

Bolivia's Voters Reaffirm 'Process of Change' But Issue Warnings to the Governing MAS

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Up to 90 per cent of the electorate voted in Bolivia's "subnational" elections March 29 for governors, mayors and departmental assembly and municipal council members throughout the country. These were the second such elections to be held since the new Constitution came into force in 2009, the first being in 2010.

The Movement for Socialism (MAS)[\[1\]](#) once again emerged as the only party with national representation – by far the major political force in Bolivia, and far ahead of the opposition parties, none of which has a significant presence in all nine departments. However, in some key contests the voters rebuffed the MAS candidates, most notably for governor in La Paz department and for mayor in the city of El Alto, the centre of the 2003-2005 upsurges and long considered a MAS bastion.

Mixed Results

With 66 per cent of the popular vote in the municipal elections, the MAS elected mayors in 225 of Bolivia's 339 towns and cities, about the same result as in 2010. However, consistent with a pattern in recent years, the various opposition parties won in eight of the ten largest cities while the MAS gained only two, Sucre and Potosí.

In the departmental legislative assemblies, the MAS deputies now hold a clear majority of seats in six departments, and a plurality in two others, while in Santa Cruz the party is only two seats from a plurality. Even in La Paz department the newly elected opposition governor will have to contend with a two-thirds MAS majority in the legislature.

Although the official results are not yet available, the MAS did well in the municipal council elections, too. The results of elections in autonomous indigenous communities, which are conducted according to ancient "usos y costumbres" (customs and traditions), are not yet known.

The MAS elected governors in four of the country's nine departments and is leading in two other departments with runoff elections scheduled for May 3. (Under Bolivia's election laws, a runoff is held when the candidates coming 1st and 2nd in the vote, with neither having 50% of the votes, are separated by fewer than 10 percentage points.) Opposition parties elected governors in three departments including Santa Cruz and Tarija, traditionally associated with the "Media Luna" (half moon) set of departments that participated in the unsuccessful 2008 revolt of the powerful landholder elite in the eastern lowlands.

However, the major upsets for the MAS were in the department of La Paz, where Felix Patzi,

an Aymara intellectual and minister of education in Evo Morales' first government, was elected governor with a 20 percentage points advance over the MAS candidate, Felipa Huanca, a leader of the "Bartolinas,"^[2] an indigenous and campesina (farmer) women's organization that is one of Bolivia's major social movements. Patzi ran on the slate of Soberanía y Libertad (Sovereignty and Liberty - SOL.BO), a reconstruction of the Movimiento Sin Miedo (the "fearless movement"), which lost its party certification in the October 2014 elections when it won less than 3% of the national vote. SOL.BO also retained the mayoralty and a council majority in the city of La Paz, the country's administrative capital.

Particularly galling to the MAS was its defeat in the El Alto mayoralty by an Aymara woman, Soledad Chapetón of Unidad Nacional (UN). The right-wing UN is Bolivia's largest opposition party; its leader Samuel Doria Medina took 25 per cent of the vote in last year's presidential election. Chapetón's campaign emphasized her personal qualities, not the UN, but her election raises some questions as to why that party was able to capitalize on the MAS discredit in this particular instance. In fact, with the possible exception of governor-elect Felix Patzi in La Paz,^[3] virtually all of the opposition candidates and parties in the subnational elections, can be said to be to the right of the MAS. This bears further examination, something beyond the scope of this article.

Local Issues Predominate

The MAS leadership was quick to attribute its electoral setbacks to local factors. Among these were inadequate procedures for selecting the party's candidates. These are normally suggested by the party members and social movements aligned with the MAS, but office-holder inertia and in some cases a misgauging of political moods can adversely affect the choice. In El Alto, for example, the MAS was widely thought to have ignored community criticism of incompetent administration and even corruption on the part of the mayor, the MAS's Édgar Patana.

Many analysts have also pointed to a major difference with the 2010 subnational elections. In 2010 the euphoria that accompanied the adoption of a new plurinational Constitution and the defeat of the right-wing landholders' rebellion gave MAS candidates, many running for the first time, a big advantage. Five years later, however, the voters were more inclined to examine incumbents' records critically in light of their experience. This was evident in the way that voters ignored MAS leadership appeals to vote the party slate; in many instances, they divided their votes among different party slates depending on the candidates and their respective offices. This may, as some analysts contend, indicate a growing political awareness among the electorate.

