https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6308

Bolivia

The Eighteenth Brumaire of Macho Camacho

- IV Online magazine - 2019 - IV538 - November 2019 -

Publication date: Friday 29 November 2019

In office since 2006, Evo Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president, has been overthrown in a coup d'état. Debate on how this happened and what it all means has been proliferating on the international left. Ashley Smith talked with Jeffery R. Webber and Forrest Hylton, two long-time observers of Bolivia, to get a better sense of the issues at stake.

"Instead of society conquering a new content for itself, it only seems that the state has returned to its most ancient form, the unashamedly simple rule of the military sabre and the clerical cowl."

Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

What kind of coup has taken place in Bolivia, and what are the stakes in labelling it a coup?

The first thing to stress is that a coup is an event that is best understood as part of a larger historical process; the trick is to grasp event and process in relation to one another. In a regional perspective, we might situate the Bolivian coup more or less mid-way between the "hard" military coup in Honduras in 2009, and the "soft" parliamentary coups against Fernando Lugo in Paraguay in 2012 and Dilma Rousseff in Brazil in 2016, with a crucial differenceâ€"in Bolivia, the far right co-opted and hijacked mass centrist protest by urban middle classes that preceded the coup, pushing it in a violent direction. The point is that there is currently no one-size-fits-all model for coups in Latin America, but rather a broad spectrum of approaches leading to regime changes aimed at restoring the Washington Consensus.

The stakes in labelling what happened in Bolivia a coup are nothing less than political legitimacy. Former presidents Dilma Rousseff and Luis Ignacio da Silva in Brazil; former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and president-elect Alberto Fernández in Argentina; and the governments of Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico and Tabaré Vásquez in Uruguay labelled it a coup, while the governments of Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia, to name only some of the countries in the US orbit, refused to do so. Brazil, perhaps the least legitimate government in the hemisphere today, was the first country to recognize the post-coup government.

What happened that led to the coup?

On Sunday, October 20, 2019. Evo Morales, leader of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) sought a fourth mandate, having been president since early 2006. Morales arrived at the Palacio Quemado, or the Burnt Palace as the presidential residency is known, with 54 percent of the popular vote, riding a left-indigenous cycle of quasi-insurrectionary proportions between 2000 and 2005. Since then, he won a number of elections and plebiscites, all with more than 60 percent of the popular vote, and with dramatic distance between him and his leading opponents.

But this year was different, and predictably so. For the first time, the ballot would be relatively polarized, drawing what had been for years a regionally fragmented and hapless right-wing oppositional spectrum behind Carlos Mesa, former Vice President under Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, or Goni, and President between 2003 and 2005 following Goni's ouster in the wake of mass popular demonstrations. Mesa leads the Comunidad Cuidadana (Citizen Community) coalition and embodies what Tariq Ali has called the extreme center. Congenitally ineffectual, after October 20, he was swept aside with breath-taking speed by a preposterously far right figure, Luis Fernando Camacho, the bible-toting president of the Santa Cruz Civic Committee, who self-identifies as Macho Camacho.

Crucially, Morales's popularity had suffered since he lost a popular referendum on February 21, 2016 – 51 percent of voters said "no" in the wake of scandals and allegations of corruption – over whether the constitution should be amended to allow him to run for a fourth term in the October elections in 2019. Through a series of legally dubious manoeuvres that many analysts correctly anticipated, he ignored these results and was approved to run by the relevant state authority –this went uncontested at the time by Luis Almagro, general secretary of the Organization of American States (OAS). The referendum became the rallying cry of urban middle classes and regional civic committees hoping to unseat Morales, but unable to do so electorally.

According to Bolivia's electoral system, to avoid a second round, the leading candidate must secure more than 50 percent of the vote, or more than 40 percent of the vote and a lead of 10 percent over the second-place candidate. On the evening of October 20, the "quick count" tally – or the Transmisión de Resultados Electorales Preliminares (Transmission of Preliminary Electoral Results, TREP), which is not legally binding – was updated regularly on the website of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE).

