

Origins of the Crisis: On the Coup in Bolivia

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From the series Quijote y los Perros by Walter Solón, c. 1972–75

Regarding recent events in Bolivia, some things are simple: Was it a coup? Yes. On Sunday, November 10, the commander-in-chief of Bolivia's armed forces, General Williams Kaliman, publically told Evo Morales, a constitutionally elected president, that he ought to resign for the good of the country. There is no other name for this kind of thing. Even if Evo had been officially accused of legal wrongdoing – he had not – this procedure of removal is unconstitutional. The resignation took place under an unstated threat of violence. Bolivia's history gives reason to take this threat seriously: military coups and counter-coups were a decisive feature of political life throughout the twentieth century. And considering that the police, two days before the general's intervention, had already decided to allow anti-government protestors to commit violence against the homes and family-members of supporters of the Movimiento al Socialismo party (MAS), to which Evo belongs, Kaliman's remarks carried weight well beyond a "suggestion."

Should people with a preference for emancipatory politics support the coup or oppose it? This, too, is simple: we can only be against it. The meaning of this, in practice, depends on one's position. Given that I'm a U.S. citizen living thousands of miles from La Paz, I venture my opposition should focus on the U.S. role. Whether material or ideological, any support for the coup by the U.S. state is hypocritical, destructive, and all too familiar. The most important thing I can do, I think, is to call on the government that supposedly represents me to stop supporting this coup – in addition to the sanctions, bombings, crop eradications, mobilizations, counter-insurgency operations, and every other disgusting imperialist act. If I cannot make this denunciation heard on my own, I should organize to amplify it.

In referencing the concrete activity of *organization*, however, we move from definition and position-taking to the level of *politics*. Here, simplicity gives way to murkiness. Much more difficult than to ask whether this was a coup or whether one should support coups are the questions: How did this coup happen? What conditions made it possible?

Compare the conditions for this coup to the one against socialist Chilean President Salvador Allende, deposed and likely murdered by CIA-trained military operatives in 1973. His coalition had held executive office for only three years, facing a congress controlled by the opposition. It had been elected by a plurality and faced open hostility from capitalists within the country, from the military, and from the rest of the capitalist world – including, of course, the world's largest superpower, the United States. These factions organized to undermine him and create crisis conditions for nearly the entirety of his presidency. Chile was deep in a capital-induced economic spiral when the military made its decisive and violent intervention.

The MAS under Evo Morales and Alvaro García Linera, on the other hand, was the most successful political force in Bolivia in decades. Starting out as the “political instrument” of coca-growers unions in the country's Chapare region in the late 1990s, it rose to national prominence throughout the mass political insurgencies against neoliberalism from 2000 to 2005, when Evo was first elected. He won that election with an outright majority – a first since the return to civilian rule in 1982 – and has done so in two more scheduled presidential elections since, in addition to a recall vote, each with nearly a supermajority. The MAS is the only party that has been able to compete consistently in national elections for the last fourteen years, and it has continuously controlled at least one (often both) of its legislatures. Evo has led the greatest period of economic growth and political stability that the country has ever seen, even while other Latin American economies have stumbled with falling commodity prices. As even critics have noted, his mandate has resulted in massive social welfare gains in healthcare, equality, poverty-reduction, and literacy; it has also given voice to the masses of indigenous and campesino people in Bolivia who had been the object of discrimination and exclusion for more than four centuries.

Crisis

To understand the coup, then, we have to understand the political crisis in which this seemingly solid ground fell out from under Evo and the MAS. The coup was an attempt by some class fractions in Bolivia to put an end to the crisis at the expense of the MAS. The MAS lacked the strength to resist this outcome. If we fail to understand why, no amount of posturing will prevent this from happening again, either in Bolivia or in another situation in which a polarizing champion of radical change might win an election against the wishes of the ruling class. For those distant from Bolivia, this sort of analysis is key to strategizing for internationalist solidarity.