In subnational elections, as well, local issues can be decisive in the result. In the [October 2014 national election](#), voters indicated their overall satisfaction with the country's direction under the MAS and its proposed "Agenda Patriótica," a set of general social and economic goals and reforms to be addressed in the coming mandate. In the subnational elections, those goals were not in question and there was in fact remarkably little public debate among conflicting party perspectives and programs. The MAS candidates all stood on the party's national program. The MAS seemed to assume that without more it could capitalize regionally on the 61 per cent support the party's national leadership had won last October. It may have underestimated the importance of local issues.

Autonomy Processes Still Incomplete

But also undermining programmatic debate in these elections was the difficulty in discerning the full measure of local government powers in many cases, since the complicated process of defining those powers under the new Constitution remains incomplete. Bolivia is not a federal state with a clear division of powers among the various levels of government. However, the Constitution sets out general criteria for defining the “autonomous” jurisdictions of departments, regions, municipalities and the few indigenous communities that have opted for legal status as “autonomies.”

So far only one department, Pando (the smallest), has completed the complex process of achieving autonomy: popular consultation and drafting of a local constitution, its approval by the national constitutional authority, followed by amendment where needed with approval in a popular referendum and, finally, proclamation by the national government. Five departments are scheduled to hold their ratification referendums on autonomy in June of this year. But few of the 339 municipalities have yet gained full autonomous status, as anticipated. These factors leave much to be determined in the budgetary provisions of the various administrations – and will continue to be a major topic of debate as the national government negotiates its “pacto fiscal” (tax and budget allocation agreements) with the various governments and social movements.

In this context, and absent debate over general programmatic alternatives, the subnational election results may have offered above all a measure of public sentiment about the performance and perspectives of local governments. That was how Evo Morales interpreted them; the President, in his few post-election remarks about the results, conceded that some of the MAS setbacks may have been merited.

Threats Against Opposition Administrations

Morales himself may have been a factor in some of the MAS electoral setbacks, however. On more than one occasion during the subnational election campaign, he arrogantly threatened to refuse to work with local governments held by opposition parties and even to deny them national government funding for major projects. These statements elicited much criticism in the media and may have resulted in an anti-MAS “voto castigo” (punishment vote) in some contests. But they have their roots in the country’s current political culture.

In Bolivia many local construction projects ranging from highways, irrigation facilities, football stadiums and arenas to hospitals and health centres, schools and some productive investments are funded under a national government program titled “*Bolivia Cambio, Evo Cumple*” (Bolivia changes, Evo accomplishes), financed largely by Venezuela under an ALBA agreement. And both Morales and his vice-president Álvaro García Linera spend much of their time inaugurating such public works in official ceremonies. Non-MAS elected officials naturally resent this program designation, which serves to credit the MAS (and its top leader) as a virtual synonym for the state.

It is worth noting, however, that in the wake of the subnational elections leaders of some social movements long associated with the MAS were critical of Morales’ threats, urging the party to work with local governments on progressive projects.

Fondo Indígena

Another factor in MAS losses may have been a scandal that erupted during the campaign over alleged abuses in the Fondo Indígena. This “indigenous fund” was created in December

2005, just prior to the MAS's first election, to implement international and national agreements on indigenous rights and to help finance infrastructure projects in indigenous towns and farming communities. It is administered by eight indigenous social movements that also tend to support the MAS politically. The Fund holds about \$270-million, much of this derived from hydrocarbon revenues and taxes.

In December 2016 a national prosecution lawyer charged that about 71 million Bolivianos (\$10-million) of the Fund intended for more than 150 as-yet unrealized development projects had been diverted to private bank accounts held by at least eight leaders of these social movements - one of these (according to an opposition politician) being Felipa Huanca, a prominent Bartolina and the MAS candidate for governor in La Paz. Subsequent media reports indicated that the Fund's leadership, which is supposed to meet every two months, had not met since March 2012.

Rumours that the Fund was being used for clientelist purposes were fed by the lack of response from Fund leaders. Only after the March 29 election did the Bartolinas hold a news conference, promising a later accounting but maintaining that their own rules allowed this extraordinary management of the Fund's monies even though this violates a legislated obligation that all Fund accounts must be held within a special system in a designated bank.