With 83.8 percent of the quick-count votes tallied, the TSE's website indicated that Morales was leading with 45.3 percent, with Mesa in second place with 38.2 percent. It appeared as though there would be a second round. At this point, the TSE inexplicably shut down live transmission of the quick-count tabulation of ballots after the 83 percent of votes had been counted, which prompted Mesa to claim fraud.

In the following days there would be four distinct and contradictory explanations for the shutdown from TSE and government representatives – (1) that they didn't want to superimpose the quick-count on the official count, which had already been initiated; (2) that there was an alert regarding a cybernetic attack so it was shut down for security purposes; (3) that they always shut it down at around 80% of the quick-count; and (4) that they did not have 17% of the votes because rural areas did not have sufficient internet access to send corresponding photos of the ballots.

To make matters worse, the vice president of the TSE, Antonio Costas, resigned, indicating that he had not been informed of the order to stop the TREP, which "was not a good decision." His resignation was nonetheless enigmatic: he said he had done it out of principle, but that there had not been any alteration of the results. This does not constitute evidence, even circumstantial, of fraud.

Twenty-two hours later, on the evening of October 21, the transmission of quick-count results was restarted, with the website now indicating 95.63 percent of votes counted. The distance between Morales and Mesa had grown over the intervening period. The difference separating the two candidates was now said to be 10.12 percent according to the quick-count. Morales had already announced that once the rural votes were counted, he was sure there would be no need for a run-off. Again, Mesa's claims of electoral fraud had no evidence other than the admittedly fishy shutdown of the quick-count results.

Violent opposition protests led by Mesa kicked off that Monday evening throughout the country and included the torching of several departmental offices of the electoral tribunal, even as MAS supporters simultaneously took to the streets in celebration. The official vote count was concluded several days later, with the results being Morales at 47.08 percent and Carlos Mesa at 36.51% – a difference of 10.54 percent, making it a first-round victory for Morales. Despite a decline in support, the official results also indicate that MAS secured a majority in the legislative elections, with 68 seats of 130 in the chamber of deputies, and 21 of 36 in the senate.

What explains the political disaster of the shutdown?

A report by analysts at the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) suggests that the TSE was only ever obliged to quick-count 80 percent of the votes, and that this had been regular practice in past elections. They suggest

that the reopening of the quick-count tally almost 24 hours later was done at the request of the OAS, and that the growing difference in the quick count between Morales and Mesa over the intervening blackout period is consistent with rural votes coming in later for a variety of predictable reasons.

Morales always enjoyed more support in the peripheries – almost two times as many votes in past elections in small cities and the countryside than in the major urban centres of La Paz, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz. The CEPR report additionally argues that the OAS has not provided any evidence suggesting any inconsistencies in the tabulation of the official count, the only legally binding vote count, despite calling into question the validity of the electoral results. The OAS audit of electoral results, released on November 9, labelled the changes in the percentage of votes for Morales “improbable,” but cited no evidence of actual fraud.

How did Morales’ opponents in the extreme center and on the far right respond to this situation?

The dye had been cast even before the OAS audit with the opposition rejecting the audit when it was first proposed by the OAS and agreed to by the government. The opposition, still nominally led by Mesa, doubled down on claims of electoral fraud, yet rejected a recount, calling for an intensified campaign of (violent) protests and demonstrations to unseat Morales. Given this maximalism, it was foreseeable that Mesa would be overwhelmed by the dark forces he helped unleash.

Especially among the urban middle class, which swelled considerably under his government, Morales lost considerable legitimacy after February 2016 when he simply ignored the negative results of the referendum. Nor was his government’s situation improved by the bizarre behaviour of the TSE and government officials concerning the shutdown of quick-count transmission on October 20.

