



Notes on the Revolution / Column #30



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Violent coup d'état in Bolivia

By Charles McKelvey

On November 10, 2019, there was a coup d'état against a democratically elected president in Bolivia. During the last fourteen years, the government of Evo Morales, the first indigenous president in the history of the South American nation, has developed a new progressive constitution; has established control over the natural resources of the country; and has elevated the socio-economic indicators of the people. The coup was orchestrated by a racist oligarchic bourgeoisie, with the support of the U.S. government and the international media of communication, which represent the interests of international corporations seeking recovery of control of natural gas reserves.

The coup was planned three or four weeks before the October 20 elections. The plan was to not accept the results of the October 20, claiming electoral fraud, supported in this false claim by the international new media. On election day, Morales was re-elected with a plurality of 47% of the vote; with a ten percent margin over his nearest rival, Carlos Mesa, he was declared



re-elected president, for a third term under the constitution of 2009. In the elections, the Movement toward Socialism (MAS), the political formation led by Morales, retained its two-thirds majority in the national assembly.

The coup plan was implemented beginning on October 20, with fascist violent gangs attacking and burning election centers, symbols of the government, and supporters of MAS. These well-armed para-military groups were joined in a second stage by the police, who attacked and burned the homes of peasants and MAS supporters. Threats were repeatedly made against elected government officials and union leaders, threatening to harm family members if they did not resign their charges. The Armed Forces turned their back on these developments, and the chiefs of the Armed Forces asked the democratically-elected president to resign.

Without police or military security forces under the effective command of the democratically elected executive and legislative branches of government, Evo Morales and Vice President Alvaro García were obligated to resign, with the hope and the appeal that their resignations would stop the campaign of violence against the people and the ministers of the government.

Other high members of the government also resigned, including the President and Vice-President of the Senate. Resigning simultaneously at the same press conference, the President characterized the event as a civic-political-police coup; and the Vice-President described it as an attack on the constitutional order. The President and Vice-President vowed to continue the struggle; they stressed that they were resigning with the hope of bringing to an end the campaign of violence against the people. However, fascist violent gangs continued to pursue MAS supporters, and the homes of government ministers were ransacked during the night.

The decision of the Bolivian president is the politically intelligent decision. If he had mobilized support from loyal sectors of the armed forces and police, he likely would have been at a strategic military disadvantage. By resigning and calling for non-violence, he puts the conflict clearly in the moral terrain, where he and his movement have the clear advantage. National and international support for Morales and MAS are likely to increase. In addition to being politically intelligent, taking a decision to avoid violence is consistent with the ethical sensibilities and humility that Evo Morales always has demonstrated. In the morning of the eleventh, he continued to be present in the national and international public debate, through his tweets, calling for an end to the violence, and reporting that his home had been attacked.

The international news media played its part, presenting the claims of electoral fraud as legitimate and calling for a second round of elections. Representatives of the U.S. controlled Organization of American States, driven by political motives rather than technical analysis, announced findings of electoral fraud. The New York Times, true to its mission as a defender of international capital, published an article by Jorge Castañeda, Mexico's foreign minister from 2000 to 2003 and currently professor at New York University, that portrayed Morales' resignation as a gain for democracy.

The next political events are uncertain. With the resignation of the President and Vice-President of Bolivia and the President and Vice-President of the Senate, the 2009 constitution stipulates that the next in the line of succession to the presidency is the second Vice-President of the Senate, who is Jeanine Añez, an opposition legislator. She is expected to be named President of Bolivia. Some reports indicate that the orchestrators of the coup want to retain constitutional continuity for purposes of legitimation; they intend to call for new elections, but will have important MAS leaders imprisoned, so that they would not be able to be candidates in the elections. At the same time, the political committee of MAS has announced that resistance will continue.



Bolivia, a landlocked country in the mountains, historically has been the poorest country in South America. It is the most indigenous country in Latin America, with 61% of the population identifying themselves as pertaining to one of the several original nations of the region. In accordance with global patterns, Bolivia played a peripheral role in the world-economy, supplying raw materials for the core nations on a foundation of cheap labor. Systems of forced labor were imposed following Spanish conquest of the Inca Empire, which included the indigenous nations of present-day Bolivia. During the course of time, first silver, then tin, and then natural gas and petroleum were extracted and exported for the industrializing economies of the North.

