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Fabrice Lehoucq

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# BOLIVIA'S CITIZEN REVOLT

*Fabrice Lehoucq*

*Fabrice Lehoucq* is professor of political science at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and the author of *Political Instability and Its Legacies: Regime Trajectories in Latin America* (forthcoming).

While the world fixated on protests in neighboring Chile as well as distant Iraq and Hong Kong, Bolivians watched as President Evo Morales—“Evo,” as he is generally known—boarded a plane and fled La Paz on 10 November 2019. Upon landing about 250 kilometers to the east in the province of Chapare (home to the coca-growers’ unions that he had led since the late 1980s), he blamed his eviction from the presidency on a “civic coup” following the disputed October 20 general election.<sup>1</sup> The next day, he boarded another plane—this one sent by the government of Mexico—to take him into exile. These events moved so quickly that even assiduous followers of Bolivian politics had a hard time comprehending exactly what had happened—and why.

The sudden departure of the undisputed leader of the politically dominant Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) after almost fourteen years in office came as a huge disappointment to many Bolivians who had seen Evo’s governments as a source of hope for their chronically poor and ethnically divided country. His first election, in December 2005, had been the culmination of an increasingly popular campaign of left-wing street marches and blockades that had forced the resignations of presidents Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (who left in October 2003) and Carlos Mesa (who departed in June 2005).<sup>2</sup>

Much of the world was dumbfounded by Evo’s flight. Especially in its first years, Evo’s government had understandably generated a great deal of foreign interest and even support. That he had promised to eradicate the privileges of race and class solidified sympathy for the social movements that had, in a victory of historic proportions, wrested control of the government from the lighter-skinned Bolivians who had long monopolized it. On May Day 2006, the MAS nationalized the country’s

sizeable hydrocarbon resources just as prices for commodities such as Bolivian natural gas were skyrocketing. The nationalization was part of a frontal assault on the neoliberal policies that Evo's predecessors had

championed. The MAS fought for, and in 2009 promulgated, a new constitution that, among other things, recognized and deepened the rights of indigenous Bolivians. And the MAS kept trouncing its opponents in regularly scheduled elections.

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From the day after the October 2019 election, in which not only the presidency but all the seats in the 36-member Senate and the 130-member Chamber of Deputies had been at stake, Evo accused the opposition of organizing a coup. His supporters claimed that he had bested

his nearest rival, former president Carlos Mesa, by the ten points required for a first-round victory, winning just over 47 percent to Mesa's 36.5 percent. Evo's flight and exile, in this view, are the result of military and police insubordination—refusing to do anything about protests other than ask the president to resign—that amounts to a coup.

The opposition, by contrast, argues that Evo faced not a coup but a citizen rebellion, and freely chose to abandon his post. Oppositionists further denounce the MAS-dominated Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) for having manipulated the tally to prevent a runoff that Evo would have lost to Mesa. Far from overthrowing the president, the opposition claims, Bolivia's armed forces simply remained true to the constitutional order rather than obey a president who was disobeying the voters. Evo, after all, had reneged on his commitment to respect the results of a 2016 referendum, where a majority had refused to back his proposal to lift the constitutional ban on consecutive reelection. By November 8, the police had given up trying to end the "revolution of *las pititas* (little ropes)," as Evo mockingly called the road blockades that had brought the country to a standstill.

Since these dramatic events, it remains unclear whether the voters really did put Evo (barely) beyond the ten-point no-runoff margin. That the race turned out to be so close suggests that uncertainty helps to explain why the opposition was able to capitalize on a widespread sense of injustice to organize an urban-based blockade movement. The extreme narrowness of the result fueled opposition outrage at the botched elections and fractured the MAS's ability to develop a coherent response to an outcome that it had failed to anticipate. Even if Evo's abrupt departure and the subsequent political succession dented the constitutional

order, close examination of the overlooked chain of events that led to his exit suggests that this was not a military coup. No military officer or group of officers at any time took charge of the state. What the outcome of Bolivia's 2019 election suggests instead is that protest and intraregime splits may be needed to defeat incumbents seeking to transform hybrid regimes into outright electoral autocracies.

