



Statement

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By International Crisis Group

Keeping Violence in Check after Bolivia's Political Rupture

An opposition senator has laid claim to Bolivia's highest office with the country's first indigenous president, Evo Morales, in exile in Mexico. Amid polarisation, street unrest is unlikely to relent. An orderly transition that avoids bloodshed will require external guidance, probably from the European Union.

After close to fourteen years in power, Bolivia's first indigenous president, Evo Morales, tendered his resignation on 10 November amid deepening unrest over electoral fraud and under pressure from the armed forces. Along with Morales, the upper echelons of the ruling Movement toward Socialism (MAS) party also quit. Many senior officials and ministers, fearing reprisals after the government's fall, sought asylum in embassies, leaving Bolivia bereft of government as strife worsened on its major city streets. Views on what occurred are deeply polarised: for Morales' supporters, his departure from power is a coup; his opponents believe that it restores democracy. The priority now is to reach a domestic agreement that moves the country away from the brink, organises a credible election with MAS participation, and avoids mass unrest on his supporters' part and a crackdown against them. That almost certainly will require brokering from one of the

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country's external partners. Because Brazil, the U.S. and even the Organization of American States (OAS) are seen as biased against Morales, the European Union may need to step in. Without a transition that bridges the bitter divisions in Bolivia's body politic, the country risks worse bloodshed and a confrontation that an ever more tumultuous region can ill afford.

As of this writing, the political situation in the capital La Paz remains chaotic. As Morales fled to asylum in Mexico along with his vice president, it fell to Bolivia's Legislative Assembly to appoint a caretaker president ahead of new polls, which, according to the constitution, must take place within 90 days. That body had been dominated by Morales' MAS. But with MAS legislators, including the Senate leadership, mostly gone to ground, Jeanine Áñez, an opposition senator, became next in line for the presidency. On 12 November, she asserted her claim to the interim post, saying her primary tasks would be to "pacify the country" and organise elections. In principle, she needed the support and attendance of some MAS legislators, as that party controls 25 of the Senate's 36 seats and 88 of the lower house's 130 seats, to assume the job. But a Constitutional Court ruling issued the same day authorised her to take power immediately, in light of Morales' "definitive absence" from the country.

The new caretaker president will need to avoid partisanship and contain the outrage of Morales' support base, which is sizeable. It will not be easy. Even after discounting reported voting irregularities, Morales is estimated to

have received at least 40 per cent of the vote in the 20 October elections. His supporters feel strongly that Morales was ousted in a coup. They fear that the target was not only the leader himself but his government's social policies, which benefited the country's poor and indigenous, and its vision of inclusion and empowerment for a population long shunted aside. Bolivia's interim authorities will also have to curb anti-Morales protesters, some of whom appear intent on clearing the country of the vestiges of MAS rule. Even prior to these most recent events, the situation was perilous. Longstanding tensions rooted in Bolivia's main social and economic divisions – between indigenous people and descendants of European settlers, between western highlands and eastern lowlands, and between poor and rich – flared into open conflict as recently as 2008.

For years, Morales held these tensions in check. The former president rose from extreme poverty in the Andean hamlet of Isallavi to leadership of the country's coca-growing movement and then to Bolivia's highest office, the first person from the country's traditionally marginalised but majority indigenous population to hold it. (Between 50 and 60 per cent of Bolivia's people are indigenous.) In office, he led a government that formed part of the emergent left-wing bloc of Latin American countries, including Venezuela, yet his administration remained hospitable to private investment and wedded to fiscal prudence. He focused intensively on poverty alleviation and, buoyed by a regional commodity boom, achieved outstanding results: extreme poverty in Bolivia fell from 38 per cent in 2005 to 15 per cent last year.

In the end, however, Morales' determination not to relinquish office after securing re-election in 2014 (with over 61 per cent of the vote) was his downfall. To opponents and even many supporters, this smacked of a lust for power that undermined his stature as a champion of the downtrodden. His efforts to secure the right to indefinite re-election were thwarted at referendum in 2016. Late last year, however, he prevailed on the Supreme Electoral Tribunal

– packed with his sympathisers – to grant him permission to run again on the grounds that his human rights would otherwise be infringed upon.

Even that constitutional manipulation was not enough. In returning to the polls, Morales reportedly permitted or orchestrated a sophisticated scheme of rigging aimed at guaranteeing him outright first-round victory. The audit of the polls by a team of OAS experts suggests that a ghost internet server with no official supervision took control of the last stages of the vote count, swinging results in the incumbent's favour. The OAS also found that voting tally sheets were left unsupervised, that some were burnt, and that 38 per cent of those which recorded votes of Bolivians living in Argentina (Morales allegedly won 80 per cent of these 100,000 votes) showed signs of doctoring. That Morales felt the need to resort to such extensive rigging, unprecedented in recent Bolivian elections, stands as a stark illustration of his declining support base.

Morales saw the writing on the wall, but too late. Hours after the OAS report was released on 10 November, and with police breaking ranks and joining protests over the preceding days, he agreed to new elections. Soon afterward, the head of the armed forces conveyed a televised message to "suggest" that the president step aside in the name of civic peace, a piece of advice – or veiled threat – that Morales and his colleagues immediately heeded.