From the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, Bolivia's peripheral role existed alongside autonomous indigenous communities, which were agricultural societies with communal forms of land ownership. As the world-economy expanded, it increasingly consumed indigenous land and autonomy, such that by 1930, the indigenous lands comprised only one-third of national territory, and the number of landless peasants exceeded the number of persons living in indigenous communities.

Bolivian mine workers, peasants, and factory workers formed a popular movement during the twentieth century, resulting in governments committed to the developmentalist project from 1930 to 1985. As was the case generally in Latin America, the project was forged through an alliance between the popular sectors and the national bourgeoisie. It attained some concessions to popular demands and some protection of national industry, protections that did not, however, threaten the interests of foreign corporations. Beginning in 1985, the imposition of the neoliberal project in Bolivia resulted in the elimination of the modest protective measures for the people and for national industry that had been put in place. In the 1990s, mass mobilizations emerged, protesting specific measures of the neoliberal package. From 2000 to 2006, the popular movement intensified, with mass mobilizations, road blockings, general strikes, work stoppages, and hunger strikes, culminating in the resignation of the president in 2005 in the midst of a generalized chaos.

As the renewed popular movement unfolded in the period 1990-2005, new political parties were formed, and they were effective in undermining popular support for the traditional political parties that had cooperated with the imposition of the neoliberal project. One of the new political formations was the Movement toward Socialism, a federation of social movement organizations and unions, founded in 1995. Its principal leader was Evo Morales, an indigenous coca farmer who had been born and raised in a poor town in the Bolivian high plains. Morales won the presidential elections of December 18, 2005.

The government of Evo Morales sought to put into practice an alternative economic model based on control of the natural resources of the nation and the establishment of national sovereignty. In accordance with his campaign promise and a fundamental popular demand, Morales convoked a Constitutional Assembly, which assembled to begin the formulation of a new Constitution on August 6, 2006. Although confronting various maneuvers by the opposition, the new Constitution was approved by popular referendum on January 25, 2009, with 61.4% of the vote.

The 2009 Constitution recognizes the autonomy of the indigenous communities, and thus it establishes the Plurinational State of Bolivia. The Constitution establishes a maximum extension of land of 5000 hectares for personal property; it guarantees access to health services, education, employment, and potable water as constitutional rights; and it prohibits the establishment of a foreign military base in the country.

In addition to establishing an alternative constitutional foundation, the government of Evo



Morales renegotiated contracts with natural gas and petroleum companies, which included accords for the industrialization of the Bolivian processing of natural gas. This resulted in a large increase in state revenues, used to develop a variety of social programs, including programs in literacy, housing, health care, education, and credit for small farmers; and to construct a transportation infrastructure. The Morales government also initiated a land-reform program, beginning with the appropriation of land that was unproductive or that was fraudulently obtained, a common practice during the era of the neoliberal governments.

By 2007, a counterrevolution had taken shape, formed by the owners of the large estates, large-scale businesspersons, leaders of the traditional political parties that benefitted from the previous political-economic order, and transnational corporations. The US government has provided financial support to the counterrevolution.

In spite of the opposition, Morales and MAS maintained political control for fourteen years. In 2009, Morales was reelected president of Bolivia with 64.22% of the popular vote, and MAS won a majority in the National Assembly, including a two-thirds majority in the Senate.

Since 2009 election, the opposition has been able to capture previously non-political Bolivians, through the dissemination of fake news on the social media and through an orchestrated religious crusade, exploiting the religious sentiments and beliefs of the people. Although this led to some erosion of support, Morales nonetheless won the recent October 20 elections for a third presidential term under the 2009 Constitution.

Evo Morales is one of significant leaders in the new political reality that has been forged in Latin America since the beginning of the twenty-first century, which has challenged not only the neoliberal project but also the structures of the neocolonial world-system.

The obligated resignation of Evo Morales is a great setback for Bolivia and for the struggles of the peoples of Latin America to establish sovereignty and true democracy in the region. The movements must regroup and define necessary strategies of resistance and opposition to the U.S. supported fascist coup. The first priority is the freedom and physical safety of Evo Morales, who is an important resource for the struggle of the peoples of Bolivia.

This is Charles McKelvey, reflecting on the unfolding global popular socialist revolution forged by our peoples in defense of humanity.

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