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## ***Bolivia: How Absolute is Morales' Power?***

Miguel A. Buitrago

Bolivian president Evo Morales began his second period in office on January 22, 2010, following a sweeping win with 64 percent of the vote in the December 2009 early general election. As a result, Morales can count on a two-thirds majority in the Senate and a close to absolute majority in the Chamber of Deputies. This will allow him to continue with his "refounding of Bolivia" – provided his party can win the upcoming municipal and prefecture elections on April 4.

### **Analysis**

President Morales has managed to consolidate his power. Since the December 6 election he has tilted the current power struggle considerably in his favor by neutralizing most of the opposition. The government's next steps will be to reform the judicial branch and the electoral court. At the same time, it will have to pass the legal framework for the constitutionally mandated regional, municipal and indigenous autonomic process. Moreover, it will have to step up the political campaign to win prefectures and municipal governments from the opposition in April 2010 as absolute control of government will depend on the outcome of these elections.

- Some constraints to the ruling party, the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), might come from within its ranks. The intellectuals and middle-class assembly members, especially in the Senate, were included in the lists of candidates as part of a strategy to entice middle-class voters to support Morales. The problem might be that these people do not support the totality of the government's more radical dogmas.
- The current opposition, made up of Plan Progreso para Bolivia-Convergencia Nacional and Unidad Nacional, has been significantly weakened in the legislative as well as in the political arena. At present there are doubts as to what role they will play in the new legislature.
- The traditional opposition, made up of parties such as MNR, ADN, MIR, CSU, etc., seems to have opted to retreat to the departmental level. These parties will be taking part in the next prefecture and municipal elections in April 2010. They will seek to articulate a new kind of opposition at the departmental level.

*Keywords: Bolivia, Evo Morales, 2009 Elections, Electoral Politics*

## 1. Morales' First Presidential Period

When Evo Morales took office in January 2006, his government started out on a favorable wind. First of all, Bolivia had reached a historical moment in its history. In the December 2005 general elections, Morales became the first indigenous candidate to win the presidency, with an equally historical result (54 percent of the vote) and as the country emerged from a deep political crisis. Second, the macroeconomic conditions in the country were positive. Real GDP was growing at 4 percent, the balance of payments was strong, inflation was low (5 percent in 2005), the fiscal situation had improved (fiscal deficit of 2.3 percent of GDP), and the international reserves had reached a historical high (USD 500 million)<sup>1</sup>. Third, and in the background of that favorable economic picture, the international community of creditors had promised support for the new government through the elimination of a big part of Bolivia's foreign debt, an act which even further improved Bolivia's financial situation. In addition to picking up moral support from Cuba, Bolivia received promises from Caracas of plentiful oil supplies and loans in various forms. In Madrid Morales received an offer to eliminate 50 percent of Bolivia's debt as long as that money was invested in education. In China Morales received promises of much needed investment. The IMF promised to write off Bolivia's debt up to 2005 (USD 231 million).<sup>2</sup> The World Bank and the IADB also promised similar actions. The international community was eager to lend its hand and to be a part of such a historical moment.

In the first four years of his term, President Morales and his government were able to realize many campaign promises. In one of its first significant actions, on May 1, 2006, the government nationalized Bolivia's natural gas and oil resources, which were under majority control of several international energy companies. In the process, the government renegotiated the contracts it had with these companies and was able to raise its revenue intake to close to 80 percent.

In this manner Morales managed to preside over the first two budget surpluses in Bolivia's recent history (2006 and 2007), which were a direct result of debt forgiveness and increased rev-

enue from the sale of natural gas to neighboring Brazil and Argentina. With these funds, the government was able to introduce a series of social payments for the elderly, for school-aged children and for mothers-to-be. Furthermore, the MAS government followed through with its promise to rewrite the country's constitution. It introduced a Constitutional Assembly on August 6, 2006, which, after having extended its deadline twice, came up with a highly conflictive constitutional text in November 2007. The final draft was negotiated with the opposition in Congress, then approved by the population in a national referendum. In January 2009 Bolivians approved the new constitution with 61 percent of the vote<sup>3</sup>. In addition to the above actions, the government defended the cultivation of coca leaves. A provision of the new constitution allows for self-controlled cultivation. Finally, the government managed to improve relations with long-time rival Chile and established close cooperation with Cuba, Venezuela, Brazil and Iran. The latter promised investments and energy cooperation.

