

# Bolivia's Evo Morales marks 12 years in power amid mounting social struggles

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On January 22, Bolivian President Evo Morales delivered a speech marking 12 years of his government. He declared that over the course of his three terms in the presidency, “we have structurally transformed the country with greater social justice [and now] are looking more optimistically at the future.”

The policy of limited social welfare measures, combined with a fiscal pact with the Bolivian capitalist oligarchy and the defense of private property, has resulted in a “transformation” reflected most accurately in the extraordinary rise of the Bolivian banks, which last year recorded the second highest growth rate in Latin America, 12 percent, compared to an average of 4.7 percent for the region.

“This reflects the extraordinary performance of the national banking sector, which, for the sixth year in a row, has 11 national financial institution among the 250 largest in the region,” Guillermo Prömmel, the Bolivian representative of the *Revista América Economía* en Bolivia told the La Paz daily *La Razón*.

But this stunning economic performance in terms of profits generated by the financial system under the government of Evo Morales and his ruling Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) stands in stark contrast to the conditions confronting the masses of Bolivian people. The country's poverty rate is close to 39 percent, with 64 percent working in the so-called informal sector. For the minority who are employed, the monthly minimum wage is only US\$290, or US\$1.57 an hour.

In his televised message to Congress, Morales proclaimed, “We are the strongest state in the entire region and the one that has grown the most in recent years in South America. Now we enjoy economic stability that is an example in the world.”

Meanwhile, however, the Bolivian people have taken to the streets in opposition to Morales's bid to seek

another re-election, which voters rejected in a referendum that the president lost on February 21, 2016. Morales refused to recognize the results of the ballot, instead using the judicial apparatus, controlled by the ruling MAS, to nullify the vote. This action by the government has unleashed a series of protests, with the government itself recording 984 social conflicts in 2017 in which the police were called in to repress opposition.

One of those mobilizations was a strike by Bolivian doctors, which lasted 47 days. The strike was launched to demand the annulment of Article 205, which criminalizes malpractice, essentially scapegoating underpaid and overworked residents and interns for the failures of Bolivia's health care system.

The response of President Morales was swift in coming. “It is time to finish with some conservatives on the issue of health care, who do not want to change the system; and we are going to change it, it is our obligation, as well as changing many other issues. Some changes are hard but necessary.” He threatened criminal prosecution of the strike's leaders, as well as workers and students, and the closing down of pharmacies, dismissals and wage cuts.

Over the course of the last 12 years, Morales and his administration have made many pledges to build hospitals and improve the health care system, but this has all remained on the level of demagogic speeches and populist promises, without either the budgeting of funds or any genuine planning to resolve the deep problems of the system. Those with resources are treated in private clinics, and those without are relegated to crumbling public hospitals, where the cost still places treatment out of reach for large sectors of the working class, peasants and poor.

The lack of decent health care is only one of the

indices of the impoverished living conditions of the Bolivian population. In 2016, the Human Development Index created by the United Nations Development Program, taking into account life expectancy, education, per capita income and levels of social inequality, placed Bolivia at 119th in terms of national rankings of the 193 member states of the United Nations, making it one of the lowest in Latin America and the Caribbean, alongside Haiti, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras.

In his January 22 speech, Morales proclaimed that the country's next challenge was the "the technological revolution," calling upon young people to "take up the banner of the technological revolution. "Our doors open to receive and listen to them; we have to support the new generations."

The reality is that in Bolivia, most of the young people have precarious jobs in the informal sector, without social benefits or stability, suffering extreme forms of exploitation at sub-minimum wages and without any labor rights. Young graduates are forced into positions unrelated to their academic or technical training, working for long periods under conditions of underemployment and the general labor instability that affects the entire population.

This social reality of poverty, exploitation and inequality found no expression in Morales's celebratory speech. Instead, he appealed to the "social movements," which are controlled by the ruling MAS, to defend his government against any threat from the right-wing opposition.

Even as large sections of the Bolivian bourgeoisie have accommodated themselves to the MAS government, the right has been strengthened by Morales's actions, particularly the repudiation of the popular referendum denying him a fourth term in office. It has allowed these forces to masquerade as defenders of democracy.

The biggest threat to Morales and his attempt to remain in power indefinitely, however, comes not from the right-wing bourgeois parties and their allies in the US Embassy, but rather from below, from the masses of Bolivian workers, peasants and youth, whose social reality stands in stark contrast to the populist demagoguery of the ruling MAS, driving them into mass struggles against the government and the capitalist system that it defends.



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