Predictably, the radicalization of the lowland right in the eastern lowlands, linked to agri-business and gas-petroleum extraction, as well as racist paramilitary youth groups, followed immediately. Luis Fernando Camacho, hitherto little-known outside the eastern lowland department of Santa Cruz, captured and became the leading figure of a nationwide, and predominantly urban middle-class revolt.

Camacho comes from a wealthy Santa Cruz family with interests in agribusiness and finance. He directed the neo-fascist youth group Union Juvenil CruceÃ±ista (UJC), which led street-violence against indigenous informal street vendors in the city of Santa Cruz during a failed destabilization campaign against Morales in 2008. The UJC has made frequent use of the swastika symbol in the past and engaged in actions together with the fascist Falange Socialista Boliviana.

A born-again evangelical Christian, the 40-year old “Macho Camacho” shares more than a little in common with Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil: both cemented an alliance with evangelicals, paramilitaries, and cattle ranchers. After years of ineffectual, traditional right wing opposition from the likes of Samuel Quiroga, Samuel Doria Medina, and Mesa, beginning in 2019 Camacho stepped in to fill a vacuum that arose from a power dispute within the Civic Committee of Santa Cruz – long the institution responsible for aggregating the interests of reactionary lowland elites and various sections of agrarian, financial, commercial, industrial, and narco capital in that part of the country, which was systematically favoured by military dictatorships in the 1960s and 70s as well as the subsequent neoliberal partidocracia in the 1980s and 90s.

Camacho managed to amalgamate the disparate threads of opposition, including forging pacts with popular sectors that had become alienated from the Morales government during the last four or five years. These included the Ponchos Rojos, a dissident Aymara indigenous group from the western highlands, coca growing peasants from the Yungas region, sections of the state-owned mining unions, and transport unions. Crucially, he also forged an alliance

with the president of the PotosÃ- Civic Committee, Marco Pumari, an indigenous son of a miner and leader of the PotosÃ- regional dispute with the national government over the distribution of future wealth to be generated by the extraction of lithium deposits in that part of the country.

What about forces on the left and in the popular movement? How did they respond?

Other popular sectors were also independently aligned against the government, either out of spontaneous discontent over perceived electoral fraud, or for longer-standing grievances, many of them legitimate yet ignored. Examples include the government's intervention and disruption of the authentic leaderships of the highland indigenous organization, Consejo Nacional de Ayllus y Markas del Qullasuyu (CONAMAQ), and the lowland organization, Confederación de Pueblos IndÃ-genas de Bolivia (CIDOB), in open dispute with the government since Morales's decision in 2011 – as well as more recently – to railroad opposition to highway construction in an indigenous territory and national park called the TIPNIS.

The feminist organization Mujeres Creando has also mobilized against the government over its failure to act in the wake of accelerating gender violence and one of the highest proportional rates of feminicide in the continent. Other indigenous territorially-based organizations in the lowlands have been on the frontlines of disputes with the government over its failure to consult indigenous communities properly prior to initiating development projects, in partnership with multinational capital, for extractive industries such as mining and natural gas extraction. None of these grievances is minor. None was heard.

Yetâ€"and this is crucialâ€"we can't miss the forest for the trees. Independent Left and indigenous opposition to Morales and MAS was incidental to the post-electoral course of events. Similar to Brazil in 2013 and thereafter, even mobilizations that included popular sectors were quickly channelled and led by the far-right. This was movement capture with a vengeance.

At the same time, popular organizations closely aligned with the governmentâ€"the six trade union federations of the coca growers, the highland and highland valley indigenous peasants of the CSUTCB, miners, the Landless Workers' Movement, and what's left of organized labourâ€"have been slow to react. This, too, was predictable, and is to be explained in part by their near-total incorporation into the apparatuses of the state, their bureaucratization and pacification in that process, and the lost capacities for critical independence, autonomy, and mobilization. Again, the parallels with Brazil and the PT spring to mind.