### **The 2019 Campaign and After**

The stakes of the 2019 elections were high. After close to fourteen years in power, Evo was consistently polling below 50 percent. The MAS and his supporters feared that he was headed for defeat, likely by failing to win a ten-point first-round margin and then losing the subsequent runoff. In an election featuring just two candidates, the anti-Evo vote would coalesce behind the only other person in the race, and Evo would likely lose.

The opposition had reason to feel confident. By 2015, the commodities boom had begun to subside, taking Bolivia's natural-gas revenues down with it. Annual growth, which had averaged 5 percent between 2005 and 2014, had fallen to 4.4 percent between 2015 and 2018. Consumers had been cushioned by an artificially stable and overvalued exchange rate, but only experts noticed that the central bank was losing the reserves needed to keep propping up the currency and holding import prices down. So official exchange-rate policy helped the regime to prevent economic grievance from becoming another major complaint that the opposition could wield against the government.

More worrying for Evo's government was its defeat, by 51.3 to 48.7 percent, in the 21 February 2016 referendum on amending the constitution to allow unlimited consecutive reelection. In April 2013, the MAS had succeeded in legalizing Evo's third bid for the presidency, despite the constitutional ban on a president serving more than two terms in office. The MAS government had successfully argued before the Plurinational Constitutional Tribunal (TCP)—whose members the MAS legislative majority had picked—that he was exempt from the prohibition because his first term had started under the previous constitution (this argument was made in frank violation of the agreement that Evo had reached with his opponents during the final ratification debates before the 2009 Constitution had been adopted).<sup>3</sup>

The regime gradually backtracked on its initial acknowledgement of its 2016 referendum defeat. Evo's critics, the MAS said, had pounced on a scandal to dupe Bolivians into turning against him. Eight days before the February 21 vote, a journalist had reported that the never-married Evo had fathered an out-of-wedlock child (since deceased of natural causes) with Gabriela Zapata. He first denied, then admitted paternity. The paternity was not the scandal. The scandal was that Zapata, a Bolivian national working in Bolivia for a Chinese-owned engineering firm, had benefited

from US\$560 million worth of Bolivian-government contracts extended to her employer. In May 2017, a court sentenced her to ten years in jail. In November came the term-limits—denying second TCP ruling. The ruling held, remarkably, that treaties such as the American Convention on Human Rights took precedence over the Bolivian constitution. In late 2018, the TSE voted 4 to 2 to let Evo run again for the presidency.<sup>4</sup>

A vibrant debate exists about what sort of a regime the MAS built. The “social movements”—left-wing popular organizations—incorporated marginalized Bolivians into the political process. The MAS’s ability to rack up one electoral victory after another in contested races confirms that it had reordered the electoral landscape and amassed deep reservoirs of support. In August 2008, Evo overcame a recall attempt by winning 67 percent in a referendum. In January 2009, 61 percent of voters approved a new constitution for the newly styled Plurinational State of Bolivia after almost three years of controversy. At the end of that year, Evo won a fresh presidential term under the new constitution by amassing 64 percent of the vote, putting him almost 38 points ahead of his nearest rival. In October 2014 he won easily again, this time gaining 61 percent against a second-place finisher who could not win even a quarter of the vote. The MAS’s expansion of participation and its successes with voters undercut claims that it had established a nondemocratic system.<sup>5</sup>

But in its support of constitutional democracy, the MAS was what Juan Linz would call “semi-loyal.” In the decade before Evo became president, the MAS and the social movements won legislative representation as they simultaneously marched and protested to topple two presidents. In pursuing their project to “refound” Bolivia, the MAS and the movements had unhesitatingly erased the line between legitimate protest and subversion. With time, even progovernment social movements and factions began to complain about the favoritism, corruption, and atmosphere of *personalismo* that pervaded Evo’s government.<sup>6</sup> The MAS used its overwhelming legislative majorities—it controlled more than two-thirds of the seats in both chambers of the Plurinational Legislative Assembly from the 2009 election onward—to neutralize the courts and the TSE. The descent into a one-party system set on keeping its leader in the presidency made for a semidemocratic or hybrid regime in which executive centralization and arbitrariness were eclipsing the regime’s democratic elements. The 2019 elections therefore became a crucial a test of whether the MAS, as its critics had long alleged, was trying to consolidate an electoral autocracy.