However, these successes did not come without failures. On the economic front, the Bolivian government failed to translate the favorable macroeconomic and fiscal conditions as well as the state-led investment into less unemployment, less corruption and lower inflation. To the contrary, inflation rose persistently, with some months showing a double-digit rise. In 2008 there were once again fiscal deficits. At the same time, on the political front the government's unrestrained and polemic political discourse – from President Morales as well as his vice president Alvaro Garcia – polarized the population. Vivid examples of this polarization included the Cochabamba riots in January 2007, during which several people died; the May 4, 2008 referendum on autonomy, carried out in several opposition provinces without the consent of the central government; and the Porvenir killings in September 2008, where several MAS supporters were shot, allegedly by the opposition.

In addition, the government's image suffered due to corruption and state brutality allegations. In early 2009 the president of the state oil company YPFB, Santos Ramirez, was formally charged with receiving bribes in exchange for government

<sup>1</sup> IMF Country Report, July 2006, online: <<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2006/cr06270.pdf>>.

<sup>2</sup> IMF Press release 05/289, online: <<http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2005/pr05289.htm>>.

<sup>3</sup> La Razón, February 3, 2009, online: <[http://www.la-razon.com/versiones/20090203\\_006627/nota\\_247\\_757202.htm](http://www.la-razon.com/versiones/20090203_006627/nota_247_757202.htm)>.

contracts. Also, in April 2009 a special Army commando killed a group of alleged international terrorists in the name of state security. Finally, on the international front, Morales and his government seriously damaged diplomatic relations with the US, and some of Bolivia's neighbors such as Peru. The poor relations between Morales and the Bush administration led the US government to remove Bolivia from the Andean Trade Preference and Drug Eradication Act agreement, which had allowed Bolivian products preferential access to US markets.

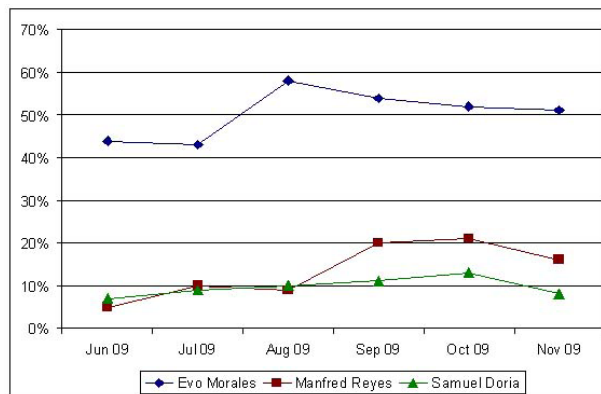
## 2. Before and After the Elections

The early general elections of December 2009 were carried out under relative certainty due to Morales' significant lead in the polls, as shown in Figure 1. This figure shows the percentage of the vote Morales and his opponents were predicted to receive in the months leading up to election day. From a popularity rating in the 40 percent range in June 2009, Morales was able to steadily improve his image among the electorate. One factor helping his image was the general perception that his government had performed well, especially in terms of its social policies. Another factor was the fact that the opposition was never really able to present a credible alternative candidate to the electorate. This might be attributable to the fact that Reyes Villa and Doria Medina were leading relatively new political forces as compared to the traditional and seasoned political parties such as the MNR, MIR and ADN, which have a longer institutional history. In particular, Reyes Villa's PPB-CN was a coalition of several relatively new parties.

Figure 1 also shows the significant gap between Morales and his closest rivals. The likely outcome was thus relatively clear because, according to the constitution, the elections would not go to a second round if either of the following conditions were met: a) the winner wins if he receives more than 50 percent of the vote; and b) if the winner does not achieve a relative majority (Bolivians call this absolute majority), he would have to win with at least 40 percent of the vote and have a 10-percent-age-points lead over the second runner-up. The magnitude of the gap gave Morales security and allowed him to concentrate on his own strategy to

boost his support in the *media luna*<sup>4</sup> region rather than on his opponents' campaigns. Morales ran an aggressive rather than a defensive campaign.

**Figure 1: Intention Vote (IAOMLR)**



Source: Author's own compilation based on data from Angus Reid.

Table 1 shows the results for the most recent election and for the previous general election in December 2005. The most obvious conclusion is that Morales won the 2009 election with an advantage of 33 percentage points, more than double the votes received by his closest opponent. This was more than enough to avoid a second round. However, it is when we break down the results by department that it really becomes clear why Morales won with such a big margin.