The right seems to have taken advantage in these circumstances to press their demands with increasing violence. What have they done?

The right's key demands quickly shifted from new elections to Morales's resignation to the incarceration of the president, the vice president, and the entire cabinet. Violent lumpen mobs burned Morales's house down, as well as those of his sister, Esther, the ex-president of the Chamber of Deputies, VÃ-ctor Borda, and the ex-minister of mines, César Navarro. In a moment that marked the shift from center to far right, on November 6, students from the main public university and private universities confronted police and miners supportive of Morales shouting, "We are all Camacho!"

On November 7-8, police forces mutinied in support of the opposition, first in Cochabamba, and then in Sucre, Santa Cruz, PotosÃ-, Oruro, and La Paz. According to the director of the Institute of Forensic Investigation (IDIF), Andrés Flores, six people have been violently killed in the 23 days following the October 20 elections – two in Santa Cruz, two in Cochabamba, and two in La Paz. Five were civilians, one was a police officer.

On Sunday evening, November 10, Camacho was paraded on top of a police car through the streets of La Paz, escorted by mutinous police and accompanied by cheering supporters of the opposition. Morales and vice-president Ã lvaro GarcÃ-a Linera fled to the Chapare region of the department of Cochabamba, the coca-growing region that produced Morales and MAS, to avoid the fate of Gualberto Villaroel, who was hung from a lamp-post in 1946.

Camacho entered the Palacio Quemado, placed a bible on top of a folded Bolivian flag on the floor, and knelt down on bended knee, announcing that “Dios vuelva al Palacio”: “God returns to the presidential palace.” Outside, the non-partisan indigenous Wiphala flag was torn off buildings and set aflame by Camacho supporters, as they announced the defeat of communism. Police in Santa Cruz removed the Wiphala from their uniforms.

Openly racist sentiment, tamed to a remarkable degree during the Morales period for the first time in Bolivian history, has now risen forcefully above ground, as have reactionary ideologies against women (never below ground, in spite of significant political and legislative advances for women during the Morales era), and LGBTQ+. Alongside Camacho’s facho-macho-blanco street politics (anti-feminist, white supremacist, and fascist), another expression was the electoral rise to almost 10 percent – and third position – of evangelical doctor and pastor, Chi Hyung Chang, who spoke of the presence of Satan in the Morales government, and their sin of idolizing the indigenous conception of Pachamama, or mother earth. Once again, the Brazilian example looms large.

Following several resignations of cabinet ministers, the chief of command of the Bolivian Armed Forces “suggested” Morales resign. On Sunday, November 10, Morales and GarcÃ-a Linera resigned, leaving for exile in Mexico two days later, while denouncing the coup in process, and promising that resistance would follow. Adriana Salvatierra, the masista president of the upper house of congress, and VÃ-ctor Borda, masista president of the lower house, also resigned – constitutionally, in order, each would have been in the next position to replace Morales as interim president.

On Tuesday, November 12, without legislative quorumâ€”since MAS, which holds a majority in both houses, was absentâ€”Jeanine Ã Ã±ez was declared the new president of Bolivia. The right-wing senator from the eastern lowland department of Beni, a member of the Unidad Democrática (Democratic Unity, UD) party, had been the vice president of the senate. When asked if she would accept the presidency, she stated, “We owe it to people to give them certainty. Thus, if there is accompaniment by civic organizations I will accept, but if some other path is chosen, I will also accept.”

In other words, she accepted without conditions. She was then made president of the senate and then immediately declared president of the republic. She promised to “convene elections as soon as possible,” but her first act was to make a balcony appearance from the second floor of the Palacio Quemado, with bible in hand, and Camacho and Marcos Pumari, the leader of the PotosÃ- Civic Committee, on either side. Other than Pumari, there were no indigenous faces in the photo.

