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# What's happening in Bolivia? From the botched 2019 elections to MAS' triumphal return in 2020, and beyond

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ABSTRACT

After winning three presidential elections in a row — 2005 (53.74%), 2009 (64.22%) and 2014 (61.36%) — Evo Morales only got 47.08% in the controversial 2019 election, where he was undermined by accusations of fraud by opponents and international observers. The upshot in 2019 was his overthrow amid street protests, police mutinies and intervention by the Armed Forces. However, almost exactly a year later his party —MAS — won 55.1% of the votes and returned to power on the Luis Arce and David Choquehuanca ticket. What seemed then like a triumphant return of Bolivia's only party with real ties to broad swathes of society would soon be riven by divisions when selecting candidates for the 'departmental' [regional] elections in March 2021. Evo Morales' return from exile in November 2020 and his efforts to stay in charge of the party, and above all to hand-pick candidates himself, led to major internal rifts and electoral defeats. This paper analyses the reasons for the overthrow of the hitherto unbeaten former President and his party, as well as for MAS' swift return to power. In doing so, we focus on the party's relations with its social bases and its dwindling political support during its long, uninterrupted spell in office. It also delves into the transitions of the current period and the impact the political reshuffle in the wake of the 2021 departmental elections may foreshadow for the party's future.

**Keywords:** Bolivia, Crisis, MAS, Social movements, Transitions.

SUMMARY



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## INTRODUCTION

On November 10, 2019, Evo Morales resigned from the Bolivian presidency after over twenty days of raging demonstrations, an OAS [Organization of American States] audit, police mutinies, and a suggestion by the Commander of the Armed Forces, General Kaliman that it was time Morales threw in the towel. Allegations of electoral fraud seemed likely to at best give Morales a knife-edge victory under the Constitutional rules[1] if he were elected President for his fourth term in a row. Meanwhile, protests paralysed the country and culminated in the rise of Jeanine Áñez (a woman who was then a little-known Senator for Beni Department) to the Presidency. The Plurinational Constitutional Court (TCP) appointed her as a caretaker President with a mandate to call new elections in due course. Everything seemed like "the turbulent end of an Era" (Wolff, 2020) yet the new elections held in October 2020 gave MAS — under the Luis Arce/David Choquehuanca presidential ticket — a resounding victory with 55.1% of valid votes.

What had happened to overthrow Bolivia's hitherto hegemonic party and unbeatable leader? How was it that the party was returned to power less than a year later and, moreover, with a decisive majority? This paper analyses: (1) the factors that led to Morales' failure to get re-elected for a fourth time; (2) the socio-political realignments that let MAS regain power so quickly; (3) the parties major ructions

1 The Constitution stipulates that a candidate can be elected during the first round with 50%+1 of valid votes or a minimum of 40% of valid votes and a lead of at least 10 per cent over the second-place candidate. The same also applies on the election of governors. According to the official results, Morales got 47.08% of votes compared with 36.51% for Carlos Mesa in the 2019 General Election.

with its social bases (which came to a head during the candidate selection process for the March 2021 departmental elections).

To these ends, we briefly analyse the origins of Movimiento al Socialismo [Socialist Movement] (MAS) and the political bases underpinning its rise to political hegemony. Next, we look at the reasons for MAS' defeat after the failed 2019 elections. The impacts of the socio-political realignments spurred by the defeat in the 2016 Constitutional Referendum are also analysed, as are their consequences for the Áñez government that led to MAS' return to power in 2020. The paper ends with an analysis of MAS' internal tensions and their spillovers in the 2021 departmental elections, charting likely future prospects and challenges.

## MAS' EMERGENCE AND RISE: THE MOVEMENT'S FOUNDATIONAL PURPOSE AND THE BASES OF ITS HEGEMONY

MAS was founded as a political party to advance the interests of rural unions in 1995, quickly blazing a trail to win Bolivia's presidency of Bolivia in 2005. Following the country's restoration of democracy, rural unions and indigenous communities under the aegis of the *Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia* [Single Union Confederation of Peasant Workers of Bolivia] (CSUTCB) began discussions on setting up a political party that would directly represent them (Van Cott, 2007, p. 68). The coca growers of Chapare made up the most militant group in this confederation. Their radicalism stemmed from government policies for eradicating coca-leaf farming. In 1995, the *Asamblea por la Soberanía de los Pueblos* [Assembly for the Sovereignty of the People] (ASP) was formed but could not overcome the bureaucratic hurdles to registering as a national party. This forced it to first borrow the acronym of *Izquierda Unida* [United Left] (IU), and then that of MAS, which was the one they stuck with. The MAS acronym first appeared in 2002 as part of the MAS-IPSP coalition, for which Morales ran as president.[2] He came a close second, just 1.52 per cent behind the winner. Running for president for the second time, Morales chalked up a record 53.74% of the votes. MAS' first term in government was a turbulent one in which it had to confront the old political elites that had lost their grip over the nation but that were firmly entrenched in the country's Eastern departments. MAS soon became the centre of Bolivian politics and rose to hegemony after being winning the 2009 General Election with 64.22% of the votes.