**Table 1: Electoral Results 2009 and 2005 (in %)**

	Evo Morales MAS		Manfred Reyes Villa PPB-CN/NFR		Samuel Doria Medina UN	
	2009	2005	2009	2005	2009	2005
National	63	54	27	0.7	6	8
Chuquisaca	56	54	34	1.0	6	8
La Paz	80	66	9	0.6	8	7
Cochabamba	66	65	27	0.8	5	5
Oruro	79	62	9	0.5	6	5
Potosi	78	58	4	1.0	2	5
Tarija	51	31	38	0.5	7	7
Santa Cruz	41	33	53	0.4	4	12
Beni	38	16	53	0.3	7	6
Pando	45	20	51	0.2	3	23

Source: Author's own compilation using data from the National Electoral Court.

<sup>4</sup> The media luna is a region made up from the provinces of Beni, Pando, Santa Cruz, Sucre and Tarija where the opposition was strongly established. It was denominated *media luna* or half moon because of the shape this region makes on the map of Bolivia.

First of all, Morales managed to increase his lead over 2005 in the departments where he won. In La Paz, Oruro and Potosi, there was an increase of 14, 17, and 20 percentage points respectively. More importantly, he also managed to gain support in the so-called *media luna* departments, which had been opposition strongholds in 2005. In Tarija he gained 20 points; in Santa Cruz, 8 points; in Beni, 22 points; and in Pando, 25 points. These results clearly show how Morales was able to change his image in the opposition-controlled provinces in order to gain votes. The reasons he was able to do so are discussed in the next section.

Reyes Villa also managed a modest gain in support, but at the expense of Doria Medina and those parties that did not participate this time around but were more dominant in 2005: PODEMOS, MNR, and MIR. Looking at the results, we can see that Reyes Villa's rise in popularity from 2005 to 2009 was significant in all departments, except perhaps in Potosi. It is also clear that the candidate who lost the most was Doria Medina, especially in Pando and Santa Cruz. These results support the claim that the opposition could not rise to the challenge because it was divided. Had Doria Medina left the race, perhaps Reyes Villa would have been able to build a more significant opposition block. But that is all speculation now.

### 3. The General Elections of 2009

The December 6, 2009 early general election was the result of the Morales government's success in rewriting the Bolivian Constitution and pushing for the renewal of the government's constitutional term.<sup>5</sup> The new constitution contained a transitional clause requiring early elections for president, vice president, senators and deputies in order to renew the entire political leadership.

The electoral process began with the approval of a new, albeit provisional, electoral law early in 2009. This law was intended to provide a legal framework for the December election and, at the same time, generate confidence in the process. In April 2009 the European Union's electoral observers issued a supportive report with a long list of

observations and recommendations. Prominent among the recommendations were the strengthening of ballot procedures and a transparent and secure voter registration roll. After a difficult negotiation process, which included a five day hunger strike by the president, the executive and Congress managed to forge the provisional electoral law. It included agreements on the most difficult issues, such as the special indigenous seats<sup>6</sup> and the voting rights of Bolivians living overseas<sup>7</sup>. In addition, it called for the implementation of a new biometric voter registration system. The electoral agency (CNE) rushed to reregister approximately five million voters with financial backing from the central government (USD 35 million) and political backing from all sides.

As soon as the election rules were set, the government and the opposition began their political proselytism. Given the certainty that Evo Morales and Alvaro Garcia were going to lead the MAS to victory, the government's main worry was who would make up the opposition and whether the opposition would be able to unite into a coherent block to confront a very popular President Morales. Another key worry for the government was to ensure that the elections would take place as planned. Due to the complexity of implementing the biometric registration system, the electoral schedule remained uncertain until voter registration was fully completed. Not surprisingly, issues such as regional autonomy, education, foreign investment, health, social policy, the redistribution of wealth, etc. played a secondary role in the government's campaign.

Due to the electoral disasters in the last two elections and the persisting political crisis, the main opposition parties in Congress fragmented further to the point of oblivion. The leader of Social Democratic Power (PODEMOS), Oscar Ortiz, failed to gather allies. Jorge Quiroga, former vice president and founder of PODEMOS could not restore his discredited political image. Former president Carlos Mesa had no political capital. The only two candidates with some chance were Samuel Doria Medina and Manfred Reyes Villa, both of whom continued their efforts to build alliances. In addition, several MAS dissidents presented themselves as potential opposition candi-

<sup>5</sup> The new Constitution was approved in a plebiscite on January 25, 2009 and signed into law by President Morales on February 7, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Special seats in the Assembly reserved for representatives of the major indigenous groups.

