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The 2009 presidential and legislative elections in Bolivia

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Text

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On 6 December 2009, Bolivia held presidential and parliamentary elections, a year ahead of schedule but in line with a new constitution approved by voters in January 2009. This was the fifth time voters had been to the polls since the October 2003 protests that led to the resignation of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada of the *Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario* (Nationalist Revolutionary Movement, MNR) party. As such, the election took place in an atmosphere of considerable polarization and rapid political change. Evo Morales of the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (Movement for Socialism, MAS) party won in a comfortable re-election and increased his party's legislative representation. The election also featured two novelties: a number of popular referendums on various levels of subnational autonomy, and the first time citizens overseas were able to vote.

1. Background

Morales was elected in 2005 after a series of political crises stemming from conflicts with social movements that were dissatisfied with longstanding social and economic inequalities. In 2003 such diverse movements had converged in opposition to exporting natural gas to the US through Chile, leading to weeks of escalating public protests that left 59 dead and the resignation of Sánchez de Lozada, who had been elected in 2002 and led a coalition government including all the traditional parties. Vice-president Carlos Mesa resolved the gas issue through a popular referendum but was ultimately unable to balance conflicting popular demands, including demands from the

eastern *media luna* departments (Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando, Tarija) for regional political autonomy.¹ On 6 June 2005, Mesa resigned following a series of protests. Special elections were held in December 2005, two years ahead of schedule.

That election, won by Morales and MAS, started a political realignment. After finishing second in the 2002 election, MAS had emerged as the country's largest political party after the 2004 municipal elections. The 2005 presidential election saw a continued decline for the traditional parties: only the MNR fielded a list of candidates and saw its worst showing since it was founded in 1941. The political system is now marked by deepening polarization between MAS and a loose alliance of establishment politicians, business elites, and regional political bosses.

Of particular importance is the emergence of autonomy movements in the *media luna*. As part of the June 2006 constituent assembly election, voters in those departments also voted in favor of regional autonomy (voters in the remaining five departments rejected autonomy) but Morales rejected their demands. This led to a prolonged crisis that hindered the work of the constituent assembly. Yet another complication was added by a dispute over the location of the capital, which mobilized residents in Sucre (the site of the constituent assembly). The decision to reconvene the assembly (without opposition delegates) in a different city sparked fierce resistance. The matter was resolved at the eleventh hour by a congressional agreement, mediated by the Church and international observers, that included approval of a revised constitutional draft in

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¹ These provinces are called “the half moon” (*media luna*) because that is the shape they make on a map.

January 2009 and a transitional election scheduled for later that year.

2. Electoral system

Bolivia retains a presidential system with a bicameral legislature. However, the 2009 Constitution introduced several reforms. In particular, the previous system of “parliamentarized presidentialism” – whereby if no presidential candidate received 50% in the popular vote, the newly-elected legislature chose the president (Mayorga, 1997) – was replaced by a two-round runoff system. Under this system, presidents can still win in the first round with 40% of the vote provided that they have at least a ten point lead over the nearest rival. Immediate re-election is also now permitted. Also retained were the mixed-member proportional electoral system for the Chamber of Deputies and the method of fused balloting for the Senate, President, and the PR tier in the Chamber of Deputies. However, seven special indigenous single-member districts were introduced, and the Senate was enlarged in size.

The 130-member Chamber of Deputies is now elected in three tiers: 70 seats elected in single-member (uninominal) districts by simple plurality (no change from 2005), seven seats elected in special indigenous single-member districts (one in each of the country’s nine departments except for Potosí and Chuquisaca), and 53 PR (plurinominal) seats elected on the basis of a party list headed by the presidential ticket. The plurinominal seats are allocated by the d’Hondt formula (with district magnitudes ranging from 13 in La Paz to 1 in Pando) to make overall seat allocations consistent with each party’s presidential vote. The size of uninominal districts is not uniform and results in the under representation of urban areas.