The first formal meeting she called as president was with the commanders of the Bolivian Police and Armed Forces. At that gathering, William Kalimán, commander in chief of the armed forces, and Yuri Calderón, head of the national police, pledged their allegiance to the new president. This was followed by a congratulatory tweet from Carlos Mesa. AÃ±ez also wrote to Jair Bolsonaro, thanking him for his government’s support, and, on the day that fascist shock troops stormed the Venezuelan embassy in Brasilia, invited self-proclaimed interim president Juan Guaidó to name a Venezuelan ambassador to Bolivia.

To summarize: the two short-term catalysts for the coup were the perception of fraud in the October 20 electionsâ€”a perception Mesa helped create prior to the elections and then systematically reinforced thereafterâ€”and the backdrop of the February 2016 referendum. The mobilizations were predominantly composed of an alienated urban middle class, although they included popular sectors and the lumpenproletariat, i.e. working-class forces organized

by capital (chiefly lowland finance and agri-business) for fascist violence.

Although sections of the independent left and indigenous movements had legitimate grievances with the government, these did not shape post-election political dynamics. Centrist discontent was channelled and led by the far-right, under the figure of Camacho, ultimately with the support of the police and the military, which proved decisive.

Bureaucratized and hollowed out during almost 14 years of MAS rule, popular organizations aligned with the government were unable to respond quickly and independently, and with sufficient force to challenge the reactionary tide that pulled the extreme center under its sway. They still exist as organizations with mass memberships, and we will soon see what capacity for sustained opposition remains. No one has challenged the fact that Morales won a hefty plurality of votes in the first round.`

Stepping back from the immediate conjuncture of elections and the coup, what do the medium-term dynamics look like?

We cannot make sense of the latest events unless we account for the reverberation of the global crisis of capitalism into Bolivia and the contradictions of the political-economic model of extractive neodevelopmentalism.

First, Morales's ongoing popularity after nearly 14 years in officeâ€"let us remember that he took more than 45% of the voteâ€"stems from the dynamism of the new political-economic model at its height. According to a pre-election Ciesmori poll, 36 percent of Bolivians thought that the economic situation of the country was "good," and another 27 percent "regular." Forty percent thought their personal and familial situation would be "a little better" within the year; 15 percent thought "much better," and 13 percent, "equal."

At the lower end of the social order, this is hardly surprising given that extreme income poverty (measured by the grossly inadequate World Bank indicator of less than $2 per day) fell from 38 percent to 18 percent during Morales's tenure, and is now roughly 10 percent in the cities. Simultaneously, Bolivia became what the World Bank deems a "middle income country," in which "only" 30 percent of the population earns less than $4 per day. In his first speech in exile in Mexico, Morales emphasized these achievements.

At least since the conservative turn of Morales's second term (2010-2014)â€"similar in some respects to Dilma's Roussef's shiftâ€"it has been apparent that the political project in question is a state-directed project of capitalist modernization from above; a new, improved version of the National Revolutionary Movement in the twentieth century. Notions of a "socialist success" are pure fantasy, since the (passive) revolution has been nationalist. The government's economic strategy has been reliant on low-inflation targets, fiscal conservatism, and the enormous accumulation of foreign reserves during the commodities boom.

Since 2010, if not earlier, economic policy and political coalitions have hinged on agreements with finance, multinational hydrocarbon capital, and foreign and domestic agro-industrial capital in the eastern lowlands. In terms of finance, the Morales period saw enormous gains for national banks, whose assets increased 3.6 times between 2008 and 2017, from $700 million to $2.55 billion, and whose profits in the same period grew 2.7 times, from $120 million to $330 million annually. The Morales government's core social base over time became an indigenous petty bourgeois layer of merchants, petty extractivists (miners), small-scale industrial producers, and medium-scale producers involved in commercial agriculture for export – a layer which, in the context of the commodities boom, grew expansively during Morales's first term, thus modifying the class composition of his core popular base.

