

# After collapse of the MAS, right-wing president takes power in Bolivia

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7 November 2025

Rodrigo Paz Pereira is set to become Bolivia's next president this Saturday, November 8, after winning an October 19 runoff election. His inauguration ends two decades of rule by the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS).

In the second round contest, Paz Pereira, the Christian Democratic candidate, won 54.96 percent of the vote compared to 45.04 percent for his opponent and fellow right-winger Jorge Tuto Quiroga of the Free Alliance. The MAS candidate, Eduardo del Castillo, received a humiliating 3.2 percent in the first round, while the party won just a single seat in the legislature.

The vote represented a crushing defeat for the MAS, long regarded in pseudo-left circles as a flagship of the Pink Tide and "21st century socialism," the slogan first advanced by Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and then embraced by MAS leader Evo Morales.

The slogan and the party's name notwithstanding, the MAS never implemented genuine socialist policies, instead paving the way for the return to power by the right by maintaining intact the capitalist state and its repressive apparatus and protecting the core profit interests of both Bolivia's ruling oligarchy and foreign capital at the expense of the working class and oppressed masses.

Paz Pereira won the election largely by appealing to layers that previously voted for the MAS as the "lesser of two evils." He campaigned on the basis of demagogic phrases about "capitalism for all" and promises to support small businesses and the large informal sector. He claimed he would not pursue a structural adjustment agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), like his rival Quiroga, and that he would maintain minimal social assistance programs, including cash transfers to the poorest sections of what remains the second-poorest country in South America.

These election promises will likely be shelved in short order. The week before his inauguration, Paz Pereira and his advisers flew to Washington for talks with the Trump administration and the major international financial institutions.

Among the first acts of the new administration will be to restore diplomatic relations with the US. The MAS government of Morales broke off ties in 2008, expelling the US ambassador along with the Drug Enforcement Administration and USAID, accusing them of fomenting a coup against his administration.

The US State Department was among the first to congratulate Paz Pereira on his victory. Washington declared itself "ready to be a partner with Bolivia," clearly counting on the election furthering its neo-colonial agenda in Latin America. Secretary of State Marco Rubio declared the election results "a transformative opportunity for both nations."

The transformation that Washington seeks is to tie Bolivia to the war

wagon of US imperialism as it prepares to attack Venezuela, while using loans and debt to impose a neo-liberal economic agenda, and break the country from its close economic and diplomatic ties with China and Russia.

In particular, the Trump administration has its sights set on Bolivia's lithium resources, the largest deposit on the planet, crucial for electric vehicle batteries, which are also sought by China.

Paz Pereira has called for a break with "ideologies," understood by many to mean a campaign of privatizations and "structural adjustment" that will drive up unemployment and transfer wealth from the bottom to the top of society.

The character of the incoming government has been foreshadowed by the release days before the inauguration of Jeanine Áñez, who took power as an unelected president, overseeing a campaign of violent repression, following a US-backed coup that overthrew Evo Morales in 2019.

Incoming Vice President Edmundo Lara called for the Supreme Court's annulling of Áñez's 10-year prison sentence to be followed by a universal amnesty for military and police officials dismissed or facing charges for participating in the coup and the ensuing repression, declaring that they were only "doing their duty."

The scion of Bolivia's most prominent political dynasty, Paz Pereira improbably campaigned as an "outsider," leaning heavily on the right-wing populism of his vice-presidential running mate Lara, an evangelical former police captain.

In reality, Paz Pereira is, by virtue of his background and experience, a highly conscious representative of the Bolivian bourgeoisie, whose great uncle and father were both presidents of Bolivia. His great uncle, Víctor Paz Estenssoro, first assumed the presidency in 1952 on the back of a revolution led by armed tin miners. Having integrated the main union federation, the COB, into his government, Paz Estenssoro set about reconstructing the capitalist state and its repressive apparatus.

His success was owed ultimately to the absence of a revolutionary leadership in the working class. This in turn was the result of the Pabloite revisionist perspective that prevailed within the Bolivian Trotskyist organization, the POR (Revolutionary Workers Party), which adapted itself to Paz Estenssoro's petty-bourgeois nationalist MNR (Revolutionary National Movement).

This perspective relegated the role of the POR to attempting to push the MNR government to the left, rather than that of exposing before the working class the organic incapacity of this bourgeois government to complete the democratic revolution and wage a consistent struggle against imperialism, and fighting for a program of revolutionary class struggle for socialism.

This tragedy of the Bolivian working class was repeated in 1971 leading to a bloody coup d'état led by then-Col. Hugo Banzer, supported by Paz Estenssoro's MNR. His great nephew, Paz Pereira, served in Banzer's government after the ex-dictator managed to return to power via the ballot box in 1997.