The national Transparency Minister has now announced that a full report on the allegations will be issued by mid-April. Any persons guilty of illegal diversion of funds will be prosecuted, she promises.

In Beni, a Harsh Ruling by the Elections Overseer

In a move that surprised almost everyone, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal^[4] - the national body that supervises all elections in Bolivia - ruled just nine days before the March 29 elections that in Beni department it was withdrawing certification of the opposition Unidad Demócrata (UD - Democratic Unity) alliance because its campaign chief, the outgoing governor Carmelo Lens, had publicly released an internal poll, contrary to election law. The UD was at the time thought to be leading in the contest for governor. All UD candidates in Beni were accordingly disqualified, some 228 in all.

The TSE ruling was based on a literal interpretation of an obscure provision in the country's Election Act. Was it too literal? The supreme legal authority, the Tribunal Constitucional Plurinacional, dismissed an emergency challenge of the TSE ruling, but it was widely criticized, and many saw the action as evidence of MAS control of the TSE. The Inter-American Human Rights Commission (CIDH) is investigating, and observers from the Organization of American States (OAS) used the opportunity to "regret" the TSE's action.

After the election the TSE declared it was prepared in future to support an amendment to the law that would remove the provision in question. Significantly, the voter abstention in Beni was extraordinarily high on March 29, about 20%, while a further 7% of the ballots were blank and almost 8% were ruled null or void for various reasons - adding to uncertainty about the outcome of the May 3 runoff vote.

Challenges Ahead

The subnational election results, while confirming the MAS's overall leadership in Bolivia, are in some respects a "shot across the bows" to the party's leading cadres, a reminder that

there is still much to be done to consolidate and deepen the “process of change.” With the current drop in global commodity prices Bolivia, as a small country still very dependent on resource export revenues, is encountering new challenges.

Brazil and Argentina are in economic difficulty and the value of hydrocarbon exports (chiefly gas) to those major markets has fallen by almost 30% in the last quarter from the equivalent period in 2014, along with comparable declines in the country’s agribusiness and industrial exports.^[5] Finance Minister Luís Arce recent downgraded GDP growth projections for 2015 to 5 per cent – albeit still one of the highest in South America. But any further drop could jeopardize some of the conditional transfer programs such as the two-month wage or compensation (*doble aguinaldo*) granted by law in the two previous year-ends. Also the *bonos* (conditional cash grants) programs are financed largely through hydrocarbon revenues, as is much state funding to subnational levels of government.

The MAS government program ratified in the October national election projects a major focus in the next period on industrialization projects and expansion of the domestic market to bolster food and industrial self-sufficiency, as well as replacement of present conditional programs in health and education by development of universal programs, a deepening of agrarian reform, and strengthening of the “worker-indigenous-popular” bloc that is the mainstay of the MAS. This entails major social and political transformations that can deepen democracy, incorporate participatory and communitarian practices and help to overcome colonial and patriarchal ways of thinking and doing.

These proposals should be on the agenda as the various pro-government social movements meet in the coming days with MAS leaders to discuss the election and the road ahead.

Richard Fidler is an Ottawa member of the Socialist Project. A version of this article was first published on his blog [Life on the Left](#).

Note: I profess no expertise on Bolivian politics, but I have visited Bolivia several times in recent years and was based there for six months in 2013-2014, during which I developed a deep appreciation of its “process of change” of the last 15 years, with all of its complexities, achievements, frustrations and “creative tensions.” – Richard Fidler.

Notes:

1. Movement for Socialism – Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples (MAS-IPSP) is the party’s full name.
2. Confederación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas Indígenas Originarias de Bolivia “Bartolina Sisa” (CNMCIQB-BS), or Bartolina Sisa National Confederation of Campesino, Indigenous, and Native Women of Bolivia, named after an Aymara woman leader of an 18th century revolt against the Spanish colonization.
3. As Evo Morales’s first education minister, Patzi was hounded by the Right and the Catholic church when he attempted to secularize the public education curriculum. His ideas (which are his, not those of his party in this election), are set out in Tercer Sistema – Modelo Comunal: Propuesta Alternativa Para Salir del Capitalismo y del Socialismo.
4. Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE).

5. See "Venta de gas sigue a la baja por caída en los precios del petróleo," *La Razón*, April 2, 2015.

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