The logic of large-scale, foreign capital in the extractive sectors runs alongside the growing power of an indigenous and popular petty bourgeois layer. In addition to this nucleus, there is a wider layer of passive electoral supporters

from the dominated classes. The more modest the income, the more likely to be indigenous, and the more likely to support Morales in elections.

Down from a recent high of 6.8 percent GDP in 2013, the economy has nonetheless ticked over at an average of 4.2 percent growth in the last three yearsâ€”one of the most impressive performances in the region. The subsidizing effects of extractive rent distributed to different circuits of capital in other more labour-intensive sectors of the economy (manufacturing, agriculture, construction, tourism, and so on), relatively low unemployment, and targeted cash transfers to the poorest has meant very significant improvements in poverty levels, as indicated above.

All of this is important to explaining the enduring popularity of Morales, as is the fact he is the first indigenous president in a majoritarian indigenous country since the founding of the republic in 1825. When discussing his government in interviews and speeches, these are the achievements Morales touts.

Yet the Bolivian economy, of course, is highly sensitive to broader trends in the world market and has been drying up its foreign exchange reserves and leveraging debt in order to sustain public spending and disguise the underlying reality, especially in the last year or so of pre-electoral preparation. As in Brazil, the neodevelopmental model has suffered from an exaggerated dependence on primary commodities, an overreliance on imports that have become cheaper with an overvalued currency, and an associated decline in non-traditional and manufacturing exports. The commercial deficit has been growing since 2014, as has the fiscal deficit and indebtedness, while foreign reserves have been declining at $2 billion annually over that period.

We cannot over-emphasize the fact that formerly independent social movements and trade unions were co-opted, divided, and absorbed into the state apparatusâ€”or worse, as in the case of lowland indigenous movementsâ€”maligned as agents of the right and of empire. For an ever-more extractive economy, declining market conditions do not translate into a slowdown of extractive activity, but rather a race to improve profitable conditions for extractive multinational capital, as indicated in the Morales government’s trampling of the right to meaningful consultation for indigenous communities prior to extractive development projects in their territories.

The socio-ecological devastation of the current drive for capitalist modernization will intensify. The tropical fires this summer were not restricted to Bolsonaro’s Brazil but included 500,000 hectares of Bolivian territory. As long as the Morales government’s ties to agribusiness in the east remained unbroken, the flames would have continued to spread.

Just as we celebrate Lula’s recent release from prison as an unambiguous democratic gain, without projecting a radicalism into his years in government that it never possessed, we need not claim a socialist pedigree for Morales in order to condemn his anti-democratic removal from office. Indeed, we can’t explain the momentum of right-wing forces and the significant popular support for the 2016 soft-coup that ousted the Workers’ Party in Brazil and led to Lula’s incarceration, nor the somewhat harder coup in Bolivia today unless we grasp the underlying class contradictions of each country’s experiments with neodevelopmentalist capitalism.

How have the different classes, populations, and political forces on the left and right responded?

The predominantly urban middle class 21-F Movement, which erupted in opposition to Morales’s response to the February 2016 referendum, is Mesa’s core base. Although the 21-F Movement declined once the electoral campaigns had begun, and seven oppositional parties had decided to participate despite questioning the legality of Morales’s candidacy, middle-class sentiments cohered rapidly into action in the violent post-election, anti-fraud riots, that were captured, channelled, and radicalized by what we are calling the Macho Camacho Facho effect.

The core organizational infrastructure was provided by the major cities' civic committeesâ€"in addition to Santa Cruz, PotosÃ-, Tarija, Cochabamba, La Paz, and Chuquisacaâ€"which were reanimated in recent years from relative dormancy and aligned squarely with far-right forces that organize racist youth violence and mayhem. Prior to the elections, these organized against an eventual Morales victory. Also important was the fact that the Committee for the Defence of Democracyâ€"led by Waldo AlbarracÃ-n, the Rector of the UMSA, Bolivia's leading public universityâ€"whose origins lie in the popular resistance to Bolivia's military dictatorships of the past, was reborn under a liberal anti-Morales guise.

