

Far right regaining power in Bolivia after collapse of Movement Toward Socialism (MAS)

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The first round of Bolivia's presidential elections Sunday resulted in the electoral collapse of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party which first came to power 20 years ago under former President Evo Morales.

Rodrigo Paz Pereira of the Christian Democratic Party, son of former President Jaime Paz Zamora, led the vote count with 30.81 percent over former President Jorge Quiroga Ramirez, who received 28.81 percent and whose Libre coalition represents the traditional right.

The favorite in pre-election polls, far-right businessman Samuel Doria Medina, finished third with 19.86 percent, followed by Morales's former ally and Senate President Andrónico Rodríguez Ledezma with 8.22 percent, running as an independent.

Following a years-long and violent faction fight between Morales and acting President Luis Arce, the ruling MAS barely topped the 3 percent needed to maintain its electoral party status.

This outcome marks not the "rejection of socialism," as the corporate media predictably claims, but a damning indictment of the Movement Toward Socialism of Morales and Arce and the entire political establishment. The numbers speak for themselves: fully 36.33 percent, the largest share of the ballots, were either not cast at all or were deliberately spoiled.

This act of mass abstention and protest voting, encouraged in part by Morales himself after he was banned from running again, underscores how disillusioned wide layers of the population have become with a party that once claimed to represent working people and the indigenous poor. Rather than mobilizing mass opposition to the right-wing oligarchy that carried out a US-backed coup that ousted him in 2019, Morales's call to cast null ballots handed the initiative back to the same reactionary forces, facilitating their return to the presidential palace.

MAS in power: A record of defending capitalist interests

The MAS governments of Morales and Arce were repeatedly hailed by the pseudo-left internationally as examples of a successful "pink tide" experiment—a supposedly peaceful synthesis of social reform and capitalist market politics. In reality, as shown by their record, the MAS consistently subordinated the demands of the working class to the imperatives of foreign capital and the Bolivian bourgeoisie.

While Morales emerged out of the explosive mass struggles of the early 2000s—the Cochabamba water wars and the national gas protests—his subsequent governments were a calculated attempt to contain the class struggle and disarm the working class politically. Hydrocarbons were formally "nationalized," yet in practice, multinational energy corporations continued to reap massive profits under favorable terms while state revenues rose only marginally.

Under the presidency of Luis Arce—Morales' hand-picked successor before they drifted apart—the largest lithium reserves in the world, a mineral indispensable for the global transition to electric vehicles, became the subject of new concessions to foreign firms, in particular Chinese-based companies. Bolivia's historical position as a semi-colonial supplier of cheap raw materials with most of the wealth absorbed by foreign finance capital remained unchanged.

At home, the MAS leadership accommodated the local bourgeoisie and agribusiness elites, above all those concentrated in Santa Cruz. A superficial social transfer program brought poverty reduction, but this rested entirely on a boom in commodity prices, primarily driven by China's insatiable demand for raw materials. When commodity prices collapsed in the mid-2010s, the reforms of the MAS model—limited increases to education and healthcare budgets—were exposed as entirely unsustainable under capitalism.

Moreover, workers' strikes were repeatedly repressed by the government, particularly when they demanded salary increases above the inflation rate. Indigenous movements that protested extractivist development on their territories, such as the TIPNIS march, faced state violence. This made clear that MAS's nationalism was, at its core, a bourgeois project of stabilizing Bolivian capitalism under conditions of social unrest.

Now, MAS has collapsed politically after presiding over the effective economic breakdown of the country. Inflation has surged, basic goods have become unaffordable, and a dollar shortage crisis has gripped the economy. The pegged exchange rate to the dollar is under extreme strain, resulting in a flourishing black market, destabilizing trade, and eroding popular savings. Policy measures adopted by Arce's government only bought time, relying on costly currency interventions and subsidized imports, without solving the structural problem: Bolivia's dependence on exporting raw minerals and gas left an economy tied hand and foot to global finance and commodity markets.

By attempting to manage the crisis on these capitalist foundations, MAS provoked disappointment among workers, peasants and indigenous communities.

In June 2024, former Army commander Gen. Juan José Zuñiga led a short-lived military coup with US backing against Arce, demanding the release from jail of the 2019 coup plotters. Now these fascistic forces aligned with Washington are on their way to return to power after the October 19 runoff.

Quiroga provides the starker example of continuity with Bolivia's darkest chapters. As vice president under Hugo Banzer—former military dictator turned “democrat”—and later interim president after Banzer's terminal illness, Quiroga was the “civilian” face of Banzer's regime from 1997 to 2001. During his 1971-1978 dictatorship, Banzer was infamous for his bloody repression of workers and students, and having returned to power, the Banzer-Quiroga administration oversaw a state of siege in 2000 during the Cochabamba Water War, where it violently crushed protests against the privatization of water. In 2019-2020, Quiroga briefly served as the coup regime's official international spokesperson, seeking to whitewash its repression even after it deployed the military to massacre dozens of protesters.

Paz, meanwhile, is not some fresh face, but the direct heir of entrenched right-wing politics. The son of Jaime Paz Zamora, who led the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR), Rodrigo Paz inherits the legacy of the notorious “patriotic pact” forged between the MIR and Banzer in the 1980s, which propped up the dictatorship-era elites and imposed sweeping social cuts and privatizations.

The agribusiness oligarchy of Santa Cruz has played a

decisive role once again. The fascist Governor Luis Fernando Camacho—who was a leading political figure in the 2019 coup and openly allied with paramilitary shock groups—struck an early alliance with millionaire businessman Samuel Doria Medina, who initially polled in first place. After his first-round defeat, Medina promptly endorsed Paz, cementing a united front of business, agro-industrial, and military forces behind him.

Quiroga, who won Santa Cruz outright, represents another pole of this oligarchic bloc. Together, Paz and Quiroga are pledging measures that echo the demands of Bolivia's financial aristocracy and Washington.

The right-wing's candidates who will compete in the runoff are both openly promising a pivot away from MAS's cultivated ties with China and Russia. While MAS governments gave major contracts and concessions to Chinese-owned companies—particularly in lithium, gas, and infrastructure—neither Morales nor Arce ever challenged Bolivia's underlying dependence on imperialism. Their maneuvering between competing powers has now reached a dead end as the United States pursues an increasingly aggressive policy in Latin America aimed at reasserting its hegemony.

The results of the Bolivian election prove once again that bourgeois nationalism offers no way forward for the working class and only serves to disarm workers' struggles, opening political space for the right.

The spoiled ballots and abstentions reveal deep hostility to the entire capitalist political establishment. But without independent organization and internationalist, socialist leadership—a Bolivian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International—workers will suffer fascistic and imperialist-backed reaction that will eclipse that of 2019, the early 2000s and 1970s.



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