The Senate represents each of the nine departments equally but each department was awarded an extra seat, taking the body’s size to 36 seats. Allocation of Senate seats is still tied to presidential votes. However, the formula changed in 2009. Previously, the winning party won 2 seats and the second-place party won the remaining seat, regardless of vote shares; now, all four seats are allocated using d’Hondt.

These changes, while significant, were a substantial compromise from the draft constitution, which would have eliminated the Senate entirely and replaced it with a unicameral legislature. Additionally, the original draft of the electoral law established fourteen special indigenous seats, rather than just seven. These compromises drew criticism from members of Bolivia’s indigenous communities, which represent about two thirds of the population. In yet another compromise, Morales agreed to consider his 2005–2010 presidential term as his “first,” meaning that a victory in 2009 would count as his re-election (though he has hinted he may renege on this).

Other changes to the electoral system included a new registration system that required all citizens over the age of 18 to re-register only months prior to the election. Additionally, under the new constitution, citizens living abroad were eligible to vote in the presidential election (although their votes were not used to calculate parliamentary seats). Polling stations were set up in Spain, Argentina, Brazil, and the US.

3. Candidates and parties

There was never any doubt that the President would seek re-election under the new constitution. Although not a central figure in the protests that toppled Sánchez de Lozada in 2003, Morales (a former coca farmer) had consolidated MAS into the principal party for dissatisfied and marginalized Bolivians (including indigenous groups) by pushing for the new constitution, partially nationalizing the natural gas industry, and limiting coca eradication. He also sought to increase his base of support, particularly among the La Paz middle-class, through his successes in generating economic growth and investing in social programmes. In 2009 he formed important alliances with key middle-class organizations and recruited prominent members of the intelligentsia—such as Ana María Romero, a former public ombudsman during the centre-right Hugo Banzer presidency (1997–2001)—to top positions on candidate lists.

In contrast, the opposition was unable to coordinate or establish an institutionalized party. The traditional parties that had dominated the elections since the return to democracy did not field candidates and the chief vehicle of the centre-right in 2005, *Poder Democrático y Social* (PODEMOS), did not survive beyond its electoral debut. Efforts by various opposition leaders to establish a “unity front” continued well into August but ultimately failed, leaving several presidential hopefuls on the sidelines.

Morales’s principal challenger was Manfred Reyes Villa. He had been elected prefect of Cochabamba in 2005 but was removed in the August 2008 recall referendum. Reyes Villa’s electoral front, the *Plan Progreso para Bolivia-Convergencia Nacional* (PPB-CN) was a patchwork of regional opposition figures (PPB was the party of José Luis Paredes, the former prefect of La Paz; CN was an Evangelical party formed for the 2006 constituent assembly election). That Reyes Villa became the candidate of the anti-reform right was ironic since, in 2002, he and Morales had campaigned for the same segment of the electorate dissatisfied with the traditional parties and their policies (Singer and Morrison, 2004).

The electoral field included six other candidates, though most of these failed to gain much traction. Samuel Doria Medina, a concrete magnate and former planning minister (1991–1993) who placed third in the 2005 election, again campaigned with *Unidad Nacional* (UN), the party he formed in 2004. Doria Medina never registered above 11% in pre-electoral polls. Another centrist candidate, Potosí mayor René Joaquino of *Alianza Social* (AS), fared still less well, never polling above 4%. Among the remaining candidates were two former Morales allies and MAS co-founders, Roman Loayza and Alejo Véliz.

4. Campaign

Morales entered September with 60% approval ratings, a steady increase from a low of 49% in March. His rise in popularity partly reflects Bolivia’s growing economy: Bolivia had the fastest growing economy in South America in 2009 and real per capita GDP has grown each year Morales has been in office (though inflation has also

increased to around 10%). Survey data also show that the most commonly cited reason for approval of Morales was his support for anti-poverty programs, such as expansion of the system of universal subsidies for the elderly (a programme begun during the first Sanchez de Lozada presidency, 1993–1997) and the establishment of cash transfers to poor families who enrolled their children in primary school (IPSOS, 2009). Such programmes are largely funded by the partial nationalization of the hydrocarbon and mining industries, which tripled government revenues from these sectors. At the same time, the most commonly cited concern of those who disapproved of Morales was that he “generates racism, divides the country, and does not govern for everyone”. Numerous opposition figures also argued that Morales’s economic policies were unlikely to be sustainable or to reach beyond the poorest sectors to generate long-term growth.