The last poll taken before the required thirty-day blackout leading up to the Sunday, October 20, voting revealed what the MAS feared: The opposition would coalesce around Mesa in the runoff and make him the winner.<sup>7</sup> The MAS remained Bolivia’s most popular party, but repeated polls showed Evo stuck below 50 percent. Mesa had been not only president but Bolivia’s leading journalist (and self-styled historian) as the anchor of a nightly television news program during the 1980s and 1990s. He had

wide name recognition and was a formidable opponent. Evo refused to debate him. In mid-2005, Mesa had quit the presidency (to which he had risen from the vice-presidency after Sánchez de Lozada resigned due to mass protests). Mesa had hoped to forge a new consensus around the need to preserve democracy, reform neoliberal economic policies, and advance social reforms, but the old party establishment in Congress would not back him, and the MAS was staging crippling street protests daily. Mesa later came to regret stepping down, and at age 66 urgently wanted another chance to realize his vision for the highest office.<sup>8</sup>

### **In the Wake of the Election**

By late in the evening on election day, the following seemed clear: 1) The voting had been peaceful; 2) turnout had been mammoth—88 percent in this nation of 11.5 million; 3) Evo had finished first, but without clearing 50 percent; and 4) every report was saying that there would need to be a runoff, set for December 15. Curiously, however, the TSE's Transmission of Preliminary Electoral Results (TREP), based on smartphone photographs of each polling center's initial tally of the vote after the polls had closed, stopped reporting initial results by 7:40 p.m. With 83.8 percent of polling stations having phoned in tallies, the TREP showed that Evo had won 45.71 percent of the vote with Mesa trailing by 6 points. Before 10 p.m., *VíaCien*cia, the only private polling firm authorized by the TSE to issue a rapid vote count, forecast that the result would be 43.9 to 39.4 percent.<sup>9</sup>

Three declarations made that Sunday night would lay the basis for the ensuing conflict. First, at around 10 p.m., Evo declared that rural voters would give him an outright win.<sup>10</sup> Second, at about the same time, Mesa declared that he would surely triumph in the impending runoff.<sup>11</sup> Third, at 10:30 p.m., the 92-member observer mission from the Organization of American States (OAS) declared that the TSE should resume the TREP and explain why it had been interrupted.<sup>12</sup> Only a week earlier, the TSE had vowed to issue by late Sunday night a TREP based on 90 percent of all polling-station results; now the election authority was claiming that the start of the official tally made a preliminary count superfluous.<sup>13</sup>

Did Evo beat Mesa by ten points or more? The answer to this question remains unclear, despite more than a half-dozen analyses of the results. The OAS final report concludes that “serious irregularities” and “intentional manipulation” occurred, and that the “results originally issued by Bolivian electoral authorities” therefore cannot be validated.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, the Washington, D.C.–based Center for Economic Policy and Research (CEPR) asserts that the stop-and-go release of the vote tally does not indicate statistically improbable surges in the presidential vote. The CEPR dismisses the OAS's election forensics as flawed. It charges the OAS with spreading a “narrative of fraud” that violates the neutrality of international election observation.<sup>15</sup> What these claims and counterclaims

suggest is that it may be impossible to demonstrate from the patterns in the release and the spatial distribution of the vote whether Evo failed to meet or exceed the ten-point margin.

The debate over forensics, however, distracts attention from key facts about the election. First, no one disputes that Evo fell short of winning a majority—a big comedown for a president who had at one time been able to attract more than 67 percent of the vote. Second, even if we assume that the final tally was accurate, “the election campaign had been conducted on very unequal terms,” to quote the OAS observer mission.<sup>16</sup> Even with all the disadvantages piled on him, however—and with seven other candidates splitting the remaining 16 percent of the anti-Evo vote—Mesa at the very least came extremely close to forcing a runoff. The controversially issued October 24 official tally says that Evo bested Mesa by 47.07 to 36.71 percent, a difference of 10.36 points. The TSE’s final result, issued one eventful day later on October 25, assigns Evo 47.08 percent and Mesa 36.51 percent, a difference of 10.57 points. This brings us to the third and most important fact: The TSE’s halting of TREP, its shifting rationales for doing so, and its changing claims about the exact margin separating Evo from Mesa shattered what little trust the opposition had in the final stages of the 2019 election.

