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Bolivia's left stands united

Evo Morales' movement might be able to exploit the right's failure to close their ranks ahead of the upcoming elections

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After several months of political turmoil that forced former president Evo Morales into exile, Bolivia is now facing an election that will set the course for its political future. 3 February was the deadline for candidates to register for the new presidential and parliamentary elections, set to take place on 3 May. This new round of elections comes after the annulment of the October 2019 elections. Like last time, the conservative parties in Bolivia again tried to put up a 'united front' against the 'Movement for Socialism' (MAS) – but their last-minute attempt failed.

There are currently at least four pairs of candidates who have realistic chances of moving into a likely second round, with a runoff then to follow. Three of these candidate pairs are politically right-of-centre. They are calling for a new phase in the nation's politics, after over 13 years under the government of Evo Morales and his MAS party. We can therefore expect a very tense and polarising election campaign.

Despite the loss of power and all other setbacks, the MAS has a good chance of winning the elections. Luis Arce Catacora is its presidential candidate, with David Choquehuanca running for vice president. They are committed to combining economic success and stability (Arce's forte) with the necessary renewal and return to the 'process of change' started in 2006 (Choquehuanca's contribution). This strategy allows them to target different groups of voters: while Arce's discourse is intended to appeal to the urban middle classes, Choquehuanca represents the indigenous peoples and the rural population of the highlands.

The interim government's oppressive

methods

Since the fall of the Evo Morales government and his escape abroad in mid-November, Bolivia has experienced political turbulence. By means of a legally questionable process, the conservative Senator Jeanine Áñez was installed as interim president, with the strong support of the military, the Catholic Church and the bourgeois resistance movements. The interim government, with the help of the police and the army, has suppressed initial protests against them. In these clashes, at least 35 people were killed.

A report by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) is calling for an independent investigation into the events. The Commission doubts that an appropriate review could be carried out by Bolivian institutions. Moreover, the former governing party is political persecuted, seen by many as a witch hunt. Many of the former ministers and senior government officials – essentially, the entire MAS leadership – are currently in exile or have gone into hiding. It is estimated that several hundred people have been detained for political reasons. In most cases they are being held without formal criminal proceedings and no option to have a lawyer defend them.

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As a second strategy, the interim government used the communications minister to threaten the country's media, accuse them of the crime of 'sedition' for criticising the government and resort to the public prosecutor's office if necessary. Thus, in a shortest period of time, they created social climate that supressed virtually all criticism of the Áñez government's actions and promoted the so-called 'pacification' of the country. To date, no critical review of the events of the past few months has taken place. The mere use of the word 'coup' is viewed with suspicion among the wider circles of the Bolivian middle and upper classes.

MAS remains the strongest party

Many questions still remain unanswered. The urban middle class' political protests, which originated from the rejection of Morales' candidacy and could be fuelled further by allegations of electoral fraud, are one part of the story. Another is the police's mutiny against the government, accompanied by the military's increasing opposition, which resulted in the 'recommendation' to resign. Furthermore, there are signs

that the country's traditional elite has been pulling the strings in the background.

Despite the difficult conditions, the MAS remains the largest and strongest political movement in Bolivia. One just needs to look at the latest public opinion polls. While the MAS can count on a relatively solid base of at least 30 per cent of the votes, the various conservative candidates each get only 15 to 20 per cent.

The MAS, however, has been through weeks of internal debates and trench warfare; it functions as a catch-all for disparate social movements and has no real party structure. It is held together by the Pact of Unity ('Pacto de Unidad'), a grassroots coalition that formed as a reaction to the historical exclusion of indigenous peoples and unions by the country's political and economic elites. And Evo Morales continues to play an important role here.

Despite his controversial image and his geographical distance while in exile in Argentina, he was has been appointed as head of the election campaign. But certain MAS factions have also distanced themselves from the old leadership. It seems that the debates of the past few months have contributed to an inner revitalisation and reorientation.

Morales's succession

The nomination of David Choquehuanca has been significant in this regard. Bolivia's longtime foreign minister (from 2006 to 2017) enjoys great support among the indigenous population of the Andean highlands. He was long considered an internal adversary of Evo Morales.

However, when the unions and social movements proposed Choquehuanca as a presidential candidate, Evo Morales managed to bring the various internal candidates and groups together and get them to commit to the Arce-Choquehuanca team. Luis Arce, as the architect of the Bolivian 'economic miracle' (as Minister of Economics from 2006 to 2017 and again in 2019), is said to represent socio-economic stability in the election campaign, thus alleviating the middle class's fear of an economic crisis.

The current disputes between the leaders also exposes the weakness of the political parties and the

Andrónico Rodriguez, who was long considered Morales' crown prince, was initially left out in the cold. Nevertheless, the thirty-year-old leader of the coca farmer unions from the Cochabamba region – the same position from which Morales launched his political rise – is

absence of democratic structures.

likely to have a longer political career ahead of him. Rodriguez plays an important role in the organisation of coca farmers and has contributed constructively to articulating the political realignment of the MAS. This unity could turn out to be a decisive advantage over the divided conservative parties.

A new political culture?

Bolivia is now in the midst of an incomplete political transition. The interim government that announced it would pacify the country and organise new elections has proved to be an extension of the traditional elite. But it has also gotten a taste of power and developed its own political ambitions, which now enter into conflict with the other aspiring conservative parties. For one thing, candidate Jeanine Áñez will need to fight with Carlos Mesa over which one of them has 'saved' democracy after all the supposedly authoritarian years.

In the annulled October 2019 election, with 36 per cent of the votes, Carlos Mesa was just 10 percentage points behind Evo Morales. In the early stages of the protests, he became its spokesperson with regards to electoral fraud.

When the protests, especially in affluent Santa Cruz, became more radical and bigger numbers of people demanded the government's resignation, the public image of Fernando Camacho, the leader of the local citizenship committee, benefitted substantially. The son of a wealthy family of entrepreneurs sees himself as a political outsider. With religious and ultra-right slogans, he is fighting for a deep paradigmatic shift.

The current disputes between the leaders also exposes the weakness of the political parties and the absence of democratic structures. It is quite possible that neither party will win an absolute majority in the two houses of parliament. That would certainly put the political system to the test. However, it could also prove to be a historic opportunity in the face of a political culture in which dialogue and cooperation beyond party lines are needed more than ever.



Philipp Kauppert
Berlin

Philipp Kauppert is working as an editor for the IPG Journal since 2025. He previously worked in the Democracy, Society and Innovation Department of the *Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung* (FES) and also headed the FES offices in Bolivia and Pakistan.