Protests have taken an ugly turn. After the election, tens of thousands took to the streets in major cities like Santa Cruz, Cochabamba, Sucre and Potosí to demand a new vote. Skirmishes between Morales supporters and government opponents have led to several deaths – including two in Santa Cruz at the end of October – as have clashes between security forces and protesters on both sides of the political divide. Violence has escalated in the past few days, with properties belonging to Morales, his colleagues and his opponents burnt; commercial premises ransacked and looted; and barricades and civic checkpoints erected in

La Paz to keep out Morales supporters while those in opposition strongholds, above all Santa Cruz, are dismantled. In Vinto, a small town in the region of Cochabamba, opposition thugs marched a Morales-allied mayor barefoot through the streets, cut her hair and doused her in red paint. La Paz was in effect shut down after the military stepped in to support police efforts to contain thousands of Morales supporters heading down from the adjacent town of El Alto on Sunday and Monday. According to state prosecutors, eight people have died during the protests, including one police officer, while more than 300 have been wounded since the election. The deaths were caused by gunshot wounds, asphyxiation and head injuries dealt with blunt objects.

Neither side shows much sign of compromise. More pragmatic opposition voices are increasingly drowned out by harder-line leaders and protesters, and even some elements in the security forces, who call for the restoration of democracy and appear intent on reversing Morales' pro-indigenous program. Luis Fernando Camacho, leader since February of the civic committee of Santa Cruz – a traditional conservative institution that has been at the forefront of anti-Morales protests – has demanded the ex-president be jailed and the “Bible restored to the government palace”. One fire service spokesman told a press conference on Monday, referring to Morales' resignation, that “the head of the snake has been removed, but the body is still moving”. Some police officers have also expressed hostility to the outgoing government by ripping the wiphala flag, the multi-coloured emblem of Bolivia's indigenous traditions, from their uniforms. Morales himself has appealed for calm, insisting that “we Bolivian brothers cannot fight one another”. But he and his vice president might still seek to fan the flames among protesters in Bolivia and await the right moment to return. Upon arrival in Mexico, he said he would “keep up the struggle”, aware no doubt that huge indigenous protests in 2003 and 2005 preceded his accession to power.

The dangers facing Bolivia are not unique to the country, nor can they be cordoned off from the rest of the region. Latin America is facing a period of exceptional turbulence. Massive anti-government protests driven by anger at elites, failing public services and economic inequality have shaken Ecuador, Chile and Honduras. Brazil's far-right government has thrown that country's traditional role as ballast for regional stability into question. Venezuela's crisis has had devastating humanitarian consequences, and the failure to resolve it, partly a reflection of the region's polarisation, casts a long shadow over the continent. The Bolivian crisis risks falling victim to and further aggravating that same polarisation. The military's prominent role has convinced many from across Latin America's left that Morales fell victim to a coup mounted by the country's former elites, while many centrist governments have been disconcerted by his sudden exit. In contrast, his critics insist that Morales had forsaken all constitutional legitimacy, first by skirting rules on re-election and second by resorting to electoral fraud. They view his demise as a restoration of liberal democracy.

The degree to which violence intensifies and the legitimacy Morales' successor enjoys in the eyes of Bolivians and the region will hinge in large part on how the transition is piloted by Áñez and her supporters, how much it hews to Bolivia's constitutional procedure and how far it is subverted by mob violence or the military. It is critical that Morales' party have some say in what happens next and that de facto power remain with civilian leaders. The best way forward would be a transition plan that enjoys at least some buy-in from Morales supporters, an interim government that abstains from taking crucial policy decisions and a credible election within three months featuring,

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among others, a candidate from Morales' MAS party. Security forces will need to take great care to avoid as far as possible use of violence and any show of political bias.

This outcome will require robust and even-handed support from abroad at a time when conditions are hardly propitious. Identifying a credible mediator of sufficient heft to be effective is a big part of the challenge. Brazil has been centre stage in the past: former President Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva helped avert conflict between leaders of the eastern lowlands and Morales' government in 2008. President Jair Bolsonaro, whose foreign policy is now dedicated to combating "cultural Marxism" and "globalism", in the words of Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo, cannot play that role. The U.S. government has declared that it views Morales' resignation as a boost for democracy and a "strong signal to the illegitimate regimes of Venezuela and Nicaragua that democracy and

the will of the people will always prevail". Few other countries in the region, if any, are trusted by both sets of duelling political forces, while regional institutions, including the OAS, are widely regarded as ideologically slanted. OAS General Secretary Luis Almagro has said the only "coup" in Bolivia was the electoral fraud in October.

In this light, the EU and European governments may be best positioned to mediate and support a transition to fresh elections. Europe's full diplomatic engagement over the next few weeks will be crucial, as will its commitment to deploying an election observation mission for the next poll. As peace and stability for Bolivia and its people lie precariously in the balance, the two sides and their respective foreign backers need to call for restraint in the streets, seek some sort of compromise transition plan during the interim government, and move toward a credible and inclusive presidential vote.