To understand how MAS became so successful so quickly, one needs to grasp that traditional, grassroots social organisations in Bolivia were much more important than political parties in forging bonds between ordinary citizens and The State (Domingo, 2001; Tapia, 2009). State-building in Bolivia has been a haphazard, stop-go affair, with much of the territory being relegated to the periphery, and linked to the Central Government by proxy through mining or rural unions, community authorities or locally powerful leaders. Thus, to all intents and purposes, these departments operated almost like pocket-sized proto-States (Gray Molina, 2008). This left Bolivia with a weak State but with a strong, self-organised civil society. MAS sprang from live debates in rural Bolivia and was conceived as a political party to represent it. It was structured in such a way as to draw on the strength of MAS' grassroots organisations. This helped it benefit from the fallout from earlier political reforms, and events in the critical period running from 2000 to 2005.

The Popular Participation Act of 1994 finally brought institutional policy to all the country's rural areas, creating over 300 municipalities with their own autonomous budgets (Zuazo, 2012). Ironically, this policy move had been drawn up by the then ruling

2 Translator's note: To avoid confusion, the early MAS party was set up in 1995 but Morales was not one of its founders. In 1997 Morales was one of the co-founders of a revamped MAS. During the 2002 election, MAS had not yet grown into the hegemonic party it would later become under Morales, which is why he stood as a MAS-IPSP coalition candidate.

MNR in an effort to boost its own prestige. Yet the measure breached the institutional dams that had kept national politics in the hands of traditional political elites grouped around the MNR-MIR-ADN troika that had taken turns in the presidency since 1985. Local political leaders (many of them indians and/or working class) initially sought intermediation through traditional parties. Through those parties, they gained their first municipal and council posts. Yet frustration with the lack of resources and support, and with government indifference to local problems led many to seek other options in the next electoral cycle. MAS, which benefited from the work put in by the militant, well-organised coca farmers, won its first municipalities in the Chapare department. The 'defectors' took posts in several of them (Postero, 2007, pp. 143-144; Zuazo, 2009).

Yet what most boosted MAS' political strength was less the influx of such local leaders and more its ability to incorporate grassroots social organisations. From its core of the *Federaciones de Cocaleros de Cochabamba* [Cochabamba Coca-Growers Federations], MAS expanded outwards to include the CSUTCB, the *Federación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas-Bartolina Sisa* [National Federation of Peasant Women-Bartolina Sisa] (CNMCIOB-BS) and the *Confederación Sindical de Comunidades Interculturales de Bolivia* [Trade Union Confederation of Intercultural Communities of Bolivia] (CSCIB) (Cunha Filho, 2018a, p. 134; Silva, 2017, p. 102). These organisations were incorporated into MAS through what Anria and Cyr (2017, p. 1256) call 'intensive links'. This amounted to including such groups in its management structure tiers and candidate lists. Such grassroots organisations had great national reach, giving MAS remarkable departmental coverage throughout Bolivia — a key advantage over its political adversaries, as we shall see later. Such 'intensive links' greatly helped MAS to keep the government coalition together. That was because they raised the costs of defection for its members when government policy clashed with the interests of one of the party's constituent groups. In addition to this core, MAS has also been able to approach other major social organisations, such as: the pro-indian *Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas de Bolívia* [Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia] (CIDOB); the *Consejo Nacional de Ayllus y Markas del Qullasuyu* [National Council of Ayllus and Markas del Qullasuyu] (CONAMAQ); the *Central Obrera Boliviana* [Bolivian Labour Federation] (COB); the *Federación de Cooperativas Mineras* [Federation of Mining Co-ops] (FENCOMIN). However, in these cases there was less organisational integration and more stress on using a mix of plum jobs, electoral quotas, the provision of goods, patronage or concessions covering specific public policies (Anria and Cyr, 2017, p. 1276) to keep everyone on board. This eventually boiled down to 'dissenting intermediation of interests', which is to say "routine interactions in which the government proposes a policy, and the affected grassroots organisations protest vigorously. Negotiations take place and the government abides by the accords reached." (Mayorga, 2019b; also Molina, 2013; Silva, 2017, p. 96).