When a neutral arbiter was most needed—when the key electoral margin was just a few thousand votes out of almost 5.7 million cast—the TSE seemed to go out of its way to damage its own credibility. The opposition had long criticized the electoral tribunal for partiality. The MAS-dominated Plurinational Legislative Assembly had chosen the TSE’s six-person executive council, with newspaper reports indicating that six were either unalloyed ruling-party supporters or somewhat more independent “institutionalists.”<sup>17</sup> The TSE sacrificed transparency—a core component of any tribunal’s credibility—when it halted the TREP on Sunday with an assertion that the start of the official tallying made the preliminary count superfluous. The tribunal muddied the waters further the next day, when it released the TREP results and changed its story, now ascribing the TREP stoppage to unspecified “technical problems” rather than superfluity. With almost 100 percent of all polling-station results, the TREP showed Evo leading Mesa by 10.14 points as of 6:30 p.m. on Monday, October 21.<sup>18</sup>

In the face of the TSE’s improvisation, uncertainty turned to indignation, and indignation gained force when it came out that the electoral tribunal had no plan to safeguard the ballot boxes. Within 48 hours of election day, mobs attacked and ransacked electoral offices in four of the country’s nine departments (Chuquisaca, Pando, Potosí, and Tarija). As of this writing in June 2020, no one has been apprehended for these acts, even if many believe that opposition hard-liners were behind them. The media carried images showing hundreds of ballots abandoned on city streets. On October 22, TSE vice-president Antonio Costas (an “institutionalist”) resigned, saying that the “alarming” decision to halt the

TREP had been made in his absence.<sup>19</sup> If autonomous electoral agencies can prevent conflicts over electoral outcomes—and there is legitimate debate about whether impartiality makes a difference when partisan differences are intense—the 2019 Bolivian election suggests that such agencies can also exacerbate such conflicts, perhaps severely so.

While the opposition protested and began to mobilize, the government behaved as if the voters had handed the president another massive victory. On October 23, after days of unaccustomed silence, Evo held an early-morning news conference to dismiss the fraud charges and minimize the protests. “The right,” he charged, “is preparing a coup d’état with international support.” Then he declared to “the people”—by which he meant his many supporters—“a state of emergency and a peaceful, constitutional mobilization to defend democracy.”<sup>20</sup> The government seemed to believe that repeatedly asserting that it had won another “historic victory” was the rhetorical course that would allow it to steer clear of the rising political storm.

The OAS and EU observer missions played crucial roles during these dramatic days. The OAS began by being skeptical of government claims, then turned publicly critical of the TSE for mishandling the preliminary vote count and losing custody of ballot boxes. The OAS observer mission noted that the campaign had not taken place on a level playing field. Evo and the MAS had state resources to spend; the opposition did not. Both the OAS and EU missions repeatedly asked the TSE to explain its decisions. On October 22, the OAS mission accepted the government and the TSE’s offer to let the mission perform an electoral audit, with what the OAS insisted would have to be binding results. A day later, the OAS mission concluded that the reported voting trends were statistically improbable. It recommended holding a runoff because the margin of votes separating Evo from Mesa was going to be either below 10 percent or just barely above it.

The OAS mission’s behavior was remarkable and even ironic. It was remarkable because it overlooked diplomatic niceties to declare that Bolivia should hold a runoff. The OAS observer mission had stepped in, without hesitation, to perform some of the functions that the electoral tribunal was neglecting. The mission’s stance was ironic because oppositionists had often distrusted the OAS. In May 2019, OAS secretary-general Luis Almagro had enraged many Bolivians when he seemed to endorse Evo’s decision to run a fourth time: While signing the accord that set up the OAS mission’s trip to Bolivia, Almagro had called it “absolutely discriminatory” to claim that Evo could not rightly be on the 2019 ballot.<sup>21</sup>

### **Protest, Paralysis, and Disintegration**

While the government was looking to inertia and rhetorical repetition to wear down its critics, the opposition sprang into a set of actions that are by now traditional in Bolivia. Since winning independence from Spain in



1825, the country has experienced many civil wars, a social revolution (in 1952), and, since 1900, 35 coups d'état (21 of which overthrew the president). In the early 1980s, it went from the frying pan of chronic instability into the fire of economic meltdown. It had gradually constructed the institutional elements of a functioning democracy that, by the late 1990s, became the target of attack by remnants of the old left plus the newer social movements, all of them united in their hostility to neoliberal policies. With the rise of the MAS, irregular changes of government made a comeback. A trademark form of "direct action" was multiple road blockades. After the TSE ruled that Evo had won by more than ten points and so could stay in office, protest mobilizations assumed central importance.

