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A triumph for Bolivia's Left

The socialists from MAS have achieved a spectacular election victory in Bolivia that could usher in a new post-Morales era

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Not even the socialist victors themselves had expected such a clear election result. Around 55 per cent of Bolivians cast their votes for Luis Arce of the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), who will become the next president of Bolivia. His lead over the runner-up, the social liberal Carlos Mesa, was an impressive 25 percentage points. MAS will also have an absolute majority in both chambers of parliament. Such an unambiguous outcome came as a surprise to the entire country, since many polls had predicted a run-off election.

Nearly a year after the socialist Evo Morales was forced to leave the country because of nationwide protests, police mutiny and pressure from the military, which left MAS in disarray, the party is now returning to power. Last year's protests were triggered by allegations of electoral fraud. The claim was that MAS somehow boosted its result by a few percentage points to 47 per cent, attempting to sneak a win in the first round and thus avoid a run-off.

Now in 2020 it has achieved a significantly better result in fair and clean elections organised by an independent electoral body. All of the international election observation missions have confirmed that there has been no electoral fraud and that the elections proceeded smoothly and properly. Most political actors quickly recognised the result, with only a few right-wing radical groups refusing to do so.

How can this amazing comeback be explained? The reasons lie in some of the strategic decisions taken by MAS, the behaviour of its political opponents, the poor governance of the transitional government, and the economic and social consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The poverty of the alternative to MAS

One important strategic decision of MAS was to combine the candidate duo of Luis Arce and David Choquehuanca. Luis Arce, an urban, cosmopolitan economist trained at a UK university, was the right person to address the urban working and middle classes, who were hit hard by the pandemic-induced economic crisis. In its election campaign, MAS focused on the economic crisis and the need to bring back economic stability. Arce's many years of government experience as Minister of Economy and Public Finance and the sustained economic growth and reduction in poverty during his tenure gave credibility to his election manifesto, which highlighted the restoration of growth, jobs and stability.

The other candidates, however, Carlos Mesa and Luis Fernando Camacho, both focused their campaigns on preventing MAS from returning to power. For people from the poor neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the city and those who fell from the middle class back into poverty due to the pandemic, this was not the critical issue. It is far more important for them to have an income to support their families. MAS made this a promise as part of its campaign.

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The transitional government under Jeanine Áñez, however, showed the ugly side of the conservative political alternative to MAS. In the short time she has been in power, her behaviour in all areas has served to dissuade voters. The management of the health crisis was poor. There was a lack of coordination with other political forces, the sub-national levels of government and social groups. In the midst of a strict nationwide curfew, family members of the President and ministers used Air Force planes for leisure and attended celebrations (which were banned at the time).

There were also numerous cases of corruption. The most serious instance concerned the procurement of ventilators at several times higher than the actual price – and what's more, the devices were ultimately unsuitable for intensive care patients. A constant focus of the anti-MAS discourse was on the alleged (and actually existing) corruption of the MAS government. In a very short time, however, the transitional government showed that its own administration was at least as corrupt, and also inefficient.

Anez' authoritarianism

The transitional government also acted in an extremely authoritarian manner, and with an ongoing disdain and denigration of the indigenous and rural population of the country. This was evident in both practical action and symbolism. The government as well as newspapers and television stations, which largely adopted the anti-MAS line after the overthrow of Morales, created a dichotomy whereby they regularly portrayed the rural population and MAS supporters as violent and ignorant hordes, in contrast to the 'citizens', that is, the educated middle and upper classes of European origin.

The wiphala – the flag representing the indigenous peoples of the country and an official emblem of Bolivia with constitutional status – has played a particularly important role in this context. Immediately after the seizure of power, they were taken down in many government buildings and in some cases publicly burned. Many indigenous people saw this as a direct attack on their identity. The burning of the wiphala has mobilised significantly more indigenous people to protest than the dismissal of Evo Morales did.

Protests by indigenous peoples against the transitional government in El Alto and in the coca-growing regions around Cochabamba were brutally suppressed by the transitional government, resulting in numerous deaths. The soldiers were granted immunity and the government never dealt with the events or even acknowledged them. The official line was that the soldiers never fired a shot and the 40 or so fatalities were due to shots between the protesters. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, however, regards these events as massacres.

The contradictions of Evo Morales

For the majority of the indigenous population, all of this has created alienation toward the transitional government and the anti-MAS camp in general. Vice-presidential candidate David Choquehuanca, on the other hand, identifies himself as Aymara and has been able to bring back many indigenous people who were previously disappointed by MAS, since they identify with him on the basis of their ethnicity. One significant example was the case of influential radical indigenous leader Felipe Quispe (El Mallku), who left MAS when Evo Morales took office and then publicly attacked it. Thanks to David Choquehuanca, however, he voted for MAS in these elections and many others did likewise. In this way, MAS was able to restore its dominance among the indigenous and rural population groups.

This also shows the continued importance of Evo Morales, in spite of certain contradictions. While the coca farmers, in whose trade union he began his political career, remain loyal to him, for a large part of the MAS voters he is already history. MAS achieved a better result with a candidate other than Morales. This shows that his insistence on running again after three terms in office has disappointed many voters, to the detriment of MAS.

Luis Arce understood this and cautiously criticised Morales several times during the election campaign. He has announced that there will be no place for Evo Morales in an Arce government, nor for those around him. Arce also countered concerns that he would now cling to power forever, by already announcing that he will govern for only one term and then step aside for a younger generation.

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Meanwhile, the other candidates in the election campaign largely ignored the population in the periphery of the big cities and the rural population and offered them no political platform. Carlos Mesa spoke to the educated urban middle classes with his intellectual image and the promise that he would be the best candidate to restore democracy and prevent MAS from returning to power. But he failed to give the rural population any good reason to vote for him.

The political programme offered by right-wing populist Luis Fernando Camacho was also limited to preventing the return of MAS. He also distinguished himself as a dedicated regional candidate who addressed only the population of Santa Cruz and the other lowland regions. His strongest argument there was his identity as a classic “Camba” macho, a native of the country’s tropical eastern region. He succeeded in flattering the regional pride of the Santa Cruz residents, but did not pull in the rest of the nation. This explains why he got over 45 percent of the vote in Santa Cruz, but his support remained barely 1 percent in La Paz.

Luis Arce’s new governing style

Luis Arce’s future government is facing major challenges: the economy is paralysed, traditional sources of income such as natural gas are almost exhausted, a number of people have fallen back into poverty, the population is still deeply divided, the health and education system is in a sorry state and the country’s Amazon forests are burning. The economic crisis, the political-institutional crisis and the social division of the

country are the biggest challenges for the new government. In order to tackle them, MAS must rely on broad social agreements.

Luis Arce, with his pragmatic and technocratic manner, seems to be the right person at this crucial juncture. He showed himself to be conciliatory and ready for dialogue, and promised to correct the mistakes of the previous MAS governments and to rule for all Bolivians. This is important because the increasingly authoritarian governance under Morales and the openly authoritarian transitional government resulted in damage to the country. What is now needed is openness, dialogue, reconciliation, pluralism and the independence of state institutions. Only in this way can unity be restored to this deeply divided country.

Arce has also announced that he wishes to normalise bilateral relations with the US as well as Russia, Venezuela, and Cuba. For this and the other challenges facing Bolivia, he will need all of the support that he can muster from both social groups within the country and the world at large.



Jan Souverein
Sao Paulo

Jan Souverein heads the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's office in Brazil. Prior to this, he headed the office in Bolivia and worked as a project assistant for the Foundation in Uruguay.