The Morales campaign emphasized his economic policies and promised continued growth and development, using slogans such as “*De un país hipotecado a una Bolivia industrializada*” (“From a mortgaged country to an industrialized country”) and “*El cambio es tuyo*” (“The Change is yours”). Morales and MAS also campaigned on the back of the new constitution, despite criticisms that the final document had been substantially revised to placate opponents. His campaign also sought a difficult balance between a catch-all alliance (including the middle-class) and the use of polarizing rhetoric attacking the party’s “reactionary” opponents.

The opposition focused on various themes: restoring national unity, criticism of Morales’s economic policies, defending democracy, and expanding regional autonomy. Reyes Villa pledged to revisit several constitutional reforms, particularly those that he argued went so far towards ethnic pluralism as to threaten national unity, although he supported fiscal and political decentralization to Bolivia’s departments (many of which are governed by Morales’s opponents). On the economic policy front, Reyes Villa emphasized his previous experience with public works programs as mayor and prefect of Cochabamba. He also argued that the government’s increase in hydrocarbon and mining revenues had come at the cost of an overall decrease in investment in those sectors, which would hurt

Bolivia in the medium and long term. For his part, Doria Medina stressed his own entrepreneurial success, and his party’s advertisements emphasized the need to “put Bolivians back to work”. Joaquino presented himself as a viable, moderate alternative to Evo Morales, while also appealing to the growing Evangelical vote by selecting a Santa Cruz minister as his running mate.

Among opposition candidates, Reyes Villa did most to take up the regional autonomy banner, starting with his selection of Leopoldo Fernández as his running mate. Fernández, elected prefect of the *media luna* department of Pando in 2005, had been deposed by Morales and imprisoned for his role in political violence that left 15 dead in September 2008. The selection of Fernández was calculated to appeal to *media luna* autonomy supporters and those who feared Morales’s government was increasingly authoritarian. Throughout the campaign, while championing national unity, PPB–CN ads featured Reyes Villa and Fernández on a red and yellow field with the phrase “*el verde te lo pones tu*” (“you put the green on”). The three colors are on the Bolivian tricolor flag, but green is the color of the *media luna* autonomy movements.

Overall, the campaigns did not significantly change overall voter preferences. Candidates’ popularity shifted little throughout the campaign, with polls from September through November projecting a comfortable Morales victory – never with less than 57% of the vote – followed by Reyes Villa with 21–24% and Doria Medina with 12–15%. Additionally, no formal presidential debates were held because, as in 2005, Morales refused to attend them.

5. Results

Electoral turnout hit a record high, as 95% of Bolivian voters cast ballots, up ten points from the already impressive turnout in 2005. An additional increase in voter registration meant that the number of voters increased by 1.6m. An additional 125,000 Bolivian citizens living abroad also voted in the presidential race.

As expected, Morales and MAS emerged victorious, winning more than 64% of the vote (see Table 1). Interestingly, Morales’s support was slightly higher among citizens living outside Bolivia, though there were sharp differences

Table 1
Results of the Bolivian presidential election, 6 December 2009.