What ignited the citizen movement? That Evo had declared himself the outright winner just two hours after the TSE stopped the preliminary vote count revealed that he was willing to win recklessly rather than lose calmly. The move threw the opposition onto the defensive, and warned the TSE to produce the desired result. Everyone in the country faced a choice: Affirm Evo's victory, or oppose it. Before noon on Monday, Mesa "called for the mobilization of Civic Community [his party, known as CC], the civic committees [nongovernmental urban associations of businesspeople and notables], and political parties."<sup>22</sup> Many of these were already preparing to protest, and they made similar announcements. Two days later, in a fifteen-minute Facebook video, Mesa urged his fellow citizens "to mobilize permanently" and told Evo directly: "We will not permit you, for a second time, to steal an election. Lesson learned."<sup>23</sup> By October 23, opposition parties and Civic Committees had formally declared their strike. Far from neutralizing indignation, the regime's decision to reelect Evo had provoked a storm of protest.

Who were the protesters? While only surveys and ethnographies can answer this question definitively, newspapers and social media suggest, first, that protest movements took root in cities (as of 2018, home to 70 percent of Bolivians). Second, protesters skewed middle class and nonindigenous. If the revolts that catapulted the MAS to national prominence at the beginning of the new millennium had been spearheaded by rural dwellers, shantytown residents, and indigenous people, the new urban movements featured high-school and university students, white-collar workers, and "neighbors" (*vecinos*, as they called themselves) living in established quarters of urban Bolivia. A multiplicity of groups swiftly moved into action. Most worked independently of Mesa and his party, Civic Community, especially in the eastern half of the country. This is the so-called *media luna* or "half-moon," a group of four lowland departments comprising Pando and Beni in the north, Santa Cruz in the east, and Tarija in the south. In the late 2000s, Morales opponents in these departments had fought a losing struggle to stop the MAS from consolidating its power.

The business-dominated Civic Committee of Santa Cruz, which had slowly reemerged starting in late 2018, intensified its efforts to play a cen-

tral role in the postelection protests. Crowds formed around the tall statue of Christ the Redeemer, a traditional gathering point for demonstrators in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, the department's capital and largest city. It would be a mistake to suggest that protest movements were limited to the half-moon. Citizens mobilized throughout Andean Bolivia as well; protest emerged in La Paz and Potosí, to name two heavily indigenous cities of the west.

The government reacted in part by downplaying the protests, betting that Evo's larger vote share would, by inertia, produce the consent necessary for him to govern for yet another term. The government's rhetorical cocktail came to include a dash of mockery when Evo, in perhaps the best quip of the crisis, ridiculed the opposition for using rope cordons, saying he could offer "workshops" or a "seminar" on how to organize street blockades.<sup>24</sup> With less levity, his government also began using the more than 36,000-strong National Police Corps to clear protesters out of public spaces—a reminder that the demonstrations would not be tolerated indefinitely.<sup>25</sup> In an expected rallying effect, Evo's supporters began reiterating their allegiance to his government.

Opposition protests did not dwindle, however. Instead, they became the biggest story as reports on and discussions about the all-encompassing conflict packed newspapers, television broadcasts, and social media. In response to the police deployments, the opposition blocked off streets and neighborhoods, using ropes or even barricades made of donated furniture. Essential vehicles such as ambulances and food trucks were allowed to move freely. When police arrived, demonstrators would move, only to come back a few hours later. More brazenly, they would march too, often risking confrontations with regime supporters and even the police.

In addition to the barricades and the marches, there were *cabildos* (assemblies) in the streets of urban Bolivia. By November 1, opposition assemblies in Potosí, Oruro, Sucre, Cochabamba, Santa Cruz, and Pando (Tarija would later join too) were calling not for a runoff, but for a fresh election in which neither the sitting president nor the sitting vice-president would be on the ballot. Protesters dismissed the OAS-sponsored audit as beside the point. For the strike to end, the assemblies declared, Evo would have to resign.