Similar to what happened in Brazil under the PT, due to the promotion of popular and indigenous sectors in Bolivia, urban middle class people perceived that their status had been undermined during the course of the Morales years. There was a new petty bourgeois indigenous layer, and the country's indigenous traditions were newly valorized in the public school system – even as the quality of public education remained dire.

Indigenous people were incorporated into the state bureaucracy in proportional numbers for the first time, cutting off one common traditional employment route for lighter-skinned middle class professionals. The geography of social life and consumption patterns changed, as spaces once exclusive to white-mestizo middle and upper class layers were relatively democratized – shopping malls, airports, and so on. The subsidized gondola transport system in La Paz, for example, made the route from popular-indigenous El Alto to the posh southern end of the city a cheaper, easy and quick commute.

Meanwhile, the various fractions of capital had never found in Morales and the MAS a natural political home. In the first few years of MAS rule, organizations like CAINCO, the main commercial and industrial business confederation of Santa Cruz, organized an all-out destabilization campaign to overthrow the government. Once that was defeated in 2008-2010, however, they entered into a pact with the government, together with agribusiness interests, as well as foreign hydrocarbon and mining capital.

Finance capital had a similar relationship to the Morales government. As in Brazil under Lula, as long as profitability was high, and viable right-wing political alternatives were unavailable, they learned to live with the Morales government. However, since 2014, economic conditions have worsened, despite surface growth. Demands for austerity and restructuring were escalating from the think tanks that represent these interests, and unlike Dilma Rousseff, Morales did not shift economic policy toward austerity for MAS's base.

Morales's reaction to the February 2016 referendum, moreover, suggested that capital might be indefinitely locked out of direct political representation. Under these circumstances, capital began looking for an exit behind the scenes, and have fallen in behind this coup, supporting the new, unelected president.

As we have suggested, many of the core social-organizational infrastructures that underpinned the extraordinary left-indigenous cycle of contention in the 2000-2005 period have been weakened through their subordinate incorporation into the state over the Morales period. However, we must remember that this relative decomposition of autonomous popular capacities does not preclude rapid recomposition.

There are incipient signs of this already in El Alto and the Chapare region of Cochabamba, but it is too early to say how far efforts to reverse the coup will go. Albeit in very different circumstances, the dynamics of popular struggle in Argentina under Macri might provide a clue as to what to expect. Whereas the Peronist administrations of Néstor Kirchner and later Cristina Fernández de Kirchner divided the left vis-Ã -vis the state, the common enemy of Macri's neoliberal restructuring led to very high levels of militancy, at least for Macri's first years in office.

Similarly, the Bolivian left has been divided with respect to the Morales administration, especially since his second

term in office began in 2010. The installation of an unelected right-wing regime backed by the armed forces, especially if it fails to hold open elections in which the MAS can participate, is likely both to introduce neoliberal austerity measures, and to face serious and growing popular opposition.

What role did the OAS, the US and Canada play in the ouster of Morales?

The OAS has long been considered a branch of the US State Department, which is part of the reason alternative regional bodies which excluded the United States and Canada – the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America (ALBA) – were established during the height of the Pink Tide era (1998-2012). They were an effort to establish a relative autonomy for the region from the dictates of the United States, and to a lesser degree Canada, in the geopolitics of the hemisphere. The OAS has always been seen, correctly, as one institutional expression of imperial power.

In the case of the October 20 elections, the OAS performed its appointed role of undermining Bolivian sovereignty. “In Bolivia there was a coup on October 20 when Evo Morales committed electoral fraud,” Luis Almagro, the general secretary, told those gathered at a special session of the Permanent Council of the OAS in Washington, DC, on November 12. “The military has to act in accordance with its mandate. Nobody has exceeded that power to this point.”