Both the results of the 2009 national elections and those of the 2010 departmental elections underlined that MAS was Bolivia's only competitive party with truly national appeal. The sundry opposition groups were fragmented into countless departmental or even municipal spots, incapable of offering a coherent, fully-national manifesto. This starkly contrasted with the well-oiled MAS political machine. MAS' opponents were never able to overcome this fatal flaw. MAS' coming to power and its broad incorporation of grassroots organisations (Anria and Cyr, 2017; Silva, 2017; Wolff, 2018) not only marked a deep shift in the political elites (Espinoza, 2014 ) but also the death of the old party system, which was underpinned by a Left-Labour/Right-Capital split. The new split is based on the ethnic-rural/cosmopolitan-urban divide (Faguet, 2019, pp. 207-208), which traditional parties have yet to adapt to. The shift has put MAS at the centre of Bolivian politics (Molina, 2010). Here, the party has brought in some of those on the Left of the earlier divide 'in from the cold' to build strong plebeian. and indigenous-peasant majorities.

## FROM INTERNAL TENSIONS TO THE 2019 ELECTIONS: WEAKNESSES AND STRENGTHS

The long spell in power[3] and major contradictions between an extraction-based economic model and the interests of many in the party's social base sparked tensions. Despite political rifts over the new Constitution and the opposition of some departmental leaders during the first government (2005-2010), the divergences, conflicting interests, and resulting divisions within MAS and the government were kept in check. After the second administration (2010-2015), these divisions no longer threatened party unity, not least because the government had shifted to a more production-based approach. This included a tacit agreement with the agricultural elites of Santa Cruz, and acceptance of some of their demands in exchange for them abandoning their previous confrontational politics (Cunha Filho, 2018b; Wolff, 2016). Without this shift in policy, such internal conflicts might well have been sharper.

In Wolff's words, the model adopted by MAS can be defined as "a neo-developmentalist agenda", which is characterised by a marked increase in the role of The State and stress on social inclusion, with these policies being underpinned by a thriving commodities sector, including privately-managed agroindustry" (2019, p. 114). Following resolution of the departmental divisions during the first government, the new model fostered contacts with the agribusiness elites, leading to conciliation. It also boosted the economy, improved infrastructure, and raised public investment in agriculture. Naturally, the agrarian elites benefited from all this. The government also made concessions to these elites, such as: (i) allowing farming in previously protected areas; (ii) putting a halt to agrarian reform and lengthening the period for verifying land use. On the other hand, the government benefited from the end of open business hostility to its policies, helping maintain agricultural export volumes — something that was needed to fund government investment and social inclusion policies. This need for resources also led to greater investment in hydrocarbons and mining on the one hand, and slacker enforcement of regulations (something that had foreseeable environmental consequences).

The contradiction between a government that takes control of indigenous peoples and social movements but that financially depends on an extraction-based economy and agribusiness led to frictions within the social coalition making up MAS. The most notable of these was the TIPNIS incident in 2011. This was sparked when the government tried to build a highway between Villa Tunari and San Ignacio de Moxos. The highway's route would cross a protected area of indian territory, something made worse by lack of the prior consultation required by The Constitution. The upshot was a CIDOB-organised march which was blocked and attacked before it arrived in La Paz to broad popular acclaim (Hirsch, 2019; Rossell, 2012). The episode opened people's eyes and dented the government's reputation. It only speeded up MAS' steady distancing from its pro-indian CIDOB and CONAMAQ[4] bases, which would lead to the party trying to control these entities by splitting them into 'official' and 'opposition' wings (Cunha Filho, 2018a; McNelly, 2020; Silva, 2017). The TIPNIS affair was not the only case of dissidence but the opposition stayed departmentally split and incapable of coming up with a national opposition discourse. Neither was it able to woo any of MAS' grassroots entities. The upshot was that Morales coasted to re-election in 2014, winning 61.36% of votes, in what — at least in constitutional terms — was MAS' last internal dispute (Cunha Filho, 2018a).

The issue of seeking a successor to Morales was shied away from both during and after the election campaign, however it was soon to come up again and

3 On the 21st of October 2015, Morales beat the record of Andrés de Santa Cruz (1829-1839) as the President with the longest unbroken spell in office.