<sup>7</sup> Bolivians living in ten cities in Argentina, Brasil, Spain and the US.



dates, showing that the president's party was not a solidly unified force. Prominent among them were former MAS militant Román Loayza, leader of the *campesinos* (peasants) umbrella organization (CSUTCB) and co-founder of the party itself; Filemon Escobar, MAS ideologue and a close adviser to Morales; and Alejo Veliz, also a *campesino* leader and a MAS dissident.

All in all, the opposition failed to build a block capable of presenting a real alternative to Morales' candidacy and challenging his high approval ratings. Even in the last weeks before the election, some candidates kept changing sides or dropping from the race altogether. For example, German Antelo, the candidate of the Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (MNR), dropped his candidacy and joined Reyes Villa's ticket. Roman Loayza and Alejo Veliz lost their running mates weeks before election day. They went into the elections without a vice president.

As election day approached and the September 6 deadline for official registration with the CNE arrived, the candidate landscape cleared, leaving Evo Morales as the major candidate and Manfred Reyes Villa and Samuel Doria Medina as the two major opposing forces. Reyes Villa scored some sympathy points by choosing former Pando prefect Leopoldo Fernandez (currently in jail accused of staging the killings in el Porvenir) as his running mate and allying with Jose Luis Paredes, former prefect of La Paz, from whom he had adopted the PPB-CN party. Further back in the popularity race were candidates such as Rene Joaquin, Alejo Veliz and Roman Loayza.

While the opposition was sorting itself out, the government's campaign, launched in early 2009, followed a concrete plan. First of all, the government concentrated on highlighting its successes – such as successive fiscal surpluses, record levels of international reserves, the nationalization of the hydrocarbon and telecommunications sectors, the passing of the new constitution and some social benefits such as the Juancito Pinto bonus, the Juana Azurduy bonus and the Renta Dignidad – while also making promises to industrialize Bolivia, increase employment and revamp citizen security.

Second, Morales effectively used government resources in combination with his political campaign – that is, government buildings, vehicles, personnel and, above all, the state-owned media. The opposition did not succeed in denouncing Evo Morales for systematically combining his du-

ties as president and his electoral campaign. For example, he traveled all over the country distributing checks worth hundreds of thousands of dollars for the construction of infrastructure as well as donating machinery, delivering finished infrastructure, opening schools or hospitals, and inaugurating projects (often financed by the international community).

Third, one of the Morales government's main strategies was to increase the number of voters in battleground provinces such as Pando. Once a stronghold of the opposition, Pando became a battleground after the former prefect, Leopoldo Fernandez, was forcefully removed from office. The government, referring to a resettlement program to distribute land, then moved 1,300 landless peasant families from La Paz and the Chapare region<sup>8</sup> to Pando and at the same time boosted its military presence. The opposition saw this program as an effort to slant the balance of support in the government's favor as Pando had a relatively small population and any increase could have potentially made a difference in terms of legislative seats. Morales also mobilized military personnel to vote in Pando, even though they were only temporarily stationed there.

Fourth, Morales attacked his opponents using legal means. In the last two months leading up to the election, the anticorruption and transparency minister Nardi Suño issued repeated statements on several corruption charges against Reyes Villa related to his term as prefect.<sup>9</sup> These legal troubles prevented Reyes Villa from campaigning outside Bolivia.

Fifth, the government suspended public financing for political campaigns. As a result, smaller parties such as MUSPA, Gente and Pulso could not achieve national attention. The weakened and disoriented opposition did not respond to this issue. Sixth, the MAS campaigned against the "crossed vote"<sup>10</sup> by tightening controls on militants at the local level. Several organizations that make up MAS, such as the *campesino* organizations (CSUTCB) and the Bartolina Sisa women's organization expressed their intent to oblige their members to give both votes to MAS. Finally, an

<sup>8</sup> The Chapare region in Cochabamba is a stronghold of Evo Morales.

<sup>9</sup> La Razon, November 19, 2009, online: <[http://www.la-razon.com/versiones/20091119\\_006916/nota\\_244\\_911944.htm](http://www.la-razon.com/versiones/20091119_006916/nota_244_911944.htm)>.

<sup>10</sup> The ballot, being divided in to two areas, gave the possibility of voting for a party and a candidate of another party. This was known as the *voto cruzado* (crossed vote).

important MAS strategy was to invite intellectuals and professionals to join its candidate lists in order to gain support from the urban middle classes. To that end, Morales invited people such as Ana Maria Campero, former ombudswoman and journalist, to participate in his government.