How did a crisis emerge to which a coup seemed like the best option in the eyes of a military, which had, for better or worse, a largely positive relationship with the MAS-controlled portions of the state?¹ Why did at least some portion of the population that originally supported Evo, or only wanted to see a second round of voting in the election, end up demanding his ouster? And why did some powerful sectors that had, in fact, benefitted from the relative social stability ushered in by the MAS decide it was time to change course by any means necessary?

Most immediately the crisis began with the elections on October 20. In this election, the winner would need to defeat his or her nearest opponent by ten percent, or else face a runoff. Polls showed Evo beating his nearest opponent Carlos Mesa – a former president who had in fact been deposed by protests in 2005 – by something close to this amount. After a portion of the votes had been counted indicating that Evo's lead would be right around ten percent, there was a one-day break in the poll counting. According to an analysis by the Center for Economic and Policy Research, this procedure was entirely normal. When the count resumed, Evo's lead over Mesa widened slightly, which was also predictable given the geographic distribution of which vote tallies had been counted and which had not. Mesa, however, already declared that he knew there would be a runoff, and so when the count resumed and official results came in showing Evo winning by just over ten percent, he demanded a new election and was echoed by various segments of the national and international media, by international organizations like the EU and the U.S.-dominated Organization of American States, and by the rightwing forces whose power, for the most part, was situated in regional governments and civic committees.

So a seemingly predictable outcome in a close race suddenly became a basis for some to declare electoral fraud. Some people who took to the streets were, of course, opposed to Evo and the MAS in general, and others may have resented that Evo was running despite losing a 2016 referendum to abolish term-limits, which the country's electoral court subsequently found violated Evo's rights. The OAS, a United States-sponsored body and no close friend to Latin America's leftists like Evo, volunteered to investigate the fraud claims, and Evo – but not Mesa – agreed to abide by their findings.

While the investigation proceeded, protests grew. The leader who urged them on and who pushed them toward demands for resignation, rather than a re-vote and regardless of what the OAS found, was Luis Fernando Camacho. Member of an elite family, Camacho is involved in financial and legal consulting – including, as revealed in the Panama Papers, helping private businesses set up tax-dodging offshore accounts. He has never held elected office, but was once a leader of a right-wing regional youth organization, the Union Juvenil Cruceña (UJC), from 2002 to 2004. Recently, however, has occupied an influential position as the president of the Pro-Santa Cruz Civic Committee, a business association in Bolivia's second-largest city, seat of the most recalcitrant and racist opposition to the MAS in the early years of its government, when the UJC served as its “brass knuckles” by attacking indigenous people who supported Evo. As a protest leader Camacho eventually outflanked Mesa; the latter continued to call for a new election rather than simply demanding that Evo resign immediately.

Over the last several weeks, supporters of Evo and the MAS have been marching too. And though the *New York Times* and other English-language media outlets have painted the MAS supporters as “armed bands” terrorizing the innocent anti-MAS protestors, it is more accurate to say that a two-sided political conflict resulted in two-sided political violence. Since no one disputes that Evo won a plurality of the votes, it's unsurprising that the anti-MAS protests were met with counter-protests.

On Friday, November 8, the police, who have not had a strong relationship with Evo, declared that they would not police the protests anymore. Sunday, the OAS issued its report citing “irregularities” – *not fraud* – in the election, pointing to but not providing evidence of several instances of questionable paper vote tallies and some lack of technical accountability in the electronic processing of an unofficial vote count.² It was no smoking gun, but it was enough for Evo to agree to a new vote. Yet shortly thereafter, the military – whom Evo never called on to police the protests – then “suggested” that he resign for the good of the country. Hence, the coup.

Contradictions

The immediate political crisis and the coup, however, are also rooted in a deeper history of the vicissitudes of the MAS itself.

