

Bolivia: Elections in September?

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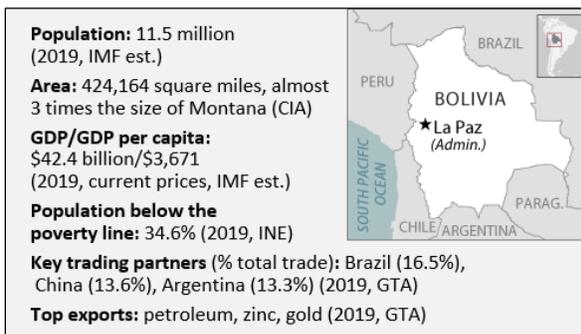
On June 10, 2020, Bolivia's legislative assembly approved a law establishing September 6 as the new date for general elections. The elections were scheduled for May 3, 2020, but **suspended** in March following Interim President Jeanette Añez's declaration of a national quarantine in response to Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). Añez has **refused** to sign the legislation due to the pandemic, but a supermajority of legislators can promulgate the law without her support. Bolivia has been polarized since the annulled October 2019 elections alleged to be marred by fraud and the **November resignation** of President Evo Morales of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party.

The United States remains concerned about the political volatility in Bolivia. The Trump Administration and Congress have supported efforts to ensure the upcoming elections are free and fair.

October Elections Annulled

Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president, **transformed Bolivia**, but **observers** criticized his effort to remain in office (he won elections in 2006, 2009, and 2014). In 2017, Bolivia's Constitutional Tribunal removed limits on reelection established in the 2009 constitution, effectively overruling a 2016 referendum in which voters rejected a constitutional change to allow Morales to run for another term.

Figure I. Bolivia at a Glance



Sources: CRS Graphics, International Monetary Fund (IMF), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas* (INE), Global Trade Atlas (GTA).

Allegations of **fraud** marred Bolivia's October election. The TSE said Morales exceeded the 10-point margin he needed to avoid a runoff over former president Carlos Mesa, but Mesa rejected that result. Some protesters called for a new election; others demanded Morales's resignation.

On November 10, 2019, the Organization of American States (OAS) issued **preliminary findings** suggesting enough irregularities to merit a new election. (Some experts have since **challenged** aspects of those findings). Morales agreed to hold new elections, but the opposition rejected his offer. Morales resigned after police refused to stop protesters, ministers resigned, and civic organizations, unions, and the military urged

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him to step down. He sought asylum in Mexico and then Argentina. In late November 2019, the MAS-led Congress passed a [law](#) to annul the October elections and select a new electoral tribunal. In December 2019, the final OAS election [audit report](#) found “intentional manipulation” of the results.

Interim Government

Interim President Añez, formerly a little-known opposition senator from Beni, became president following the resignation of three MAS officials ahead of her in the line of succession. Añez’s past anti-indigenous rhetoric and conservative cabinet [raised concerns](#) among some of Bolivia’s indigenous population, which became empowered under Morales. The MAS-led Congress initially refused to accept Añez’s government and many MAS supporters protested. Añez issued a [decree](#) giving the military authority to participate in crowd-control efforts and immunity from prosecution while doing so. The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights [documented](#) 36 deaths and 400 injuries that occurred in mid-November 2019, including two massacres involving state forces. The government [rejected](#) those findings.

According to Bolivia’s constitution, the interim government has a mandate to convene new elections. Some observers have criticized Añez for exceeding that mandate. Interim President Añez reversed many MAS foreign policy positions by expelling Cuban officials, including doctors, and recognizing Interim Venezuelan President Juan Guaidó. Under Añez, prosecutors have issued an [arrest warrant](#) for Morales on charges of terrorism and sedition and reportedly pursued politically motivated cases against former MAS officials.

The interim government has strictly enforced a nationwide quarantine, currently extended through June 30. It has received [\\$327 million](#) in International Monetary Fund assistance for health and social spending. In April 2020, the government issued a [decree](#) criminalizing “disinformation,” reportedly including criticism, about the government’s response to COVID-19. In May 2020, police [arrested](#) Añez’s former health minister for a corruption scandal involving ventilator purchases at inflated prices. As of June 15, Bolivia had [611 deaths](#) from the virus.

2020 Elections: Candidates

After the Bolivian Congress passed an election law in November 2019, legislators appointed a new electoral tribunal. In January, that tribunal announced the first round election would occur on May 3. Following the suspension of the May 3 election, legislators have selected September 6 as the new first round election date. Due to COVID-19, many observers are concerned about the health risks for poll workers, candidates, and voters.

Bolivia’s Presidential Candidates

Luis Arce: economist, former minister of the economy from 2006 to 2019, who was generally [praised](#) by the International Monetary Fund

Jeanette Añez: former senator and current interim president who abandoned an earlier pledge not to run

Luis Camacho: lawyer and Catholic civic leader from the eastern state of Santa Cruz who led [nationwide protests](#) urging Morales’s resignation

Carlos Mesa: former journalist who served as president from 2003 to 2005 who has opposed the MAS, but has more moderate positions than Añez and Camacho

Source: Paola Nagovitch, “Explainer: Presidential Candidates in Bolivia’s 2020 Special Elections,” *Americas Society/Council of the Americas*, February 6, 2020.

Although protests in Bolivia died down in December 2019, they could resume if MAS supporters think Añez is using the pandemic as a reason for her to remain in power.

U.S. Concerns

The United States remains concerned about the political volatility in Bolivia, but its role in supporting a return to democracy may be limited. Bolivia-U.S. relations were tense following the 2008 ousting of the U.S. ambassador, and bilateral assistance to the country ended in 2013.

The [State Department](#) supported the OAS election observation and audit efforts. The United States and 25 other OAS countries issued a November [statement](#) rejecting violence and calling for new elections. A December 9 [statement](#) by Secretary of State Pompeo also called for convening new elections. Within the Western Hemisphere, consensus on Bolivia has eroded over the Añez government's crackdown on protesters and efforts to punish Morales and his allies—actions that some governments have criticized but [U.S. officials](#) have not. Following President Trump's January 2020 decision to [waive](#) foreign aid restrictions on Bolivia, U.S. support for electoral authorities and civil society groups has totaled some \$3 million. U.S. assistance to help Bolivia address [COVID-19](#) has totaled nearly \$900,000.

The situation in Bolivia has generated some concern in Congress. S.Res. 447, agreed to in the Senate in January 2020, supports the prompt convening of new elections.

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