4 As well as urban environmental groups.

become a key item on the government's agenda (Welp and Lissidini, 2016, p. 173). Taking advantage of its parliamentary majority, MAS approved a constitutional amendment at the end of the first year of the new government's office. The change would enable Morales to run for president once again. Yet in the compulsory ratification referendum, the amendment was rejected on the 21st February 2016 with 51.3% of voters against. It was the government's first electoral defeat. Although the results were promptly recognised and accepted as valid, that did not mean the government was going to give up on the idea. This soon became apparent as MAS began treating Morales' re-election as both a necessity and a foregone conclusion. It was clear the Administration was bent on making it happen (Mayorga, 2019b, pp. 138-141).

The President argued for this as both being demanded by social movements and popular groups, and as the only way to keep the so-called "Process of Change" going. Among the options considered, it was finally decided to bring the case before the TCP — Bolivia's Constitutional Court — to argue that the limit on re-election was incompatible with the American Convention on Human Rights. Said Convention states that political participation is a basic human right. The Court ended up accepting the Government's argument in November 2017,[5] effectively annulling articles 156, 168, 285.II and 288 of Bolivia's Constitution. This made it possible for all Bolivian politicians to be re-elected without limit.

Following on from the referendum result, the government's successful appeal to the TCP united the Opposition, which rallied round the banner of defending the Constitution and democracy (Mayorga, 2019a). This message commanded greater support among the urban middle and upper classes (Molina, 2018), making the government (which had hitherto based its legitimacy on broad social support) much more vulnerable.

First though, one should consider why accusations of undemocratic meddling took little root. This card had been played by the Opposition as soon as MAS gained power in 2006 but with little success. The Opposition accused MAS of abusing the Justice system, persecuting its opponents, avoiding accountability, and unfairly applying the electoral rules to harm its opponents. Such criticisms are warranted, and are echoed in academic debates on the Bolivian political regime's development[6]. Yet critics tend to overlook that the way in which MAS has incorporated grassroots organisations since 2006, and its impact on Bolivian democracy (Wolff, 2018). One impact can be seen in the composition of Parliament (Zegada and Komadina, 2014) and in overhauling the country's bureaucracy (Soruco Sologuren *et al.*, 2014). Although progress has been uneven,[7] one should not underrate the benefits for broad swathes of society.

Here, one should note that many rural and indian Bolivians had long been excluded from the political system (Faguet, 2019). The shift away from the old national split meant that many Bolivians felt that the country was steadily democratising and including them whether directly or indirectly through MAS. Whether they were right or not on this score is something the main democratic indicators shed no light on (Wolff, 2018). Likewise, the Opposition's fiery speeches slamming MAS' 'anti-democratic behaviour' got rapturous applause from the party faithful but failed to win over the many other voters needed to build a working majority" (Molina, 2018, p. 13). One can draw a parallel with the situation in post-Perón Argentina, where many anti-Peronists thought denouncing the regime's anti-democratic deeds would win them the election. What they failed to grasp is that Perón's pro-worker reforms had

5 Judgement 0084/2017.

6 For example, see Cameron (2018) and Sánchez-Sibony (2021).

7 The access and influence of CSUTCB/Bartolinas/CSCIB – the MAS' hard core – is deeper and more direct than other groups, which were also somewhat boosted by the election victory (Wolff, 2018, p. 700).

forged a strong, well-nigh unbreakable bond between the labour unions and Peronism (Cavarozzi, 1986).

Likewise, in Bolivia, much of the population is unaffected by the vitriol hurled at the government in urban and intellectual circles, and instead identifies with MAS and/or Morales. Bolivian public opinion expert Julio Córdova (see Molina, 2018, pp. 12-13) reckons that there are two poles, each making up roughly 35% of voters. One of these firmly supports Morales and his group and the other is strongly opposed. The remaining 30% can be split into two groups with voters floating between them: (1) former MAS voters displeased with the President or government but who do not fully identify with the Opposition and who might vote for MAS again; (2) voters who still support the government but whose support has weakened to the point where they might be won over by the Opposition.

