**Headline:** Why Bolivia’s Democratic Comeback Election That Overthrew a Coup Offers Hope for the U.S.

**Teaser:** Bolivians faced a coup one year ago. But in recent peaceful elections, the power of democracy swept the socialist leadership back into power.

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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**[Article Body:]**

Bolivia’s Movement for Socialism (MAS) party is celebrating. A year after a right-wing coup that deposed the Latin American nation’s first Indigenous president, Evo Morales, and after [two election delays](https://www.npr.org/2020/10/17/924868565/bolivia-prepares-for-its-long-awaited-presidential-election), the socialist party proclaimed a huge victory on October 18 after a landslide win by Morales ally Luis Arce. Many media outlets had expected violence, a close election, and even contested results. In an [article](https://www.vice.com/en/article/88a4n4/voters-brace-for-violence-in-hyper-polarized-bolivian-presidential-elections) discussing the “profound polarization” in Bolivia, Vice News’ Amy Booth asked two days before the election if “the vote can return stability to the country.” But Arce, the former finance minister under Morales, who had enjoyed a lead in the polls ahead of the election, prevailed with a margin of victory that surpassed most expectations. Arce secured [55 percent](https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-evo-morales-elections-socialism-bolivia-f8d2fb4ac80db6f7fd8face7c3f7b75d) of all votes compared to less than 29 percent by his closest rival Carlos Mesa, bypassing the need for a runoff race.

Could Bolivia’s election be a harbinger of what the United States may experience around its highly anticipated presidential race? Just as we see in the U.S., officials and observers [urged calm](https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/10/1075532) in Bolivia ahead of an election where violence was expected. But in the end, the vote went forward in a relatively peaceful manner and the results were clear enough that there is no question of who won.

The October 18election was a redo of last year’s debacle when [Morales resigned](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/bolivia-to-hold-new-elections-after-protests-and-international-criticism/2019/11/10/4778e842-03b2-11ea-ac12-3325d49eacaa_story.html) after weeks of political turmoil that followed his reelection to a fourth term. The Organization of American States (OAS) questioned Morales’ legitimacy by its [now-discredited claims](https://cepr.net/press-release/new-york-times-and-new-report-confirm-cepr-analysis-refuting-oas-claims-of-flawed-bolivian-election-results-2/) of electoral fraud. Having served for 14 straight years, Morales became Latin America’s longest-serving elected head of state. He denounced the forces pushing for his resignation as “a coup,” and there is plenty of evidence to back that claim. The Washington Post [reported](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/bolivia-to-hold-new-elections-after-protests-and-international-criticism/2019/11/10/4778e842-03b2-11ea-ac12-3325d49eacaa_story.html) last November that right-wing “[p]rotesters ransacked and burned the homes of senior members of Morales’s Movement for Socialism party and, in at least one instance, kidnapped a relative.” They even began burning down election centers, leading Morales to resign as he begged, “stop burning the houses of my brothers and sisters.”

Mesa, who was seen as one of the architects of this ouster, celebrated Morales’ departure as “[t]he end of tyranny” and insisted that “this was not a coup.” But taking Morales’ place at the helm of the nation, right-wing interim leader Jeanine Áñez went on to oversee an era of repression over the past year that includes political persecution of her opponents and MAS supporters. She had the [backing of the United States](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/as-the-us-backed-government-in-bolivia-unleashes-what-many-see-as-political-persecutions-the-trump-administration-remains-silent/2020/03/06/542b828c-5751-11ea-8efd-0f904bdd8057_story.html), and by many accounts violated the limits of her role as an unelected caretaker president. As per Bolivia’s constitution, the election should have been held within 90 days of Morales resigning, but it took nearly a year.

With echoes of how the right-wing movements in the U.S. use Christianity as a tool of repression, Áñez’s government [went down a similar path](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/16/world/americas/bolivia-anez-morales.html), inserting Catholic rituals into the government of a secular nation. In an apparent reference to the Indigenous culture that Morales had infused into his role as president, Áñez said, “We have tied all the demons of the witchery and thrust them into the abyss. Satans, get out of Bolivia now.” Not surprisingly, Indigenous Bolivians and MAS supporters denounced her statements as [racist](https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/2020/03/09/interim-bolivian-president-jeanine-anez-recalls-painful-past-remarks/4982763002/).