These street assemblies also made a striking request, whose reverberations increased as the opposition racked up day after day of protests. The request was for the National Police Corps and armed forces "to unite themselves with their people and not stain their hands with the blood of Bolivians." This was an extraordinary demand, which followed an equally important declaration issued the day before by 2,933 active-duty junior officers of the 56,000-strong military. These officers reminded the government that both they and it were bound by the same constitution. They declared that "sovereignty resided in the people, not in the party in office" and that "on 21 February 2016, we Bolivians voted not to modify" limits on the consecutive reelection of presidents.<sup>26</sup>

This signal from the armed forces fundamentally changed the political dynamic. Opposition strikers took heart, while the government began trying to mobilize its own supporters. There were street clashes in La Paz, sometimes featuring dynamite.<sup>27</sup> Coca growers from the Chapare—Evo’s original base—marched into Cochabamba to uphold the MAS’s authority in the city. Most important, the police found themselves in the middle of a dangerous crossfire. By November 9, the Defensoría del Pueblo (the country’s constitutional human-rights monitor) reported that the clashes had left 383 citizens wounded; earlier reports indicate that sixty police officers had been injured.<sup>28</sup>

From the first week of November, newspapers also began to report signs of disobedience and discontent among rank-and-file police officers. While the police were joining MAS shock troops to fight protesters in some places, in others the officers desisted from crowd control. In a bid to shore up its position, the government deposited “3,000 bolivianos [about US\$435] in the bank account of each of the more than 36,000 police officers,” but this seems to have caused indignation not only outside but also within police ranks, as some officers felt the regime was trying to pay them to do its dirty work.<sup>29</sup> While some protesters fought the police and the MAS militants, other oppositionists began asking officers to put aside their batons and shields, and to stop firing tear gas. Opposition Bolivians had either figured out that disarming their government was paramount or had read Gene Sharp, the theoretician of nonviolent protest who stressed the strategic importance of disarming the security forces to topple a regime.

The unity of the ruling bloc cracked on November 8, when police in Cochabamba mutinied. Hours later, the police in Santa Cruz followed suit. In Beni, Potosí, Sucre, and Tarija, the police withdrew from the streets to their stations and declared their loyalty to the people.<sup>30</sup> As for the MAS, it had never quite turned out at full strength. Some of its affiliated social movements came to the government’s defense, but many MAS supporters spent the postelection protests on the sidelines.<sup>31</sup> When the OAS election audit came out on November 10—finding that irregularities in vote tabulation, tally sheets, and the officially reported final result barred an OAS endorsement of the 2019 electoral process—the trickle of high-level MAS appointees who had been resigning their government posts turned into a flood.<sup>32</sup> Evo’s call for new elections and a new TSE fell on deaf ears; hours later, he was on his plane to the Chapare. After the armed forces urged him to resign “for the good of our Bolivia,” Evo took to the airwaves and did exactly that.<sup>33</sup>

## The Streets Not the Barracks

Had Bolivia experienced a military coup? Many inside and outside the country echoed Evo’s charge. Military coups, though, typically involve officers unconstitutionally replacing the executive with an officer or group

of officers. Sometimes, as in Chile in 1924, officers pressure a president to resign, which is nonetheless a coup because it is the threat of a military assault that removes a president from office. But it was the power of the

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streets, not of the military, that forced Evo to resign. It was a raw display of people power that held the government accountable for its actions.

A counterfactual cements this conclusion. If the military had come to Evo's rescue, they would have had to deploy brutal repression to clear the streets of opposition protesters. It would have possibly meant undermining their oath—the president's oath, too—to respect the constitutional order and its guarantee of individual rights. It would have forced the military to travel farther down the path of becoming an instrument of a regime

determined to remain in office for a controversial fourth term—and with no guarantee of success. In the wake of the 2003 MAS mobilization that forced Sánchez de Lozada to resign the presidency, it bears remembering, the security forces were investigated and tried for having killed dozens of protesters.

