



Bolivia: Presidential Resignation and Aftermath

Updated November 14, 2019

On November 10, 2019, Bolivian President Evo Morales of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party [resigned](#) and subsequently received asylum in Mexico. Bolivia’s military had recommended that Morales step down to prevent an escalation of violence after weeks of protests alleging fraud in the October 20, 2019, presidential election. While Morales has described his ouster as a “[coup](#),” the opposition has described it as a “popular uprising” against an authoritarian leader. The three individuals in line to succeed Morales (the vice president and the presidents of the senate and the chamber of deputies) also resigned. Opposition Senator Jeanine Añez, formerly second vice president of the senate, declared herself senate president and then [assumed](#) the position of interim president on November 12, 2019; MAS legislators do not recognize her authority.

The [U.S. Department of State](#) supported the findings of an Organization of American States (OAS) audit that found enough irregularities in the October elections to recommend a new election. President Trump [praised](#) Morales’s resignation. State Department officials have called for all parties to [refrain from violence](#) and issued a [travel warning](#) for Bolivia. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [applauded](#) Añez for stepping up as interim president. Congressional concern about Bolivia has increased. [S.Res. 35](#), approved in April 2019, expresses concern over Morales’s efforts to circumvent term limits in Bolivia.

Morales Government (2006-2019)

Morales, Bolivia’s first indigenous leader, had governed since 2006 as head of the MAS party. With two-thirds majorities in both legislative chambers, Morales and the MAS transformed Bolivia (see CRS In Focus IF11325, *Bolivia: An Overview*). They decriminalized coca cultivation, increased state control over the economy, and used natural gas revenue to expand social programs. Morales and the MAS enacted a new constitution (2009) that recognizes indigenous peoples’ rights and autonomy and allows for land reform. Previously underrepresented groups, including the indigenous peoples who constitute 40% of the population, increased their representation in government. Traditional Bolivian elites opposed these changes and have become leaders of the recent protests.

Although Bolivia’s economic performance has been strong under Morales, there has been an erosion of some democratic institutions and relations with the United States have deteriorated. Under Morales, annual economic growth averaged some [4.5%](#) from 2006 to 2018 and poverty rates [fell](#) from 60% in 2006

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to 34.6% in 2018. Governance standards have [remained weak](#), especially those involving accountability, transparency, and separation of powers. The Morales government [launched](#) judicial proceedings against opposition politicians, dismissed judges, and restricted press freedom. Morales aligned his country with Hugo Chávez of Venezuela vis-à-vis the United States, and Bolivia-U.S. relations have remained tense since he expelled the U.S. ambassador in 2008.

A Disputed Reelection

Many observers expressed concerns about democracy in Bolivia as Morales sought to remain in office beyond his third term (he won reelection in 2009 and 2014). In 2017, Bolivia's Constitutional Tribunal removed constitutional limits on reelection established in the 2009 constitution. The decision overruled a 2016 referendum in which voters rejected a constitutional change to allow Morales to serve another term. Since then, periodic protests have occurred.

In January 2019, Morales won the MAS primary and began campaigning for a fourth term.

Opposition candidates included former President Carlos Mesa (2003-2005) of the Civic Community Party; Oscar Ortiz, a senator from the “Bolivia Says No” Party; and Chi Hyun Chung, an evangelical minister from the Christian Democratic Party. Morales needed to win by a 10-point margin in the first-round election to avoid a second-round runoff in mid-December against a potentially unified opposition.

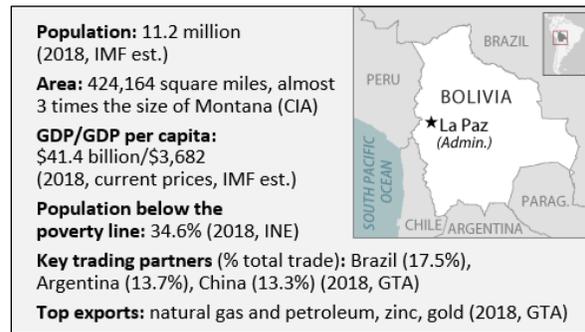
Bolivia's first-round election in October 2019 was marred by [allegations of fraud](#) in the vote tabulation. The country's electoral agency said Morales won a narrow first-round victory, but opposition candidate Mesa rejected that result and OAS election observers described [irregularities](#) in the process. Mesa and other opposition leaders called for protesters to demand a new election and then urged them to push for Morales's resignation. On October 30, the Morales government agreed to have the OAS audit the election results and to participate in a runoff election if recommended by the audit. Nevertheless, protests turned increasingly violent, with at least three individuals killed and hundreds injured.

On November 10, 2019, the OAS issued the [preliminary findings](#) of its electoral audit, which concluded that enough irregularities occurred in the elections to merit a new election. Morales agreed to hold new elections, but his offer did not satisfy the opposition. After a [police mutiny](#), clashes between Morales supporters and the opposition, and an army declaration urging him to step down, Morales resigned and sought asylum in Mexico.

A Constitutional Way Forward?

According to the Bolivian constitution, the national assembly of Bolivia must achieve a quorum to accept Morales's resignation and name an interim government. That interim government would then have 90 days to convene new elections. The MAS-dominated legislature has thus far boycotted legislative sessions. Although the MAS has rejected these developments, [Añez](#) declared herself senate president and then assumed the role of interim president. Bolivia's constitutional court [declared](#) those actions constitutional. She has named a Cabinet and received some diplomatic recognition. With protesters rejecting her government, the path forward remains unclear.

Figure I. Bolivia at a Glance



Sources: CRS Graphics, International Monetary Fund (IMF), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas* (INE), Global Trade Atlas (GTA).

U.S. Concerns

The United States remains concerned about the political vacuum in Bolivia, but its role in supporting stability and a return to democracy likely will be limited. Bolivia-U.S. relations have remained tense following the 2008 ousting of the U.S. ambassador, and bilateral assistance to the country ended in 2013, after Bolivia expelled the U.S. Agency for International Development.

Following the election in Bolivia, U.S. statements have largely mirrored those of the OAS General Secretariat and the European Union (the main donor in Bolivia). On November 12, 2019, the United States and 14 other countries issued a [statement](#) rejecting violence, calling for a constitutional solution to the crisis, and urging the designation of a provisional president to call new elections as soon as possible. Regional consensus on Bolivia may erode over whether to recognize Añez as interim president.

Author Information

Clare Ribando Seelke
Specialist in Latin American Affairs

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