Protesters and opposition forces contend that it was Morales’ bid for unlimited presidential terms that led to his downfall. But the socialist leader and his supporters say a right-wing backlash against his anti-poverty policies was at the heart of the coup. In anticipation of this year’s race, Áñez addressed the United Nations, casting the 2020 election as a [choice](https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/09/1073402) between “democracy or dictatorship.” The day before the election, the [New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/18/world/americas/bolivia-election-evo-morales.html) proclaimed that the race “was widely viewed as a referendum on the 14-year political project of Mr. Morales, a towering figure in Bolivian politics who lifted hundreds of thousands out of poverty but whose policies and rhetoric often divided the country.”

Both Áñez and the New York Times inadvertently made the case for the demise of right-wing authoritarian rule in Bolivia as the nation’s voters ultimately used democratic means to overturn the post-coup government by a wide margin. Even after the election proved the socialist party’s legitimacy, mainstream media outlets here in the U.S. glossed over the fact that Morales had been ousted in a coup a year ago, as per [detailed analysis](https://fair.org/home/after-socialist-victory-in-bolivia-media-still-whitewash-coup/) by the media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR). One opinion writer in the New York Times even went as far as claiming the 2019 coup [offered a useful model](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/27/opinion/bolivia-election-arce-morales.html) of how nations can get past problematic leaders. The subheadline of this op-ed by Brendan O’Boyle, senior editor at Americas Quarterly, stated, “The ability to move past controversial leaders can energize the movements and the values they champion,” ignoring the fact that Morales was ousted in a coup (O’Boyle wrote of the coup that only “some have called” it by this name).

But Arce’s election is a vindication for MAS and Morales. It means that the socialist program of eradicating poverty still resonates deeply. Even the [Associated Press](https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-bolivia-evo-morales-elections-voting-fraud-and-irregularities-1a7d1e1d638f668b62d39d9e5e326297) admitted, “Bolivia, once one of the most politically volatile countries in Latin America, experienced a rare period of stability under Morales.” Bolivian political analyst Carlos Toranzo told the [Wall Street Journal](https://www.wsj.com/articles/bolivian-election-shapes-up-as-battle-over-former-president-evo-morales-11603018800), “Everyone who is voting for Arce is, in reality, voting for Evo Morales.” Still, Arce faces a tough social and political landscape going forward. Before the ballots were cast, CNN [explained](https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/17/americas/election-bolivia-intl/index.html) that in Bolivia’s case, “Whoever wins will inherit debilitating protests, a beleaguered public health system, and an economy mired in recession.”

Such a description could apply to the United States after the November 3 race, whether or not President Donald Trump loses to former Vice President Joe Biden. In spite of many deep differences with the United States, Bolivia offers several lessons for American democracy.

As in the United States, the coronavirus crisis has played a critical role in impacting election outcomes in Bolivia. The Latin American nation experienced one of the worse infection and death rates in the world. In August, [one report](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/22/world/americas/virus-bolivia.html) explained that Bolivia’s “extraordinary rise in death, adjusted for its population, is more than twice as high as that of the United States, and far higher than the levels in Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom.” This appears to be part of a [global trend](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/02/briefing/coronavirus-populist-leaders.html) where right-wing leaders lacking legitimacy have failed to rein in the pandemic. In the United States, [President Trump’s dereliction](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-trump-coronavirus/trumps-handling-of-coronavirus-pandemic-hits-record-low-approval-reuters-ipsos-poll-idUSKBN26T3OF) on the virus has clearly dampened voter enthusiasm.

In both Bolivia and the United States, what is at work is an ideological battle over the role of government in supporting vulnerable populations. The economic platforms offered by right-wing governments in Latin America and the U.S.’s Republican Party essentially offer a brutal vision where the wealth of elites is protected and the rabble is left to fend for itself. In choosing socialism, Bolivians have reclaimed their right to a government that serves ordinary people.

Here in the United States, Biden hardly offers a socialistic vision of the kind that Morales espouses. But in contrast to Trump, Biden’s platform is enough of a rejection of libertarian economic ideals that even in a nation as capitalist as America, there is hope for a more civilized future through democratic means.