until now, Bolivia has adopted an approach based almost exclusively on extraction, focusing on the export of natural resources and with barely any industry of its own. Thus far, the majority of state income has come from gas exports. In 2025, however, these will barely reach a quarter of the value of 2014 and could dwindle to nothing by 2028. Hopes for the huge stocks of lithium advanced by some politicians may be dashed. Unity is lacking when it comes to profit sharing, investors and the legal security required. Recently concluded agreements with Russia and China do not specify when and even whether mining can start. Whereas GDP growth was as high as seven per cent until 2014, by the end of 2025, it should be only one per cent. At the same time, the country is overspending with its high fuel subsidies.

As a result, the economy barely generates the dollars it needs to import many daily goods — particularly diesel and petrol. Without them, everything comes to a standstill. In the meantime, the country survives on fuel deliveries that fit onto five to eight ships and only last a few weeks. This leads to kilometre-long queues at petrol stations and also to concerns about whether the extreme shortage might impair the elections. The inflation rate, which for many years was among the lowest in Latin America, is now the third highest, surpassed only by those of Argentina and Venezuela. Analysts fear that the new government that is to take over in November 2025 will be almost insolvent. Indeed, according to Fitch Ratings, its credit rating is now only CCC-. This means that, with insufficient creditworthiness, there is a high risk of late payments. Meanwhile, in the background, all of this is undoing the progress made on poverty and inequality.

Analysts fear that the new government that is to take over in November 2025 will be almost insolvent.

It is unclear which presidential candidate would be best suited to handle this complex crisis situation successfully. He or she would need the support of a broad social and political front. Shortly before the elections, however, the candidate situation currently resembles a telenovela full of intrigue. On the left, for example, the most promising candidate, Andrónico Rodriguez, is being mercilessly attacked from within his own ranks. Morales, who resents the competition from his protégé, is branding him a 'traitor' and dividing the indigenous voters. He grumbles that 'without Evo on the ballot paper', there would not be any elections. Although he has fewer supporters than before, their number is still significant. If he were to decide at the last minute, however, to support one of the left-wing candidates, his prospects might considerably improve. His radical rhetoric has, however, continually put a spanner in the works.

In June, Morales' supporters had organised mass demonstrations and street blockades, during which at least five people died. This spells danger both for the elections and for Bolivian democracy. Further, strategically placed barriers might complicate voting for many others in the mountainous country with its poor infrastructure. And if Morales were not to allow elections in his 'princedom' Chapare, or if his supporters were to boycott the elections, hundreds of thousands in this country of 12 million people would not participate in the elections and would neither identify themselves with the election process nor with a winner.

Depending on the extent of any disruptions, this may also raise questions as to the legitimacy of the entire elections — thereby pushing the desired political change, urgently needed reforms and economic recovery even further down the road.



Christine-Felice Röhrs

Christine-Felice Röhrs heads the Friedrich Ebert Foundation office in Bolivia. Previously, she was head of the FES office in Sudan.