

Bolivia - “Evo vs Arce”

Election Brief #1

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Recent developments in Bolivia paint a troubling picture ahead of the 2025 national elections. The country of 12 million people faces severe political divisions within the ruling *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) party. On one side, former President Evo Morales¹ is exerting increasing pressure on government officials with the clear objective of running for a fourth term in the 2025 elections². Conversely, President Luis Arce³ is relentlessly struggling to deal with the rival amid an economic, political and social crisis. This brief will offer an overview of the Bolivian political landscape towards the 2025 Presidential elections⁴.

Past

Evo Morales became president of Bolivia in 2006. He positioned himself as a figure committed to establishing a special relationship with the people, particularly those historically marginalized and engaged in collective struggles. This narrative emphasized his role as a social, political, and historical leader. He showcased his ability to mobilize large segments of society, direct the key initiatives of MAS, and maintain his image as a pivotal figure who marked a significant shift in Bolivia's history⁵. In 2019 he decided to run for a third term (prohibited by the Constitution) and after claims of electoral fraud, eventually resigned and went into exile abroad. Despite Morales' resignation, MAS retained power, with Luis Arce winning the 2020 elections after the brief interim presidency of Jeanine Añez. Arce's leadership has been characterized by a more moderate and technical approach, often overshadowed by the prominence and popularity of Morales. Although Arce holds the position of head of state, he does not lead the party or the mobilized base.

Although Arce's 2020 election win allowed Morales' return, their alliance began fracturing in late 2021, marking a growing divide within MAS. Morales accused the government of blocking his candidacy and claimed both the government and the right-wing

¹ President elected for three consecutive mandates between 2006 and 2019, leader of MAS.

² Molina (2024, September 17)

³ President elected in 2020 and former Minister of Finances of Morales, inside MAS.

⁴ Independent in 1825, the *Plurinational State of Bolivia* is a Presidential Republic with a bicameral system.

⁵ Quiroga & Pagliarone (2023)

opposition were opposing him. From his side, Arce accused Morales of paralyzing his administration for personalistic goals. In particular, current confrontations between the two leaders arise from three practical issues⁶:

I - Morales sought to *pressure* Arce by influencing government nominees to reaffirm its political (although external) authority;

II - Morales *mobilized* his parliamentary loyal fraction inside MAS to oppose Arce's decisions, leading to an institutional blockade;

III - The struggle to control the political leadership of *CSUTCB*⁷, the influential peasant-based working union, divided between pro-Morales and pro-Arce factions.

Present

Amid growing political tensions within the country's government, divisions are intensifying. On June 26, former Bolivian army general Juan José Zúñiga attempted to storm Palacio Quemado. Backed by a small group of loyal soldiers, Zúñiga deployed armored vehicles in front of the presidential palace in La Paz. Zúñiga personally confronted Arce but eventually chose to temporarily recognize his authority and ordered his forces to stand down. Shortly thereafter, all those involved in the coup attempt were arrested, and the uprising was contained⁸. In the aftermath, Morales withdrew his support for Arce, suggesting that the President may have orchestrated a “self-coup”, reversing his earlier solidarity⁹. This instance deepened the divisions between the two, seriously escalating the conflict outside a legal framework. In addition, recent developments suggested that the former President could be summoned to testify in connection with the “failed” coup d'état of June 26, as stated by the departmental prosecutor of La Paz, William Alave¹⁰.

On September 17, Morales escalated pressures by organizing the “Marcha para salvar Bolivia”, a 190-kilometer march stretching from the small village of Caracolloto La Paz¹¹. The march initially opposed Arce's plan for a referendum¹² on a Constitutional Tribunal (TCP)

⁶ Oliva (2023)

⁷ The *Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia*.

⁸ Biondi (2024)

⁹ Janetsky (2024)

¹⁰ La Razón (2024)

¹¹ Flores (2024)

¹² Molina (2024, August 6)

ruling. However, it soon became evident that the ultimate goal was to force the resignation of Arce and Vice President David Choquehuanca, paving the way for Andrónico Rodríguez, the young "*Evista*" leader and President of the Senate, to assume power¹³. Arce's Foreign Minister, Celinda Sosa, tried to draw international attention to the matter by issuing a letter to the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres¹⁴. On multiple occasions, clashes between the supporters of the two leaders led to multiple injuries with no casualties reported¹⁵. In one instance, a Mayor close to Arce tried to stop the protesters but unsuccessfully¹⁶. After almost a week, the *Evistas* reached La Paz and were confronted by *Oficialistas* in front of the Parliament. From his side, Morales promised more social unrest soon.

Future

To date, the political feud between Morales and Arce has remained contained, without casualties reported in either June or September. However, the prospect of a Presidential election in 2025 raises several questions about the peacefulness of the future process. Warning signs are becoming increasingly more frequent and threatening. The rivalry between the two factions, the *Oficialistas* and *Evistas*¹⁷, is a significant development that cannot be underestimated. Moreover, the possibility of the judiciary and the army becoming instruments to target political rivals poses a serious threat to Bolivia's democratic foundations¹⁸. The proximity of Morales' march to the coup attempt highlights the immense challenges Arce's administration is facing. A significant de-escalation of tensions is crucial to stabilize Bolivian politics in the coming months. MAS may undergo a profound and transformative reform, starting with addressing the core principles that influenced Evo Morales' decision to support Luis Arce as the presidential candidate in 2020. This reform could reshape the party's future trajectory and governance, as civil war seems to be a possibility as stated by Arce himself on September 22¹⁹. In addition, the groundbreaking decision of the TCP to bar Evo Morales from running for another mandate in 2025²⁰, issued on November 8, 2024, adds another layer of complexity to the issue. On the same day, legislators *Evistas* caused havoc in Congress, shouting and throwing flowers,

¹³ Molina (2024, September 24)

¹⁴ Aliaga (2024)

¹⁵ Karita & Valdez (2024)

¹⁶ Molina (2024, September 24)

¹⁷ *Ibidem*

¹⁸ Biondi (2024)

¹⁹ Aliaga (2024) - "Arce dio un mensaje al país para aceptar el diálogo convocado por el Defensor del Pueblo, Pedro Callisaya, y afirmó que no le dará gusto a Morales de caer en provocaciones que lleven al país a una *guerra civil*".

²⁰ Al Jazeera (2024)

keeping the protests non-violent. However, it will be important to keep monitoring further developments, addressing the next steps of Evo Morales towards the 2025 elections in August.

In conclusion, the next months will be crucial for Bolivian democracy. Several key factors must be closely monitored in the months ahead. First, the internal dynamics of MAS, especially its role in selecting the next presidential candidate. Violence or the creation of a new personalistic party would be significant developments. Second, the developments around the proclaimed referendum proposed by Arce and the impact on the sentence by the TCP. Third, any violent escalation in the protests. While there have been no reports of gunfights so far, given the tense context, such an escalation cannot be ruled out. Bolivia is currently a political powder keg, and it is up to its leaders to prevent further escalation.

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