The key is the significant loss of broad, mobilized, popular participation that won the famous Cochabamba Water War against water privatization in 2000, that deposed two neoliberal presidents in 2003 and 2005 (the latter being Mesa), that elected Evo Morales as the first indigenous president in 2005 and brought the MAS to power, that pushed for a new constitution enshrining indigenous rights, that allowed a vast renegotiation of Bolivia's relationship to transnational energy companies, and that overcame the worst of the Santa Cruz secession crisis of 2008. The organizational core of this support were rurally-based

indigenous organizations like the Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas de Bolivia(CIDOB), the Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia(CSUTCB), and the Consejo Nacional de Ayllus y Markas del Qullasuyu(CONAMAQ), but at decisive points in each of these struggles they were joined by labor unions, urban neighborhood federations, student groups, civic organizations, and others. The combined power of these groups engaging in strikes, highway blockades, and protests brought the country to a standstill on more than one occasion. Within these ranks, Evo still has plenty of supporters, and in some parts of the country they are mobilizing to oppose self-proclaimed President Jeanine Añez's transitional government. There have been several mass marches from the largely indigenous city of El Alto into La Paz, and highway blockades here and there in the countryside, but the kind of hegemony that the party enjoyed at its high points, and that enabled it to push through each of those decisive moments, is now fractured. Even in El Alto, some neighborhood committees have opted out of the protests.

The MAS has embodied contradictions since it emerged on the national scene. Its mass base is indigenous, and in coming to power it redefined indigenous identity, but it did so through a joining of this identity with a broader, more traditional nationalism that motivated some of the large protests in the early 2000s – a nationalism that had historically been built upon the exclusion of the indigenous masses. The state's embrace of "plurinationality," enshrined in the 2009 constitution, has thus often contrasted with its impulse to consolidate state power and appeal to powerful social sectors on the basis of a more classical nationalist ideology. The MAS was a grassroots political party linked to specific grievances of Aymara coca growers against the state and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, but upon taking national proportions, its umbrella began to include other social movements, different indigenous groups, and opportunistic politicians who saw which way the wind was blowing. In turning its focus definitely to elections, the movements lost decision-making power in favor of a looser consultative role. On the international scene, the Plurinational State of Bolivia has been a voice for a radical rethinking of human responsibility toward the non-human environment, while its economy has nonetheless continued to subsist on fossil fuel extraction, and the state has pursued environmentally destructive development projects in the face of protests.

There is a strong argument to be made that these broad contradictions are simply the result of historical conditions beyond the MAS's or any movement's choosing. That is, they were largely the result of an international situation that would never be friendly to a small country like Bolivia's attempt to shake off, at least to a certain degree, the Washington Consensus. The approach to development it pursued, the compromises it made with foreign capital, have been the basis for its large improvements in social welfare, which in turn should allow it to hold onto its role at the helm of a power bloc, that is, an articulated formation of social sectors with the ability to exercise power as a collective political agent. In setting a new course for the country – with things like participatory community decision making about infrastructure projects, the development of new school curricula that reflect

critically on the history of colonialism, the creation of novel political forms of local autonomy – one could imagine that people would become better organized to defend the process of change underway. And perhaps most broadly, one could imagine that the national accumulation of capital in a capitalist world might help Bolivia delink from the global centers of capital and get some political and economic breathing room.

Why didn't this happen then? Why did the bloc in power now fall apart?

Some analysts have focused on the constitutional referendum of 2016, suggesting that Evo and Garcia Linera's attempt to change the constitution to allow them a fourth term was illegal or somehow wrong. The MAS lost the referendum, and Evo brought his case to the country's highest court, which cited the American Convention on Human Rights to rule that all term limits are a violation of one's political rights. If this raises liberal hackles, it shouldn't; the court played its constitutionally defined role and made a juridical judgment in accordance with its interpretation of an international convention of which Bolivia is a signatory. Furthermore, the court is actually an elected body in Bolivia, subject to democratic oversight in a way that, say, the U.S. Supreme court is not.

But the MAS's effort to get Evo on the ballot again for the 2019 vote does raise other issues, of political rather than legal provenance. In the first place, the MAS at its high points of popularity relied on votes from the progressive portions of the urban middle classes; some of these were offended by the 2016 referendum and aftermath, however, and now largely lost to the MAS. Perhaps more importantly: how did the MAS reach a point where it understood its only electoral chance in a presidential election to hinge on Evo as a candidate? That the process of change became essentially dependent on a single figure owed in part to its loss of dynamism as the party became a distinct entity from the social movements whose political instrument it once was. Identification with Evo as a symbolic figure, while not without reason, began to stand in for an organic process that would have deepened the MAS's hegemony through a constant process of organizing, mobilizing, and participating. Grassroots organizations that once steered the MAS ended up being steered by a layer of political leaders and party functionaries.