With a far-right pro-imperialist government set to return to power, the MAS on Thursday announced that it had expelled President Luis Arce, Morales' former finance minister, who was swept into power in 2020 on a wave of popular anger against Áñez's coup regime. In a transparent attempt to distance itself from the debacle that it created, the MAS accused Arce of failing to take the party's advice on dealing with Bolivia's protracted economic crisis and floated allegations of misappropriated party funds.

But the disintegration of the MAS and its repudiation by Bolivia's working class and oppressed masses are the the product not merely of any individual mistakes or malfeasance on the part of the outgoing president. They are the inevitable outcome of the entire arc of development of not only the MAS, but the whole of the so-called Pink Tide that emerged in Latin America at the dawn of the present century.

As with similar Latin American governments, from Chavez/Maduro in Venezuela to Correa in Ecuador, Lula in Brazil and others, the MAS utilized pseudo-socialist, anti-imperialist and indigenist rhetoric to mask a policy that defended capitalist ownership and governed on behalf of the national and international bourgeoisie. In Bolivia, as elsewhere, the government was able to harness the commodities boom of the early 2000s, driven by China's growth, to implement limited social assistance programs that failed to either transform class relations or fundamentally alter Bolivia's status as one of the most unequal countries on the planet.

In Bolivia, the rise to power of the MAS, founded by Evo Morales, the leader of an organization representing the interests of coca-growers, followed the mass upheavals known as the "water war" and the "gas war," which pitted workers and oppressed peasants against the attempts of reactionary oligarchic governments to privatize and sell off basic resources.

The role played by the MAS was to divert this mass rebellion back into the safe channels of bourgeois politics and limited forms of national reformism. After winning the 2005 election by a landslide, Morales and the MAS were able to tap into the precipitous rise in gas and mineral prices to fund cash assistance programs for children, the elderly and new mothers that reduced the rate of poverty by 40 percent.

In 2006, the government announced the "nationalization" of the country's main export earner, the gas industry. In reality, production remained in the hands of giant transnationals, including Brazil's Petrobras, the Spanish-Argentine company Repsol YPF, Total from France, British Gas and British Petroleum as well as the US Exxon Mobil Corporation. Operating under the guise of "joint ventures" with the Bolivian state corporation, Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Bolivianos (YPFB), the companies were persuaded to pay the government a larger share of earnings while still reaping generous profits.

With the collapse of the commodity boom in 2014, gas production was halved, and income from hydrocarbon exports plummeted.

The class character of the MAS government emerged with ever greater clarity. Allied with Bolivia's agro-industrial oligarchs, it used its cooption of the trade union bureaucracies and social movements with positions and perks, and, increasingly, naked state repression, to

guarantee capitalist stability. Strikes and protests were denounced as acts of "economic sabotage" and met with claims that social struggles only strengthened the right.

Meanwhile, Morales' claim to represent the interests of the long-oppressed indigenous populations, expressed in the 2009 constitution's defining of Bolivia as a "plurinational" state, also wore thin as the government repressed indigenous protests against extractivist projects backed by foreign capital.

The MAS's political support was further eroded after Morales called a referendum in 2016 on overturning term limits in order to stay in office. After his proposal was defeated, he utilized MAS-controlled courts to nullify the results and ran for reelection in 2019, before the coup that forced him into exile.

Under Arce, the MAS deepened its austerity measures, effectively following the prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund. It attacked the coup regime from the right on the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic, accusing it of having prioritized "health over the economy." Its ending of preventive measures contributed to Bolivia having one of the highest rates of COVID deaths in the Americas.

In the run-up to the election, Bolivia was gripped by multiple crises, with inflation approaching 16 percent, public debt reaching 84 percent of GDP and fuel shortages leading to long lines at filling stations.

The shipwreck of the MAS's petty-bourgeois nationalist project led to an increasingly bitter internecine struggle between Arce and Morales, who were divided not by issues of program, but over who would occupy the presidential palace. Barred from running, Morales called for his supporters to spoil their ballots in protest in the first round of the 2025 elections. Reflecting the hostility toward all of the parties, the rate of abstention together with spoiled ballots reached 36 percent in the first round, exceeding the vote for any single candidate.

The working class of Bolivia and throughout Latin America must draw the bitter lessons of the debacle suffered by the MAS and its paving the way for the return of the right to power. The struggle against imperialism and oppression can be waged only on the basis of the political mobilization of the working class, providing a leadership to the masses of oppressed peasants and the indigenous peoples.

This movement must be independent of every section of the bourgeoisie, including its "left" factions, and must be armed with a socialist and internationalist program, uniting workers throughout Latin America, together with the working class of the United States and internationally, in the struggle to put an end to capitalism. This demands the building of a new revolutionary leadership, that is, sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement.



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