Between the TCP judgement and the 2019 elections, the Opposition tried to challenge Morales' candidacy through: street demonstrations; protests on social networks; appealing to the Plurinational Electoral Board (TCP) to annul the candidacy; appealing to international bodies such as the OAS [Organization of American States] to rule Morales ineligible to stand. Yet the Opposition lacked both the social support and the institutional support to achieve these goals. As a result, it ended up running for the election with several presidential candidates, and from the outset stating that the government was plotting to win the elections by foul means or that it would overturn the result if it lost. The upshot was that the Opposition fielded no fewer than 8 first-round presidential candidates, the main ones being former President Carlos Mesa (*Comunidad Ciudadana*) [Citizen Community] (CC) and Senator Óscar Ortiz (*Bolivia Dice No*) [Bolivia says 'No'] (BDN). This gave Morales a sporting chance of winning in the first round despite the erosion of MAS' electoral support during its term in office. Since The Bolivian Constitutions admits victory by a qualified majority[8] and MAS would start from hard-core support from 35% of the electorate. By contrast, the splitting of the Opposition vote among many candidates created a scenario that greatly differed from the polarisation seen in the referendum. The opinion polls published up until the end of the campaign showed either side could narrowly win the election and that the polling margin of error meant one could only guess the winner. The long-standing underestimation of the rural vote meant Morales might well be re-elected in the first round but that one could not rule out a run-off between Morales and Mesa, in which case the latter seemed to stand a better chance.

Despite the climate of mistrust, the elections passed off without incident. Yet everything changed when votes were being tallied on Sunday, the OEP [Plurinational Electoral Board] announced the suspension of the quick vote count, which then showed 45.71% of votes for Morales against 37.84% for Mesa (at the 83.8 % counted point). This triggered a wave of protest as accusations of electoral fraud spread like wildfire throughout Bolivia's main towns and cities over following days. The situation steadily radicalised and shifted strongly to the right. Civic committees again rose to political prominence, as did figures who used 'hell-fire' Christian rhetoric to slate MAS. One such figure was Luis Fernando Camacho from Santa Cruz. He emerged as a high-profile leader of the street demonstrations, fleetingly eclipsing presidential candidate Mesa.

The government hit back by demanding an electoral audit from the OAS, committing itself to abide by the results. Despite this promise, the riots continued unabated. At a given point, the Cochabamba Police mutinied (soon followed later by police forces in other areas). On November the 10th, Morales resigned after the audit's preliminary results were published, and following a suggestion from the General Staff of the Armed Forces that it might be a

8 See Note 1.

good idea if he left. The Leaders of the Lower House and Senate then resigned. Morales was then replaced by the Second Vice-President of the Senate, Jeanine Áñez, who took over the presidency, in which she took the same reactionary, sermonising tone she had used in the Senate. This paper will not delve into the accusations of electoral fraud or of a *coup d'état* that each side levelled at the other, both of which seem to contain a grain of truth.[9] The upshot of the election was a messy, highly controversial change of government. The idea was that Áñez's government would be a caretaker one, and that new elections would be called in March 2020. In the meantime, the caretaker government gave short shrift to anyone linked to MAS and radically changed government strategy. This seemed to herald the emergence of a new power bloc with long-term prospects (Molina, 2020b). Yet, in October 2020, almost exactly a year after Morales was ousted from office, MAS would win the first round of the presidential elections with the Arce/Choquehuanca ticket, racking up 55.11% of valid votes cast (See Table 1). What happened to explain this swift change in MAS' fortunes?

**Table 1** **National Elections 2020**

| | % valid votes |
|---|---|
| Luis Arce (MAS) | 55.11 |
| Carlos Mesa (CC) | 28.83 |
| Luis Fernando Camacho (*Creemos*) [We Believe] | 14 |
| Chi Hyun Chung (FPV) | 1.55 |
| Feliciano Mamani (PAN-BOL) | 0.52 |

***Source***: Author with OEP data available at https://www.oep.org.bo. Last accessed on 27/10/2021.

## MAS' TRIUMPHANT RETURN AND THE PARTY'S PROSPECTS

After the chaotic first days of Áñez's presidency, the "pacification" of the country by military force,[10] seemed to justify the aforementioned analysis, which argued that a new, reactionary power block was in the making, "comprising the military, police forces, the Justice system, the media, universities, and the organisations and institutions of the middle and upper classes", around which the leaders of both the old and new right-wing parties were articulated (Molina, 2020b, pp. 6-7; Souverein and Exeni Rodríguez, 2020). Yet this new power bloc began to break

9 Wolff (2020) carried out an in-depth analysis of the OEA's auditing and the EU'S informal election report (which also noted that there may have been election fraud), as well as studies that came out later and that sought either to deny or confirm the election fraud allegations. Wolff concluded that the margin of error was too great to say whether the election had been 'fixed' or not but that there were certainly grounds for concern. As to whether the change of government constituted a *coup d'état*, J. L. Andia argued that the elections were "hardly constitutional [...] and were 'a watered-down coup', that [...] involved a handover of power within acceptable legal limits" (2020, p. 101). However, some aspects of the handover constituted a kind of (counter)-revolution (Molina, 2019). The intervention of the Commander of The Armed Forces at the end makes Levitsky and Murillo (2020) and other critical authors see the MAS as an authoritarian political party, leading Sánchez-Sibony (2021) to call the whole thing a *coup d'état*.

