

# **Bolivia: Assessing the (now Rapid Evolving) Contemporary Social and Political Landscape**

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Since the election in 2005 and almost 14-year presidency of Evo Morales, Bolivia's government undertook an unprecedented and historic process of "decolonization," which sought to reverse the long-standing marginalization of the country's indigenous majority. This goal was most notably pursued through the promotion of indigenous languages and collective cultural identities, new citizenship rights, greater political autonomy, and increased participation in local and national elected office, and government decision-making. Taken together, this process has often been referred to as the "Proceso de Cambio," many of the details of which are enshrined in the 411 articles of the 2009 Constitution.

During the period of the extractive commodities boom, which largely overlapped with the Morales years, Bolivia also experienced sustained and at times impressive economic growth. The Morales government effectively utilized the resulting surplus revenue to carry out popular redistributive and social safety net policies while significantly reducing the number of people living in poverty. Whether the new cable car connecting El Alto to La Paz, the launch of Bolivia's first telecommunications satellite, international attention given to the "new Andean" architectural style, or the promise of development of the country's vast lithium fields, Bolivia under Morales enjoyed an era of unprecedented optimism.

Nevertheless, there remained some questions about Bolivia's direction over the medium and long-term. While both Morales and his Movement Toward Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo, MAS) party sustained their political dominance, the country remained regionally divided, with economic and former political elites in lowland departments opposing his administration. Several scandals and missteps also trained attention on occasional failures of governance. The TIPNIS conflict over a proposed highway through indigenous territory highlighted unresolved contradictions in the government's simultaneous embrace of indigenous rights and capital development. And Morales' persistent effort to suspend presidential term limits to remain in office, and disregard of the result of a national referendum he himself called, exhibited an emerging authoritarian streak and generated significant public and political pushback.

More generally, the MAS's long-term political dominance, Morales's popularity and charisma, and his ongoing designs on the presidency, left little room for the evolution of a more variegated political and electoral arena, including the emergence of a new dynamic generation of national MAS leaders and potential successors. Despite the country's evident strides, throughout his tenure, therefore, it remained hard to imagine its post-Morales future. Regionally, with the fading of the ALBA alliance and the ebbing of the so-called "pink tide," the influence of China in Bolivia and throughout the region, and ongoing poor bilateral relationship with the U.S. – which until recently hadn't had an ambassador to Bolivia since 2008 – it has been hard to predict where the country's relationships with its neighbors and former left-leaning allies, or the U.S., might be headed.

With the intention of reflecting on the legacies of the Morales years, in early March, 2018, we organized the symposium, "Bolivia: Assessing the Contemporary Social and Political Landscape," which took place on March 5th 2018 at American University, with the support of the Latin American Studies Association's "Bolivia" section, AU's Center for Latin American and Latino Studies and its Department of World Languages and Cultures. The symposium featured three moderated panels, foregrounding distinct disciplinary viewpoints and dedicated to considering prospects in a post-Evo near future for indigenous enfranchisement, social and economic policy making, and U.S.-Bolivia relations. Included in this issue are the following articles, in most cases revised and expanded versions of symposium presentations:

Racial Ideologies, State Bureaucracy, and Decolonization in Bolivia

Marcelo A. Bohrt

Cholo Politics and Urban Indigenous Self-Fashioning in Bolivia

Robert Albro

Three Takes on De-Colonizing the State Apparatus in Bolivia

Chuck Sturtevant

The Political Economy of Gas, Soy and Lithium in Morales's Bolivia

Nicole Fabricant and Bret Gustafson

Bolivia's *Proceso de Cambio*: Adjusting the Ideological Paradigm from Social to Economic

Martín Mendoza-Botelho

Diplomacy and Trade: The Current Contradictory Relations between the United States and Bolivia

Erick D. Langer

Of course, we had not anticipated the post-Evo future would become the present so rapidly, or in the way that it did. Our symposium, and the articles assembled here, therefore, reflect on prevailing Bolivian political, economic and social realities up to the contentious national elections of October 2019. As a result of the explosive popular demonstrations and political response to those flawed elections, Bolivians now uneasily await the upcoming May 2020, redo, potentially on the precipice of a major political transition. They are facing more political unknowns than they have at least since the period of sustained direct-action popular protest during the years 2000-2005.

As we write, the atmosphere of violent protests and police actions that left 33 dead in the immediate aftermath of October's disputed election has cooled down. But Morales remains in asylum in Argentina, where, barred from participating in the presidential election, he has stated his intention to run for the senate. A right-wing caretaker administration, far from simply calling new elections, has taken concerted steps to criminalize and to limit the participation of the MAS in the upcoming May elections. While the MAS retains for now its legislative majority and remains a powerful national political force, the anti-Morales Right sees an opening to return to power. Bolivia's political future hangs in the balance. The articles brought together here might not have predicted these developments, but they certainly reflect upon long-term social, political and economic trends that will influence the eventual outcome of this contest.



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