How might it have been different? Some of the events that speak to this breach – and eventually, antagonism – between the MAS and portions of its organizational and popular base have recently circulated in articles [by Raul Zibechi](#) and [Raquel Gutierrez Aguilar](#). These commentaries are shortsighted and politically inopportune insofar as they equivocate about whether a coup has taken place and draw false equivalences between the MAS and the far-right. But in a sense Zibechi is correct to say that the bleak situation of the past week “began with systematic attacks by the government of Evo Morales and Álvaro García Linera against the same popular movements that brought them to power, to the point that when they needed the movements to defend them, the movements were deactivated and demoralized.” The MAS hemorrhaged its urban, middle-class supporters who were swayed by inaccurate claims of fraud or charges of personal authoritarianism against Evo, but the

indigenous, campesino, and labor organizations that failed to materialize in the party's defense during the coup were a casualty of earlier conflicts.

The party came to power in part through the flourishing of rural indigenous organizations like the CIDOB, the CSUTCB, and the CONAMAQ. These organizations and several others, working together as the Pacto de Unidad, sought to put forth amendments directly to the constituent assembly during the rewriting of the constitution from 2006 to 2008. They proposed radical participatory measures for the Plurinational State, including the right to the immediate recall of legislators, the institutionalization of communal assemblies as a governing form, and recognition of indigenous methods of delegation. The opposition parties didn't want to entertain these proposals during the assembly, and the MAS did not prioritize them. Instead, the Movimiento al Socialismo called for a referendum on Evo to push the conflictual writing process along, knowing that his symbolic status would assemble the voters needed to give the party the mandate it needed to break through the intransigence of the opposition. The strategy worked, but the autonomous movement organizations never had a chance to introduce their radical proposals, and the relationship between them and the MAS was weakened.

In 2011, the state sought to build a massive highway through a large ecological reserve and autonomous indigenous territory, the TIPNIS. When the people who lived there marched to La Paz to voice their opposition, the police and the air force intercepted them. Thanks to the solidarity of other campesinos during these confrontations, arrested march leaders were freed, and the air force's planes – presumably there to carry away the arrested marchers – were not able to land. The march grew and made it to La Paz; their arrival was greeted by massive demonstrations against police repression. Later on, however, the MAS organized its own group of pro-highway counter-protestors in the TIPNIS, and held an official consultation that many residents claimed excluded highway opponents. The Pacto de Unidad fell apart, as did several member organizations when the MASistas in them attempted to split from those who wouldn't toe the line. This strategy of parallelism, creating duplicate, MAS-aligned organizations, known as *oficialista* as opposed to the autonomous *orgánica* factions, would be used repeatedly. As Zibechi points out, It often included using the police to dislodge the *orgánica* factions from organizational offices.³

One might call these contradictions among the people. That is, given the needs of the Bolivian state to prevent a full-blown crisis during the constitutional re-write, and to effectively update transportation infrastructure in order to develop its own industrial base, one might argue that these political differences were unavoidable. They can be seen as part of the contradictory reality brought on by trying to act effectively in the context of international capitalism and the imperialist organization of the global state system. And if the MAS had treated them as such, that may have been the case, but on the contrary, the party did not hesitate to push out its grassroots flank whenever it seemed useful to do so, sometimes deliberately sowing conflict, and at other times meeting people with undue

repression. Exercising a durable hegemony would have meant educating, conversing, compromising, trying all efforts to overcome the contradiction rather than letting it result in antagonism. This is no doubt easier said than done, yet the importance should be clear: the MAS are now lost without the power of these groups.

And if the contradictions between the MAS and its mass base were contradictions among the people, the primary, antagonistic conflicts should have been with capital. Yet the MAS had congenial, mutually beneficial relationships with large transnational and national fractions of capital involved in the gas and oil extraction industries, as well as Brazilian capital (who would have benefited greatly from the TIPNIS highway), and the local agrarian capitalist elite in the eastern portion of the country. Ironically, while the MAS held fast to these relationships – for all the good it did them this past week – Evo and García Linera accused dissenters on their left, including indigenous organizations who disagreed with them, research organizations studying the environmental toll of development plans, and workers who demanded increased wages, of being tools of foreign powers. The real contradiction was displaced in the wrong direction.