10 See Méndez et al. (2021)

down when President Áñez announced on January the 24th 2021 that she would run for re-election. This led to a split in and regrouping of the alliances between the various anti-MAS sectors that had come together under her presidency. For example, the political groups of La Paz's Mayor, Luis Revilla (SOL. Bo), and the businessman Doria Medina (UN) left the alliance that had backed Mesa's candidacy and announced their support for Áñez's[11] re-election, sparking criticism from Mesa that Áñez was going far beyond her role as a caretaker President.[12] The leader of the Comité Cívico de Santa Cruz [Santa Cruz Civic Committee], L.F. Camacho, and former President Tuto Quiroga would say the same. All three men would run for the presidency, once again showing that the Opposition to MAS was still prone to split asunder into quarrelling factions.[13]

On the other hand, the reactionary nature of the 'caretaker' government had become clear for all to see. In addition to repression and judicial persecution,[14] the interim government also sought to reverse as many MAS policies as possible, including purely symbolic ones. This was apparent in the government's communication style, which attacked its opponents in racist, discriminatory terms, resorting to terms such as "savages", "peasant hordes"[15] and so on. Such attacks only helped consolidate MAS' social base. Even strong dissidents who had long distanced themselves from the party, such as Román Loayza or historical rivals such as the pro-indian leader Felipe Quispe, saw the threat posed by Áñez's policies. The danger was those policies would undo all the advances made by indians and peasants over recent years, making tactical support for MAS in the presidential elections the only constructive option.[16]

MAS' renewed voter appeal was clear from the way the scheduled election was repeatedly put off, with the COVID-19 pandemic being seized upon as a pretext (Molina, 2020c). Originally billed for March 2020, the election was put off indefinitely. It was only after days of widespread protests and blockades in August that the President reluctantly consented to an election being held in October. At this juncture, it is worth briefly looking at MAS' internal workings and how Morales' role and relative weight in his governments and the impact of the 2020 election victory on those dynamics.

Morales was MAS' leader[17] and his position was never seriously questioned. However, the nature of his leadership and his symbolic role changed over time. In the beginning, he came across like any other Bolivian leader but little by little his image was built up to what it is today. Within MAS,[18] Evo Morales was the pivotal figure that made party's often contradictory social agglutination of disparate elements possible. He was also the final arbitrator in any internal conflicts (Do Alto and Stefanoni, 2010; Molina, 2020c). His track record of racking up electoral victories raised doubts among supporters and detractors alike as to whether MAS could keep winning without him as a candidate. However, Arce's

11 *PáginaSiete*, 25/01/2020 https://www.paginasiete.bo/nacional/2020/1/25/jeanine-anez-lanza-su-candidatura-va-con-exaliados-de-carlos-mesa-244569.html

12 *PáginaSiete*, 25/01/2020 https://www.paginasiete.bo/nacional/2020/1/25/mesa-anez-comete-una-gran-equivocacion-244585.html

13 *PáginaSiete*, 03/02/2020 https://www.paginasiete.bo/nacional/2020/2/3/ocho-frentes-inscribieron-sus-candidatos-ante-el-tse-245502.html. In the final part of the election battle, both Tuto Quiroga and Jeanine Áñez withdrew their candidacies given their low ratings in the opinion polls.

14 See Molina (2020c, p. 8) for a description of the scope of the judicial persecution.

15 See Molina (2020a)

16 *Página Siete*, 02/03/2020 https://www.paginasiete.bo/nacional/2020/3/2/mas-llama-al-mallku-otros-disidentes-para-fortalecer-el-partido-248296.html and 20/10/2020 https://www.paginasiete.bo/nacional/2020/10/20/choquehuanca-murillo-claves-para-entender-el-triunfo-de-arce-272160.html

17 *Los cocaleros del Chapare [coca farmers in Bolivia's Chapare region*, coca being the plant from which cocaine is made].