One aspect characterizing the political campaign on both sides was violence. In the last days leading up to election day MAS supporters attacked the private house of Reyes Villa, while in Tarija MAS supporters were physically attacked by opposition forces. The cities of Sucre, Tarija, and Santa Cruz, which formed the backbone of the opposition, were the scene of violent confrontations between government and opposition militants. Some local leaders and MAS supporters prohibited the opposition's political campaign in their territories, mostly around La Paz. In addition, on various occasions the police forces, questionably, did not interfere to stop such violence.

#### 4. The Implications

The sweeping and historic result of the December 6 election has a number of implications for Bolivian politics and for the current government and its policies. Firstly, Morales has improved the legitimacy of his government. He was able to significantly increase his support in comparison to the 2005 election and achieve a two-thirds majority. Secondly, Morales and MAS have managed to break up the once seemingly solid opposition of the *media luna* by winning over senators and deputies from the opposition. As a result of Morales' well-developed political strategy of concentrating on the *media luna*, his party was able to gain two senators in Pando, one in Beni and two in Tarija. It has thereby gained control of 24 of 36 seats in the Senate and 84 of 130 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, giving Morales an absolute majority in the legislature. Thirdly, with this new power, the reelected president can avoid standoffs with the opposition, something which occurred regularly in the last period, and carry on with his agenda to implement the new constitution. Fourthly, Morales' overwhelming win has imparted deep uncertainty among the current opposition forces. These parties are severely restricted in providing some kind of functioning opposition to the government.

#### 5. The Next Steps

The reelected government has several tasks on its agenda. It is set to begin the campaign for the upcoming April 2010 prefecture and municipal elections immediately. There will also be intense work in the Legislative Assembly because the government will soon have to approve a law providing the legal framework for the constitutionally mandated regional, municipal and indigenous autonomy.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the Morales government will need to pass more than 100 laws to accommodate the new constitution. Prioritized among the latter are laws to reform the judicial branch (Supreme Court and Constitutional Court) and the electoral court, along with those that will help Morales consolidate Bolivia's plurinational state. This effort will require legislative support.

Some constraints to government policies on the part of intellectual and middle-class assembly members within MAS, especially in the Senate, is to be expected however. Part of the MAS's strategy to gain support from non-indigenous urban voters was to include middle-class candidates who were not party militants. These people only joined the party in the few months leading up to election day and are therefore deeply mistrusted by the rank and file party members because they might not fully share the president's or the party's agenda. Moreover, some of these people might have had other political alliances. As opportunist as the latter might be, the MAS cannot be 100 percent sure of their support at crucial times.

The current opposition has been significantly constrained, in both the Legislative Assembly and the political arena. Together, Reyes Villa and Doria Medina captured 33 percent of the vote in the December elections. That leaves them with a very weak voice in Congress and a doubtful role in the new legislature. In contrast, the traditional opposition, made up of traditional parties such as MNR, ADN, MIR, CSU, etc., seems to have opted to retreat from the national arena to the departmental and municipal political arenas as part of a strategy to reorient itself and, in the process, build a more relevant and articulate opposition. These parties, which once dominated the national political arena, seem to have discovered the relevance

<sup>11</sup> Indigenous autonomy refers to a regional autonomy with emphasis on indigenous identity. It could be a municipality as well. The indigenous label is an important factor in the Morales government.

of local politics upon the advent of a constitutionally mandated process to implement regional and municipal autonomy. By the time autonomy becomes a reality and the country becomes more decentralized, these political forces will be well positioned and the government will face a new kind of opposition, one that is less dependent on the central government. It is to be expected that these oppositional forces will take part in the next prefecture and municipal elections on April 4, 2010.



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## ■ GIGA Research on the Topic

The wave of constitutional changes in Latin America, including those in Bolivia, is the topic of a research project by Detlef Nolte and Jorge Gordin. Miguel A. Buitrago analyzes the effects of the decentralization process on the consolidation of Bolivian democracy in his doctoral thesis. Almut Schilling-Vacaflor, who joined the GIGA Institute of Latin American Studies in January 2010, has been studying the rights of indigenous peoples and intercultural relations in Bolivia. Her Ph.D. thesis, entitled "The New Constitution and Indigenous Peoples in Bolivia" („Recht als umkämpftes Terrain. Die neue Verfassung und indigene Völker in Bolivien"), will be published by NOMOS (Baden-Baden) in 2010.

## ■ GIGA Publications on the Topic

Buitrago, Miguel A. (2007), *Boliviens neue Verfassung – ein Land vor der Zerreißprobe*, GIGA Focus Lateinamerika, 12, online: <<http://www.giga-hamburg.de/giga-focus/lateinamerika>>.

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