

# Bolivia's October 2020 General Elections

Updated October 22, 2020

On October 18, 2020, Luis Arce and the leftist Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party won Bolivia's presidential and legislative elections in a landslide. Arce, former finance minister in the government of President Evo Morales (2005-2019), [secured](#) a first-round victory with 54% of the vote. Held nearly one year after Morales's [November 2019 resignation](#) following annulled October 2019 elections that were marred by allegations of [fraud](#), the 2020 elections demonstrated voters' continued support for the MAS. U.S. officials [congratulated](#) Arce on his victory. U.S.-Bolivian relations could be challenging, given tension in relations under Morales and the Trump Administration's strong support for the conservative interim government.

## 2020 Election Results

After a year of violence and polarization since Morales's resignation, many observers questioned whether the interim government led by Jeanette Áñez, herself a presidential candidate until September, could convene free and fair elections amid the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Although some polls suggested Arce could win in the [first round](#), most suggested that a run-off election likely would be necessary and that the anti-MAS candidates could defeat Arce by uniting behind former president Carlos Mesa. As preelection tensions escalated, the interim government warned of ["consequences"](#) if MAS supporters protested the results.

Election Day proved generally calm, and postelection violence has not occurred. In contrast to the chaos of the 2019 elections, the reconstituted Supreme Electoral Tribunal administered a process that the parties and international election observers deemed generally free and fair. With 95% of the votes counted, Arce [garnered](#) roughly 54% of the vote, Carlos Mesa 29.4%, and conservative civic leader Luis Camacho 14.2%. By October 19, Mesa had [conceded](#) and Arce had received congratulations from Áñez, U.S. officials, and Organization of American States Secretary General Luis Almagro. The MAS maintained majorities in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies.

The 2020 elections proved to be a referendum on the [legacy](#) of Morales and the MAS, a social movement turned political party that enacted a constitution that increased the rights of indigenous groups, decriminalized coca cultivation, and reduced poverty during an economic expansion fueled by commodity exports. Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president, [transformed Bolivia](#), but [observers](#) have criticized his efforts to remain in office (he won elections in 2006, 2009, and 2014). In 2017, the MAS-aligned Constitutional Tribunal removed limits on reelection established in the 2009 constitution, effectively

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IN11198

overruling a 2016 referendum in which voters rejected a constitutional change that would have allowed Morales to run again. Although some Bolivians criticized Morales's moves, many also criticized the [authoritarianism](#) of the interim government, which rolled back MAS policies, used violence against protesters, and prosecuted former MAS officials. With Morales in exile in Argentina, Arce has moved to moderate the MAS.

## Prospects for an Arce Presidency

Arce is an economist who worked in Bolivia's central bank prior to serving as minister of finance for Morales. Arce [espouses](#) a state-led economic model and supports pro-indigenous policies, but he has [pledged](#) to govern in a conciliatory fashion. Clashes between the central government and eastern, opposition-led provinces could occur, particularly if Morales seeks to influence the government. A group of experts from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights recently launched an investigation into two massacres that occurred in November 2019; the investigation's results could cause tension, particularly if the group finds former Añez officials responsible for human rights abuses.

President-elect Arce will inherit a country that is struggling to address the health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. As of October 21, 2020, more than [8,500 Bolivians](#) had died from COVID-19 and the Bolivian economy is forecast to contract by 7.9%, according to the [International Monetary Fund](#). Even as Bolivia has had among the highest COVID-19 [deaths per capita](#) globally, corruption prompted the May 2020 resignation of the health minister. Arce has vowed to implement monthly cash transfers approved by the legislature, raise taxes on the wealthy, and renegotiate Bolivia's debts. Since Arce was the architect of the nationalization of Bolivia's natural gas industry and wants to reestablish relations with Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, some observers contend that investors could eschew Bolivia in favor of other, more business-friendly governments.

## U.S. Concerns

The United States remains concerned about political volatility in Bolivia, but its role in supporting a return to peaceful, multiparty democracy may be limited due to previous tensions in relations during the Morales government.

The Trump Administration sought to bolster ties with the Añez government while expressing [support](#) for "free, fair, and transparent elections." In January 2020, President Trump waived restrictions on U.S. assistance to Bolivia. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) provided \$3 million in support for the elections, and, as of August 2020, the State Department had provided \$900,000 in COVID-19-related aid.

U.S. officials have [pledged](#) to work with the Arce government on "shared interests of our citizens," but tensions could occur if Arce adopts the same drug policies and geopolitical positions as the Morales government. The United States has decertified Bolivia's progress in meeting its international drug control commitments every year since FY2008, and the two countries have not exchanged ambassadors since 2008. U.S. pledges to work on democracy, human rights, press freedom, and economic prosperity in Bolivia could be met by working with civil society organizations if the Arce government does not welcome a return of USAID programs assisting the government.

The situation in Bolivia has generated some concern in Congress. S.Res. 447, agreed to in the Senate in January 2020, expressed support for the prompt convening of new elections. H.Rept. 116-444 accompanying H.R. 7608 would have prohibited U.S. assistance appropriated in FY2021 from being used to impede free and fair elections in Bolivia. A July 2020 [Senate letter](#) to the Administration expressed concerns regarding abuses and civil liberties violations committed by the Añez government. Some

Members of Congress have congratulated Arce on his victory and expressed hope for “[enhanced bilateral relations](#),” whereas others may express concerns about the return of a socialist government in Bolivia.

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