18 *PáginaSiete*, 08/01/2018 https://www.paginasiete.bo/nacional/2018/1/8/garca-asegura-perder-sera-suicidio-politico-165779.html

electoral victory showed that MAS was capable of winning without Morales. While this does not detract from the latter's historic weight and influence it does show that Morales is not indispensable. Comparing the 2019 and 2020 election results, on the one hand, and with those of the 2016 referendum, on the other (see Table 2) seems to indicate that him forcing his candidacy on the party did more harm than good, suggesting the party would have won with another presidential candidate.

In any case, Morales's triumphant return to Bolivia, crossing the Argentine border and being cheered by crowds as he made his way to his electoral base in Chapare[19] showed that he still commanded a lot of support. The fact that this happened in the middle of the pandemic stoked fears that Morales might become the regime's *eminence grise* by virtue of his position as MAS' President. Such rumours had always been rife during the campaign, with candidate Arce denying them but it is worth recalling that his candidacy was the result of Morales' meddling in exile in an attempt to force the Choquehuanca-Andrónico Rodríguez ticket on the party.[20] Notwithstanding strong resistance within the party, the Arce-Choquehuanca ticket was approved as an interim solution (Molina, 2020c, p. 11).

**Table 2 Comparison of Election Results, 2016, 2019 and 2020, in percentages of the total number of valid votes***

| | 2016a | 2019b | 2020b |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Home and Abroad** | 48.7 | **47.08** | **55.11** |
| Provinces | | | |
| **Chuquisaca** | 44.17 | 42.35 | **49.06** |
| **La Paz** | **55.83** | **53.16** | **68.36** |
| **Cochabamba** | **54.89** | **57.52** | **65.9** |
| **Oruro** | **52.03** | **48.08** | **62.94** |
| **Potosí** | 46.74 | **49.35** | **57.61** |
| **Tarija** | 39.88 | 40.2 | 41.62 |
| **Santa Cruz** | 39.56 | 34.76 | 36.21 |
| **Beni** | 39.28 | **34.93** | 34.72 |
| **Pando** | 46.02 | **44.29** | **45.8** |

*: bold letters denote first majority.
a: 'Yes' votes in the referendum.
b: votes for MAS in the presidential elections.

Source: Author, drawing on OEP data available at https://www.oep.org.bo. Consulted on 27/10/2021.

19 *PáginaSiete*, 10/11/2020 https://www.paginasiete.bo/nacional/2020/11/10/morales-avanza-al-chapare-con-discursos-triunfalistas-274412.html

20 *PáginaSiete*, 17/01/2020 https://www.paginasiete.bo/nacional/2020/1/17/binomio-choquehuanca-andronico-provoca-tensiones-en-el-mas-243782.html

Similar frictions arose in the selection of candidates for the March 2021 departmental elections but this time there were consequences. Morales, officially the Campaign Manager, once again intervened in the selection of candidates, in some places imposing candidates close to him over those preferred by the party bases. Unlike before, his decision was not accepted as final, and many of the candidates who were not selected chose to run under other acronyms and were elected.[21] The most representative case was that of Eva Copa, who during Áñez's interim term was President of the Senate and gained considerable prominence. However, she was rejected as a candidate for Mayor of El Alto despite acclaim from the grassroots. She then came out as a candidate and was elected by *Jallalla* [Quechua-Aimara word meaning 'Making it Happen'] with 66.8% of the votes. Similarly, Morales' meddling in the selection process led to the party also losing the mayoralties of capitals such as Trinidad and Cobija and the departmental governments of Beni and Pando.[22]

21 *PáginaSiete*, 05/01/2021 https://www.paginasiete.bo/nacional/2021/1/5/candidaturas-ademas-de-el-alto-el-mas-se-fracturo-en-pando-potosi-280124.html

22 Respectively with Cristian Cámara, Ana Lucía Reis, Alejandro Unzueta and Régis Richter (MTS). Also in Chuquisaca, the MAS lost a former member because of Morales, but also in the case of Damián Condori (CST), who was knocked out of the regional elections race in 2015 when he reached the second round, being barred as a candidate by a legal trick. See tables 3 and 4.

**Table 3 Departmental Governors, Regional Elections 2021***

| Department [Region] | Elected Governor | % of valid votes – first round | % of valid votes – second round |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Chuquisaca** | Damián Condori (CST) | 45.62 | **57.32** |
| **La Paz** | Santos Quispe (*Jallalla*) | 25.18 | **55.23** |
| **Cochabamba** | Humberto Sánchez (MAS) | **57.44** | - |
| **Oruro** | Johnny Vedia (MAS) | **46.31** | - |
| **Potosí** | Johnny Maman (MAS) | **44.05** | - |
| **Tarija** | Óscar Montes (*Unidos*) [United] | 38.05 | **54.44** |
| **Santa Cruz** | Luis Fernando Camacho (*Creemos*) | **55.64** | - |
| **Beni** | Alejandro Unzueta (MTS) | **41.79** | - |
| **Pando** | Régis Richter (MTS) | 39.07 | **54.69** |

*: *: bold letters denote electoral victory.

