

Bolivian elections: Why did Evo win?

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Introduction by Richard Fidler

In Bolivia's December 6 [general election](#) the governing Movement Towards Socialism (MAS-IPSP), headed by President Evo Morales, won a resounding victory, with 63.46% of the votes. The vote for its nearest rival, the right-wing PPB-Convergencia headed by Manfred Reyes Villa, was 27.15%.

Perhaps even more important, the MAS candidates won a two-thirds majority in both the Senate and the Plurinational Legislative Assembly, which will enable the government to proceed with important legislation implementing key provisions of the new Constitution ratified in January of this year. The MAS will have [25 of the 36 Senators and 90 of the 130 deputies](#). The MAS vote increased significantly even in some bastions of the right wing, in Santa Cruz, Pando and Beni departments.

In a parallel referendum held consecutively, a majority vote for indigenous autonomy was registered in at least 8 of the 12 municipalities.

In the following article, written shortly after the election, the Argentine socialist Atilio Boron analyzes the significance of the MAS election victory with particular reference to its implications for the left in the countries neighboring Bolivia, the "Southern Cone" comprising Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Chile.

When he is sworn in for his second term of office, on January 22, Evo Morales will be unveiling some 15 bills that are major components of his [program](#) in the Legislative Assembly in the coming year. They include a vast overhaul of the state apparatus through provisions on indigenous and regional autonomy and a new constitutional tribunal; establishment of universal medical insurance; an agrarian reform law providing for expropriation of unused lands deemed appropriate for agricultural use; and anti-corruption laws that will authorize investigations of major private fortunes currently evading taxation.

Why did Evo win?

A week ago we were celebrating the triumph of Pepe Mujica in Uruguay. Today we have renewed, and more profound reasons, to celebrate the extraordinary victory of Evo Morales. As the Bolivian political analyst Hugo Moldiz Mercado pointed out some time ago, the convincing verdict of the ballot boxes marks at least three extremely important milestones in the history of Bolivia: (a) Evo is the first president democratically re-elected in two successive terms; (b) he is also the first to improve his percentage of votes from his initial electoral victory: from 53.7% to the present 63.3%; and (c) he is the first to obtain an

overwhelming majority in the Plurinational Legislative Assembly. Moreover, although we do not yet have the definitive voting results, it is almost certain that Evo will obtain the two thirds in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies that would allow him to appoint judicial authorities and apply the new Constitution without opposition. All of this makes him, from the institutional standpoint, the most powerful president in Bolivia's tumultuous history. And a president who is committed to the construction of a socialist future for his country.

Obviously, these facts will not prevent Washington from repeating its well-known criticisms about the "defective institutional quality" of Bolivian democracy, Evo's "populism" and the necessity to improve the political functioning of the country in order to guarantee the popular will, as for example they are doing in Colombia. In that country alone, some 70 supporters of President Álvaro Uribe among the members of parliament are being investigated by the Supreme Court for their alleged links with the paramilitaries, and 30 of them have already been given jail sentences. Four million persons displaced by the armed conflict, a surge in drug trafficking and paramilitary activity under official protection and with Washington's acquiescence, the systematic violation of human rights, submission of national sovereignty to the United States through a secretly negotiated treaty that conceded the installation of seven U.S. military bases in Colombian territory, and the fraudulent manipulation of the process to re-elect President Uribe, are all features of a democracy of high "institutional quality" that are no cause for the least concern by the self-styled custodians of democracy in the United States.

The Bolivian leader's performance is impressive. He obtained an overwhelming triumph in the convening of the Constituent Assembly, in July 2006, which would establish the institutional foundations of the future Plurinational State. He won another crushing victory in August 2008 (67%) in the Recall Referendum forced on him by the opposition-controlled Senate with the openly professed objective of overthrowing him. In January 2009, 62% of the voters approved the new Political Constitution of the State, and just a few hours ago he obtained a further plebiscitary ratification by almost two thirds of the electorate. What lies behind this impressively successful electoral machine — indestructible notwithstanding the erosion of four years of administration, the obstacles imposed by the National Electoral Court, the hostility of the United States, numerous campaigns of destabilization, attempted coups d'état, separatist threats and assassination plots?

