Bolivia: Elections Postponed to October
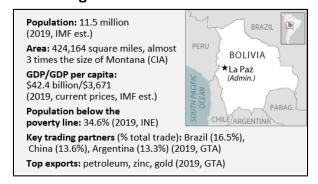
Updated July 24, 2020

On July 23, 2020, Bolivia's electoral tribunal announced the postponement of general elections from September 6 to October 18 due to the escalating Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Bolivia has been polarized since the November 2019 resignation of President Evo Morales of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party and already postponed elections originally scheduled for May 3 due to a national quarantine. Unrest and the surging pandemic (Interim President Jeanette Añez and several in her cabinet have contracted COVID-19) could threaten the elections.

The United States remains concerned about the political volatility in Bolivia and has supported efforts to ensure the upcoming elections are free and fair.

October Elections Annulled

Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president, transformed Bolivia, but observers criticized his efforts to remain in office (he won elections in 2006, 2009, and 2014). In 2017, Bolivia's Constitutional Tribunal removed limits on reelection established in the 2009 constitution, effectively overruling a 2016 referendum in which voters rejected a constitutional change to allow Morales to run for another term.

Figure 1. Bolivia at a Glance

Population: 11.5 million (2019, IMF est.)

Area: 424,164 square miles, almost 3 times the size of Montana (CIA)

GDP/GDP per capita: $42.4 billion/$3,671 (2019, current prices, IMF est.)

Population below the poverty line: 34.6% (2019, INE)

Key trading partners (% total trade): Brazil (16.5%), China (13.6%), Argentina (13.3%) (2019, GTA)

Top exports: petroleum, zinc, gold (2019, GTA)

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

Allegations of fraud marred Bolivia's October election. The electoral tribunal said Morales exceeded the 10-point margin necessary to avoid a runoff over former president Carlos Mesa, but Mesa rejected that result. Some protesters called for a new election; others demanded Morales's resignation.

On November 10, 2019, the Organization of American States (OAS) issued preliminary findings suggesting enough irregularities to merit a new election. (Some experts have since challenged aspects of those findings.) Morales agreed to hold new elections, but the opposition rejected his offer. Morales resigned after police refused to stop protesters, ministers resigned, and civic organizations and the military urged him to step down. He sought asylum in Mexico and then

Argentina. In late November 2019, the MAS-led Congress passed a law to annul the October elections and select a new electoral tribunal. In December, the final OAS election audit report found "intentional manipulation" of the results.

Interim Government

Interim President Añez, a little-known opposition senator from Beni, became president following the resignation of three MAS officials ahead of her in the line of succession. Añez's past anti-indigenous rhetoric and conservative cabinet raised concerns among some of Bolivia's indigenous population, which became empowered under Morales. The MAS-led Congress initially refused to accept Añez's government, and MAS supporters protested. Añez issued a decree giving the military authority to participate in crowd-control efforts and immunity from prosecution while doing so. The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights documented 36 deaths and 400 injuries that occurred in mid-November 2019, including two massacres involving state forces. The government rejected those findings.

According to Bolivia's constitution, the interim government has a limited mandate: to convene new elections. Observers have criticized Añez for exceeding that mandate. Añez reversed many MAS foreign policy positions by expelling Cuban officials, including doctors, and recognizing Interim Venezuelan President Juan Guaidó. Añez's attorney general has charged Morales with terrorism, and prosecutors have pursued cases against former MAS officials. Military officials received promotions without legislative approval.

Although the interim government has strictly enforced a quarantine in response to COVID-19, Bolivia's weak health system has been hobbled. Bolivia received a $327 million International Monetary Fund loan offer for addressing COVID-19, but the legislature has yet to approve the package. In April 2020, the government issued a decree criminalizing "disinformation," reportedly including criticism about its response to COVID-19. In May 2020, police arrested Añez's former health minister for a scandal involving ventilator purchases at inflated prices. As of July 20, Bolivia had 2,151 deaths from the virus.

2020 Elections: Candidates

After the Bolivian Congress passed an election law in November 2019, legislators appointed a new electoral tribunal. In January, that tribunal announced the first-round election would occur on May 3. Following the suspension of the May 3 election, legislators selected September 6 as the new first-round election date. Añez agreed to that date in late June, roughly a month before the tribunal postponed the date to October. Due to COVID-19, observers are concerned about health risks for poll workers, candidates, and voters; international observation teams are likely to be small.

Bolivia's Presidential Candidates

Luis Arce: economist, former minister of the economy (2006-2019) who was generally praised by the International Monetary Fund

Jeanette Añez: former senator and current interim president who abandoned an earlier pledge not to run

Luis Camacho: lawyer and Catholic civic leader from the eastern state of Santa Cruz who led nationwide protests urging Morales's resignation

Carlos Mesa: former journalist who served as president (2003-2005) and who has opposed the MAS but has more moderate positions than Añez and Camacho

Source: Paola Nagovitch, "Explainer: Presidential Candidates in Bolivia's 2020 Special Elections," *Americas Society/Council of the Americas*, February 6, 2020.

Although Arce leads some polls, a second round likely will be needed. Should the anti-MAS candidates unite, they could defeat Arce in a second-round scenario.

U.S. Concerns

The United States remains concerned about political volatility in Bolivia, but its role in supporting a return to democracy may be limited due to tension in Bolivia-U.S. relations under Morales.

The State Department supported the OAS election observation and audit efforts. The United States and 25 other OAS countries issued a November statement rejecting violence and calling for new elections. A December 9 statement by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also called for convening new elections. Following President Trump's January 2020 decision to waive foreign aid restrictions on Bolivia, U.S. support for electoral authorities and civil society groups has totaled some $3 million. U.S. assistance to help Bolivia address COVID-19 has totaled nearly $900,000.

The situation in Bolivia has generated some concern in Congress. S.Res. 447, agreed to in the Senate in January 2020, supports the prompt convening of new elections. H.Rept. 116-444 accompanying H.R. 7608 would prohibit 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 expresses concerns regarding abuses and civil liberties violations committed by the Añez government that could damage the electoral process.

Author Information

Clare Ribando Seelke
Specialist in Latin American Affairs

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