	In Bolivia		Outside Bolivia		Overall	
	Votes	Votes (%)	Votes	Votes (%)	Votes	Votes (%)
Evo Morales (MAS)	2,851,996	63.9	91,213	75.8	2,943,209	64.2
Manfred Reyes Villa (PPB–CN)	1,190,603	26.7	22,192	18.4	1,212,795	26.5
Samuel Doria Medina (UN)	255,299	5.7	3672	3.1	258,971	5.7
René Joaquino (AS)	104,952	2.4	1075	0.9	106,027	2.3
Ana Maria Flores (MUSPA)	21,829	0.5	1428	1.2	23,257	0.5
Roman Loayza (<i>Gente</i>)	15,388	0.3	239	0.2	15,627	0.3
Alejandro Véliz (PULSO)	12,635	0.3	360	0.3	12,995	0.3
Remi Choquehuanca (BSD)	9709	0.2	196	0.2	9905	0.2
Total valid votes (% total votes)	4,462,411	94.3	120,375	96.2	4,582,786	94.3
Null votes (% total votes)	116,839	2.5	3525	2.8	120,364	2.5
Blank votes (% total votes)	155,089	3.3	1201	0.1	156,290	3.2
Total votes (% registered voters)	4,734,339	95.3	125,101	74.0	4,859,440	94.6
Registered voters	4,970,458		169,096		5,139,554	

Table 2
Results of the Bolivian legislative elections, 6 December 2009.

	Senators and multi-member lists		Single-member seats		Indigenous seats	
	Votes	Votes (%)	Votes	Votes (%)	Votes	Votes (%)
MAS	2,851,996	63.9	2,050,547	57.3	24,928	77.6
PPB–Convergencia	1,190,603	26.7	962,648	26.9	4907	15.3
UN	255,299	5.7	260,994	7.3	1080	3.4
AS	104,952	2.4	140,262	3.9	289	0.9
MUSPA	21,829	0.5	63,007	1.8	268	0.8
<i>Gente</i>	15,388	0.3	33,159	0.9	187	0.56
PULSO	12,635	0.3	37,697	1.1	192	0.6
BSD	9709	0.2	30,054	0.8	187	0.6
Total valid votes (% total votes)	4,462,411	94.3	3,578,368	76.5	32,109	71.6
Null votes (% total votes)	116,839	2.5	104,350	2.2	1150	2.6
Blank votes (% total votes)	155,089	3.3	995,143	21.3	11,579	25.8
Total votes (% registered voters)	4,734,339	94.3	4,677,861	94.5	44,838	49.5
Registered voters	4,970,458		4948,823 ^a		90,553 ^a	

Corte Nacional Electoral (<http://www.cne.org.bo>)

^a Because voters in some parts of the country have the option of voting in either the regular or indigenous single-member-district seats, the combined registered voters for both types exceeds the presidential electorate.

between Argentina and Brazil (where MAS won with more than 90%) and those living in Spain (where MAS won a 48% plurality) and the US (where Reyes Villa won with 61%). Reyes Villa came in a distant second, although his vote share of over 26% was higher than predicted by the polls. That suggests that he gained from strategic voting by anti-MAS voters, who shifted away from third-placed candidate Doria Medina, leaving the latter with just 6% after polling at 12% for most of the campaign.

MAS also dominated the legislative election. MAS candidates won in 57 of the 70 uninominal districts and in all but one of the seven special indigenous seats (a PPB–CN candidate won in Pando). Many of these contests, however, were narrowly won and support for individual party candidates across all uninominal ballots was only 57% (more than six points less than Morales's figure). The large number of uninominal seats won by MAS candidates limited its ability to pick up additional plurinominal seats. As in 2005, the opposition won about half of its seats through compensatory plurinominal lists (see Table 2). PPB–CN candidates won in only 19 uninominal districts (mostly in the *media luna*); AS picked up two uninominal seats (in Potosí). Candidates from Doria Medina's UN won no uninominal districts, but the party won three plurinominal seats. As a result, MAS now holds supermajorities in both legislative chambers, an improvement on its 2005 position (see Table 3). PPB–CN has taken the place of PODEMOS as the principal opposition

party, though it now holds a smaller share of seats in both chambers.

MAS maintained and expanded its electoral base among the country's poorest citizens, particularly in the Andean highlands. Exit polls suggest Morales received about 70% of the poor vote (*La Razón*, 2009). This reflects a combination of increased social spending targeted to the very poor and the strong use of "symbolic" ethnic politics. However, Morales' outreach to the middle-class paid dividends, as he won almost as much support among wealthier voters as did Reyes Villa (33%–36%). Moreover, while Morales's support remained highest in the Andean highlands, his party made enough inroads in the *media luna* to win at least two senate seats in all departments.