This is a government that has fulfilled its election promises and accordingly has developed an active social policy that has won it the indelible gratitude of its people: the Bono Juancito Pinto [a family allowance] that is given to more than a million children; the Renta Dignidad, a universal [pension] program for all Bolivians over the age of 60 who lack another source of income; and the Bono Juana Azurduy, a payment to pregnant mothers. A government that has eradicated illiteracy, applying the Cuban "Yo Sí Puedo" methodology that taught more than a million and a half persons to read and write in about two years, with the result that on December 20, 2008, UNESCO (not Evo's supporters) declared Bolivia a territory free of illiteracy. This is an extraordinary achievement for a country that has suffered an age-old history of oppression and exploitation, subjected to heartbreaking poverty by its ruling classes and their imperial friends despite the enormous wealth it retains in its depths, and which now, with Evo's government, is being recovered and placed in the service of the people. On the other hand, the internationalist solidarity of Cuba and Venezuela has also allowed the construction of numerous hospitals and medical centres, while thousands of persons are recovering their vision thanks to Operation Milagro [Miracle]. Major advances are being registered in the area of agrarian reform — about a half-million hectares of land

have been transferred to the hands of the farmers — and in the promised recovery of the basic oil and gas resources, which at the time provoked some nervousness among its neighbours, especially Brazil, more concerned with guaranteeing the profitability of Petrobras than in cooperating with Evo's political agenda. Lastly, the careful handling of macro-economics has enabled Bolivia, for the first time in its history, to count on significant reserves, an estimated ten billion dollars, and a tax bonanza that, combined with the collaboration of Venezuela under the ALBA agreements, has enabled Morales to carry out many infrastructural projects in the municipalities and to finance his ambitious social agenda.

Of course, many matters are still pending, and not everything that has been done is exempt from criticism. In a recent column Pablo Stefanoni, editor of the Bolivian edition of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, warned of the unstable coexistence between “an eco-communitarian discourse in international forums and a developmentalist sermonizing without much nuance in the domestic context”. Although this tension exists, it must be acknowledged that Evo's eco-communitarian vocation amply transcends the level of his arguments in international forums: his commitment to Mother Earth, the Pachamama, and the original peoples is sincere and effective and is a milestone in the history of Our America. Of course, the focus on natural resources extraction in his pattern of development is undeniable, but also inevitable given the brutally predatory characteristics that capitalist accumulation has assumed in Bolivia. It is completely unreal to think that overnight the people's government could sustain an alternative model of development setting aside the exploitation of the country's immense mineral and energy resources. Bolivia does not have the latitude, at least for now, that Ireland or Finland had in their day. But it would be unfair to overlook the fact that the orientation of its economic model and its strong distributionist content clearly separates it from other experiences under way in the Southern Cone. Not to mention Evo's declared intention to move ahead with the risky — and thus slow and conflictual — construction of a renewed socialism, something that has nothing to do with the nebulous “Andean-Amazonian capitalism” that some persist in presenting as an inexorable and implausible antechamber of socialism.

All these achievements, combined with his absolute personal integrity and a Spartan-like day-to-day routine (that contrasts favourably with the exaggerated fortunes and high consumption patterns exhibited by other “progressive” leaders and politicians in the region) have made Evo a leader endowed with a formidable personal charisma that enables him to beat any rival who dares to challenge him in the electoral arena. But in addition, his constant concern to raise consciousness, mobilize and organize his social base — stepping outside the discredited bureaucratic apparatuses which, like those in Argentina, Brazil and Chile, do not mobilize or raise the consciousness of anyone — not only satisfies the inescapable need to construct a subjectivity that is appropriate to struggles for socialism but also, at the same time, constitutes a decisive asset when it comes to prevailing in the electoral arena. The forces of the suffering “centre-left” of the Southern Cone, which are looking to an unpromising political future in view of the growth of the right-wing fuelled by their own resigned acceptance of possibilism, would be well advised to note the brilliant lesson offered by Evo's triumph in the elections of last Sunday. A lesson which demonstrates that, faced with the danger of restored domination of the right, the only possible alternative is the radicalization of the processes of transformation under way. Defeated on the electoral terrain, the right will redouble its offensive in the many scenarios of the class struggle. It would be suicidal to imagine that they will bow out without a battle in the face of an electoral setback. Let us hope that this lesson is learned.

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Translation by Richard Fidler*

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