Hence, some of these organizations joined the protests, calling first for a new vote and then for Evo's resignation. Obviously, the rise of the right is dangerous for them, yet who can blame them for thinking that the MAS-led state was their principal political adversary when the state has treated them as such for the last seven years? Their participation in the post-election protests was small compared to the "mass centrist protest by urban middle classes" that they joined. The latter were concerned with Evo's long mandate as both a matter of abstract liberal principle and in part because they realized that the MAS's ongoing power would mean their ongoing exclusion from the spoils of state power. And while the process of change was producing new indigenous middle classes who turned out to be ambivalent when it came to the conflict, the old ones were still around, now feeling that Evo was no longer the "democratic" option – or the option by which they, in any case, could advance their interests. On top of this were regional civic movements like the one in Potosí, which has chafed recently in its relationship with the national government, demanding more autonomy in its budgeting and its ability to negotiate concessions for the extensive lithium reserves to be mined there.⁴ The civic committee of Santa Cruz is the traditional bastion of opposition to Bolivia's indigenous majority and home to its most virulent ultra-right, and now Christian fundamentalist political strains. These strains took on an outsize articulating role through the initiative of Camacho. Finally, seeing that the movement would not abate and trying to get out ahead of it, even leaders the Centro Obrero Boliviano (COB), the country's national union federation with a well-deserved reputation for its part in bringing down military dictatorships, called on Evo to resign in order to end the conflict. But it was the Kaliman's word who tipped the scales.

Conclusions

The MAS, despite its political advantages, crumbled. Under threat, its officials resigned by the dozen with Evo and García Linera, including numerous mayors and local functionaries across the country, as well as the presidents of both chambers of congress. This cleared the way for Jeanine Añez in the line of succession. While those who remain may well participate in the next elections, the balance of power has shifted. The MAS has held an exceptional political position, and its electoral machine, as well as the symbolic weight of Evo and its management of the economy, were all factors in its favor. But its once great strength has come apart.

If a strong coalition of the MAS and other autonomous grassroots forces is difficult – owing, in part, to the MAS's inflexibility and its tactics when dealing with contradictions among the people – the newly emboldened right, which took the initiative in the crisis, may make further gains. In contrast to their stated goal of simply organizing new elections, the coup ministers of Añez have already begun an audit of the state healthcare system. They've also withdrawn from ALBA, a regional body formed to counter U.S. imperialism. Meanwhile, while police and soldiers killed at least nine protesters on Friday who were marching in support of Evo near Cochabamba, Añez's office issued a decree releasing soldiers from criminal responsibility. To confront this situation, it's still possible that some movements who've been crowded out by the MAS will resurface, but these are fewer than they once were, and, as even García Linera acknowledges, their demobilization means they may lack the requisite organizational experience.

A coup it is, as the outcome of a larger crisis. On some level, what has re-emerged in Bolivia are a series of contradictions that the MAS managed to navigate effectively for a time – regional, racial, sectoral, and institutional conflicts temporarily held at bay. How will the intervening hegemony of the MAS alter the new landscape? How will the new constitution? Will conditions allow Evo and García Linera stage a return? I won't guess. But there's something discouraging in how familiar the players are: the Pro-Santa Cruz civic committee, open anti-indianismo, Carlos Mesa, the OAS. The return of each onto the scene suggests the MAS's break with the past was not as decisive as it once appeared.

Sadly for those who appreciate simplicity, contradictions are endemic. They're all Bolivia has, and, in this world, all any of us can expect. Politics means navigating them, treating some as real antagonisms and others as challenges to be resolved with novel practices. If this space of contradiction is where political possibility emerges, then it's also where stress builds up, ready to tear us apart. This isn't to say that overcoming political contradictions is easy – but, in the end, repressing them isn't any easier.