This suggests that Morales's success in maintaining a relatively stable economy and a balanced budget allowed his party to reach out to economic elites. Finally, the MAS strategy of identifying competitive uninominal candidates who could carry their districts worked. Between 2005 and 2009 the number of MAS uninominal seats increased from 45 to 57 and overall uninominal votes for MAS increased by 14 percentage points (more than the 10% increase for Morales), suggesting MAS is taking steps towards consolidation as a party.

The opposition, in contrast, suffered both from the new rules and a failure of coordination. While it could have done little to prevent Morales's re-election, failure to rally around a single candidate cost the opposition the seats needed to

Table 3
Distribution of legislative seats following the Bolivian elections of 2009.

Party	Chamber of Deputies			Senate					
	Multi-member	Single-member	Indigenous	Total	%	Change	Total	%	Change
MAS	33	57	6	96	73.8	+18.5	26	72.2	+27.8
PPB–CN	17	19	1	37	28.5	–4.6	10	27.8	–20.4
UN	3	0	0	3	2.3	–3.8	0	0.0	–3.7
AS	0	2	0	2	1.5	+1.5	0	0.0	–
Others	0	0	0	0	0.0	–11.4	0	0.0	–3.7
Total	53	70	7	130	100.0		36	100.0	

Corte Nacional Electoral (<http://www.cne.org.bo>)

check Morales as they were able to do in 2005, when PODEMOS lost the presidency but won a plurality in the Senate. Changes in the electoral system also benefited MAS at the margins. Under the previous electoral system, which guaranteed the second-placed party in each province one Senate seat, MAS would have won only 15 of 27 Senate seats (60%). Under the new rules, MAS was able to win enough votes to win all four Senate seats in three departments (La Paz, Oruro, and Potosí). The same held for the lower house where the new indigenous districts clearly advantaged MAS, both because such seats were expected to be won by MAS candidates and because the loss of plurinominal seats hurt the opposition where it could have made up for disproportional losses in uninominal districts.

6. Conclusions

The 2009 election consolidated a bipolar political system marked by a dominant MAS on the left and an antagonistic, fractured, but entrenched opposition on the right. MAS has not fully transformed itself from a loose collection of social movements and political organizations into a modern, institutionalized political party, but Evo Morales commands a significant following that has carried his party to several electoral victories over the past five years. The feat is even more remarkable when one remembers that MAS made its electoral debut in 2002.

While Evo Morales clearly won a popular mandate, there are signs that he will face serious challenges during his second term. Despite winning substantial supermajorities in the legislature, MAS faces important constraints imposed by the new constitution, which included radical reforms to decentralize the country. In addition to voting for presidential and legislative candidates, voters in the five

“Andean” departments also approved a referendum for regional autonomy. In April 2010, voters in all nine Bolivian departments will go to the polls to elect governors and assemblies for newly organized autonomous governments. In addition, voters in several municipalities voted for special recognition as “indigenous communities,” with special constitutional legal status. These elections will both give the opposition opportunities to reinforce their regional bases (especially in the *media luna* where opposition parties are expected to win) while testing the unity of Morales’ coalition.

Already a rift has opened between MAS and a key ally, the *Movimiento Sin Miedo* (MSM) party of Juan Del Granado, the popular mayor of La Paz. As a key ally, MSM is credited with helping Morales to appeal to middle-class voters. As a reward, MSM and other middle-class candidates were given choice positions on party lists. After MSM announced that it would campaign independently of MAS in the April 2010 local elections, Morales became openly hostile towards the party, which has generated tension in the legislative ranks. Already plagued by important defections since 2005, the greatest challenge for Morales may be to keep his expanded coalition together.

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The presidential election in Ukraine, January–February 2010

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1. Background

The 2010 presidential election was Ukraine’s fourth since the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991.¹ The

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¹ On earlier presidential elections, see (Birch, 1995, 2002) and Hesli (2006).