*Source*: Author, drawing on OEP data available at https://www.oep.org.bo. Consulted on 27/10/2021.

**Table 4 Departmental Capitals + *El Alto*, Regional Elections 2021***

| Municipality | Mayor elected | % of valid votes |
|---|---|---|
| ***Sucre*** | Enrique Leaño (MAS) | 33.26 |
| ***La Paz*** | Iván Arias (PBCSP) | 49.52 |
| ***El Alto*** | Eva Copa (*Jallalla*) | 68.7 |
| ***Cochabamba*** | Manfred Reyes Villa (*Súmate*) [Join Us] | 55.63 |
| ***Oruro*** | Adhemar Wilcarani (MAS) | 39.52 |
| ***Potosí*** | Johnny Laly (MCP) | 37.46 |
| ***Tarija*** | Johnny Torres (*Unidos*) | 53.68 |
| ***Santa Cruz de la Sierra*** | Johnny Fernández (UCS) | 35.41 |
| ***Trinidad*** | Christian Cámara (MTS) | 28.48 |
| ***Cobija*** | Ana Lucía Reis (MTS) | 44.64 |

*: There is no second round in municipal elections

Source: Author, drawing on OEP data, available at https://www.oep.org.bo. Consulted on 27/10/2021.

## CONCLUSIONS

MAS is the political group that has won the most mayoralties (240 out of 336 municipalities) and governorships, and remains the party with the broadest territorial representation in Bolivia, standing in every department. The results of the March 2021 departmental elections were disappointing, with MAS winning just two capitals and three departments. In particular, they were a personal defeat for Morales inasmuch as it was his meddling in the selection of candidates that led to the loss of several MAS bastions.

On the other hand, the Opposition remained highly fragmented at the regional level. Tarija and Santa Cruz continue to be governed by new actors from the old political Right, with Óscar Montes (Unidos) and Camacho (Creemos) respectively. In the case of Santa Cruz, Camacho confirmed his rise as the most prominent Right-Wing leader and his hegemony in Santa Cruz, which is once again leading opposition to the national government. On the other hand, former President Mesa – despite coming second and his alliance being the second largest legislative group – was unable to exercise effective leadership, failing to get his group to

even present candidates for many seats and much less win any in any major departments or municipalities.

Yet what is new about the situation is that the main competitors in much of the rest of the country are finally on the same side as MAS in the new electoral cleavage described by Faguet (2019). Movimiento Tercer Sistema [The Third System Movement] (MTS), founded by the former Minister of Education Félix Patzi (with strong pro-indian affinities), knew how to position itself to attract new dissidents from MAS, strengthening positions in The North with the governments of Pando and Beni, in addition to their respective capitals and another eight municipalities in Chuquisaca, La Paz, Cochabamba and Oruro. Likewise, although still limited to La Paz, the Jallalla group had been occupied by the pro-indian leader Felipe Quispe, who died during the campaign and was replaced as candidate by his son, Santos Quispe, who finally won. His formation also won the department, El Alto, and three other municipalities in the department.

Although regional elections have proven tougher to win for the party than presidential elections, it is still too early to say how far these new actors competing in the same part of the political spectrum can offer viable alternatives to MAS. Right now, the party faces two key challenges — the need for internal reform and of letting new leaders rise to the top. The rifts spawned by the myth of Morales' invincibility and indispensability have both made it harder for him to centralise everything in his hands, and less costly for dissidents to resist his impositions. Despite calls in MAS for political renewal, the party's pro-Morales hard core is still unwilling to relinquish control, spelling more internal tensions. Will MAS be able to tackle self-renewal and keep its hegemonic role in Bolivia's political system or will it, like the post-revolutionary MNR, succumb to a combination of internal contradictions and its political competitors? Did the March 2021 regional elections mark the end of the MAS monopoly on rural/indigenous representation or were they just a fleeting reverse? Against this background, one needs to keep an eye on the path taken by Opposition regionalism in Santa Cruz to see whether it stands a chance of competing at the national level or instead splits apart as so many Opposition movements have done in the past.

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