



Bolivia: Presidential Resignation and Aftermath

November 12, 2019

On November 10, 2019, Bolivian President Evo Morales [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 who sought to remain in office through electoral fraud. The three individuals in line to succeed Morales (the vice president and the presidents of the senate and chamber of deputies) also resigned, leaving Bolivia without clear leadership. The congress is struggling to select an interim leader to serve until new elections are convened.

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 under a new electoral tribunal. President Trump [praised](#) Morales's resignation and said his departure "paves the way for the Bolivian people to have their voice heard." State Department officials have called for all parties to [refrain from violence](#) and issued a [travel warning](#) for Bolivia. Congressional concern about Bolivia has increased over the past year as Morales has pursued a fourth term. [S.Res. 35](#), approved in April 2019, expresses concern over efforts to circumvent term limits in Bolivia.

Morales Government (2006-2019)

President Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous leader, had governed since 2006 as the head of the Movement Toward Socialism (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 President Morales, there has been an erosion of some democratic institutions and relations with the United States have deteriorated. Under

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Morales, annual economic growth averaged some 4.5% from 2006 to 2018 and poverty rates fell from 60% in 2006 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, President 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.

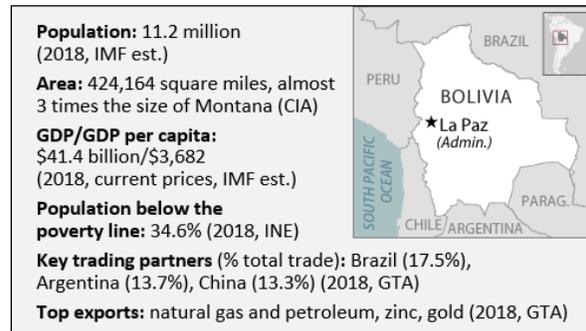
Bolivia's first-round election in October 2019 was marred by allegations of fraud in the vote tabulation. The country's electoral agency said Morales won a narrow first-round victory, but opposition candidate Mesa rejected that result and OAS election observers described irregularities in the process. 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 his 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. With the MAS unlikely to approve Senator Jeanine Añez, an opposition senator who has declared herself interim leader, the path forward in Bolivia 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 from 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.

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