The 2019 election crisis in Bolivia helps to identify the strategic conditions that prevent incumbents from using electoral chicanery to remain in power. As in Serbia in 2000, widespread protest and splits within the regime led to the fall of a president seeking to perpetuate himself in power. In Serbia, fraud-tainted elections triggered the postelection confrontation, as electoral authorities denied the opposition's first-round victory in the presidential contest.<sup>34</sup> More often than not, however, elections are not enough to defeat such incumbents, as is shown by Nicolás Maduro's narrow and controversial 2013 victory in Venezuela. (With the full power of the recently deceased Hugo Chávez's regime behind him, Maduro won by fewer than 224,000 votes out of more than 14.9 million valid votes cast.) A tentative conclusion is that such regimes fall only when large-scale protests help to convince the security forces to abandon the incumbents.

Amid the debris of regime collapse in Bolivia, pro- and antigovernment sectors maneuvered to fill the void at the top while public order continued to break down. Constitutional chaos ensued when the resignations of Evo and his vice-president were followed by those of the presiding officers (both president and vice-president) of both houses of the Plurinational Legislative Assembly. The MAS, which controls two-thirds of each chamber, boycotted sessions of both the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies after Evo left, leading observers to wonder

whether the absence of a constitutionally sanctioned successor would lead the Assembly to reject his resignation and allow him to reassume the presidency.

Second Vice-President of the Senate Jeanine Áñez, a little-known opposition politician from Beni (Bolivia's smallest department, population about half a million), became the Senate's acting head because of the prior resignations. The chain of succession above her was empty, and she was the highest-ranking constitutional officer because the Senate is the upper house. On November 12, Áñez declared herself president of Bolivia, citing a 2001 constitutional ruling that the executive can never be vacant.<sup>35</sup> In the absence of a legislative quorum, however, Áñez's presidency was a constitutionally suspect, if clever, gambit to stabilize Bolivian politics.

By December 2019, the MAS-dominated Assembly began working with Áñez to enact emergency legislation. She named Salvador Romero Ballivián as the TSE's new head. It was an appointment that met with the MAS's approval. He had been in charge of the forerunner electoral authority to the TSE in 2005 when Evo won his first election. The MAS legislators voted to extend Áñez's caretaker government—and their own terms. Until new elections are held, Áñez and the Assembly elected in 2014 for a five-year term remain in office.

Áñez's government has shifted to the right, and not just because her initial advisors were drawn from conservative Santa Cruz business circles. Dozens of exiles have returned from abroad. Her government has sacked some of Evo's holdover officials, launched investigations of others, and filled public-sector vacancies. She has reneged on her promise to run a transitional government. By late January 2020, she had announced that she would enter the fray and run for the presidency. The new presidential poll had been set for 3 May 2020, but on March 23 the covid-19 pandemic caused the balloting's postponement. Despite President Áñez's insistence that the pandemic should continue to delay a vote, in late June the Assembly followed through on a TSE-brokered multiparty agreement by setting September 6 as the new election date.

The sudden and unexpected end of Evo's government makes it hard to assess its impact on the country's democratic prospects. That government's failure to entrench itself in office for a fourth consecutive term is good news for democracy. But the course correction has come at a high cost: By late November, there had been 33 deaths and more than 800 injuries.<sup>36</sup> Property losses have also been considerable. The cost has also included the controversial selection of an interim president who has gone from public caretaker to political player. The covid-19 pandemic has allowed her and the MAS-dominated Assembly to extend their terms far beyond those contemplated by the 2009 Constitution. The citizen rebellion has also regrettably exposed the limits of the ballot box in Bolivia. Elections are not the only route to power. While state weakness—the inability

to crush a mass protest—foiled Evo’s bid for hegemony, it also sustains the equilibrium that encourages parties and movements to undermine the agreements that allow elections to settle conflicts in a less costly manner.

Any effort to evaluate the impact of the 2019 citizen rebellion must also come to terms with the MAS. One interpretation emphasizes its populism and its disposition to centralism—and thus, to arbitrariness. Certainly, the story of Evo’s rise and fall tends to confirm this view. The MAS went along when Evo and his entourage insisted on competing for an unprecedented fourth term in the presidency, then a big chunk of the party left him high and dry as the police quit the streets. But the MAS remains the most popular party in Bolivia. It contains social movements and internal structures that are more than appendages for ambitious politicians. And it articulates the interests and concerns of poorer, rural, and indigenous Bolivians whom the country’s Europeanized elites have long excluded from power. How its supporters react to Evo’s overthrow will shape whether the course correction opens the door to a revival of democracy, or merely leads to yet more instability.

## NOTES

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