

Bolivia Postpones May Elections Amidst COVID-19 Outbreak

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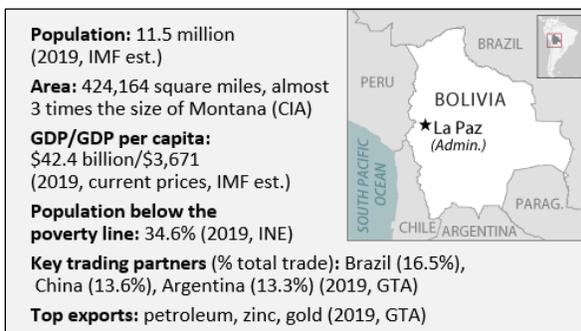
On March 22, 2020, Bolivia's Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) [suspended](#) preparations for national elections scheduled for May 3 following Interim President Jeanette Añez's declaration of a two-week national quarantine to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Bolivia remains extremely polarized following 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. Morales's former finance minister Luis Arce had been leading the polls. According to the TSE, the MAS-led Congress may need to enact legislation to select a new election date.

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



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. Morales agreed to hold new elections, but the opposition rejected his offer. Morales resigned after police refused to stop

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

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protesters, ministers resigned, and civic organizations, unions, and the military urged him to step down. He sought asylum in Mexico and then Argentina. On November 23, 2019, the Congress unanimously passed an [electoral law](#) to annul the October elections and select a new electoral tribunal. In December 2019, the final OAS [audit report of the October election](#) 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. Among other policy changes, Interim President Añez reversed many MAS foreign policy positions. Añez expelled Cuban officials, recognized Interim Venezuelan President Juan Guaidó, and got into a [diplomatic row](#) with Spain and Mexico regarding their diplomatic protection of former MAS officials. Under Añez, prosecutors have issued an [arrest warrant](#) for Morales on charges of terrorism and sedition and reportedly have pursued politically motivated cases against former MAS officials.

The interim government is now attempting to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak. While Bolivia ranks in the middle for the region in terms of [health security preparedness](#), the government [reportedly](#) lacks intensive care beds and ventilators. As of March 23, Bolivia had [27 confirmed cases](#) of the virus.

May 2020 Elections: Candidates and Postponement

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, with a second-round presidential runoff, if needed, to occur on June 14.

Bolivia’s Leading 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 after passage of the electoral law and Añez’s revocation of the military decree, they could resume if MAS supporters think Añez is using the pandemic as a reason for her to remain in power. MAS reportedly [did not participate](#) in discussions with the TSE on the postponement of the elections. If the MAS is not involved in negotiations to set a new electoral timetable, the electoral process may not be perceived as free and fair.

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 as soon as possible. A December 9 [statement](#) by Secretary of State Pompeo also called for a focus on 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.

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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