The OAS politicized the procedure of the electoral process by making misleading statements without evidence concerning the quick-count tally, and by restricting its commentary to the legally non-binding quick-count tally, ignoring the fact that “it is the official count that is legally binding,” as the CEPR report indicates, and that “the official count was never interrupted and was regularly updated online without any significant interruption.”

In other words, on the basis of speculation rather than evidence, the OAS helped polarize the political setting even further, thereby lending credence to the violent street politics of the far-right, with predictable consequences. Now that the police and military have intervened on behalf of the far right and installed an unelected, unknown oppositional senator as president, Almagro has congratulated the Bolivian armed forces for carrying out its mandate. This is diplomacy as farce.

Barring another heroic gesture from the inside of the intelligence services on the scale of Chelsea Manning’s leak, it is unlikely that we will know the depth and detail of US and Canadian involvement for some time to come. We know, however, that the Trump administration was involved in Juan Guaidó’s futile coup attempt in Venezuela in April this year, and that he has greeted the coup in Bolivia with unrestrained delight.

“After nearly 14 years and his recent attempt to override the Bolivian constitution and the will of the people,” Trump’s official statement reads, “Morales’s departure preserves democracy and paves the way for the Bolivian people to have their voices heard. The United States applauds the Bolivian people for demanding freedom and the Bolivian military for abiding by its oath to protect not just a single person, but Bolivia’s constitution.” Trump also said the Bolivian dynamics should be read as a warning by the governments of Nicaragua and Venezuela as the US administration pursues a “completely democratic, prosperous, and free Western hemisphere.”

As Thomas Walkom points out in the Toronto Star, we find echoes of Trump in Justin Trudeau’s position. On October 29, the Canadian government’s official statement noted that it would recognize Morales’s government only if there was a run-off election, meaning that it rejected the official count, despite the fact that the OAS never demonstrated fraud. In the words of Ottawa, “it is not possible to accept the outcome.”

These statements contrast with the tweet by Bernie Sanders condemning what “appears to be a coup in Bolivia,” the only one of this year’s US presidential contenders for the Democratic party to do so, and Jeremy Corbyn of the British Labour Party, who issued a similar message in stronger terms: “I condemn the coup against the Bolivian people and stand with them for democracy, social justice and independence.”

How should the left in Bolivia and internationally respond to the coup? And, specifically, what posture should the left take toward Morales and his deposed government?

Those parts of the international left based in imperial countries need to insist on the right of Bolivians to self-determination free of outside intervention. In this case, the demand is not abstract, and within Bolivia, the gesture would be deeply appreciated by all those except the golpistas. This does not require that we suspend disbelief, refrain from criticism of Morales, or romanticize his rule, as some of the more vulgar interpretations would have it. As Karl Marx quipped to Engels in The Young Marx, “Ignorance never helped anyone.” We have been highly critical of Morales from the left, while trying to explain both his enduring support and his untimely demise.

In Bolivia, critics from the left should recognize that Morales won a convincing plurality in the first round, that the MAS is self-evidently the most popular political entity in the country, and that a coup has indeed taken place. What has occurred is a coup, and the Ã Ã±ez presidency is illegitimate and illegal.

Morales and MAS will have to be a part of any negotiated exit to the present political crisis, and their willingness and capacity to negotiate with the opposition has never been in doubtâ€”which is why the opposition insisted on Morales’s renunciation, and is now actively persecuting key MAS figures. The left in Bolivia and abroad should be highly sceptical of the OAS findingsâ€”which cited probability rather than evidence of fraudâ€”even though, in the wake of the February 2016 referendum and the bizarre explanations for the cessation of live transmission of the quick count vote, many have understandably lost faith in the MAS administration’s democratic transparency.

Avoiding a right-wing consolidation of the post-coup scenario will involve massive, militant extra-parliamentary struggle, which is exactly what the coca growers, miners, trade unionists, and indigenous peasant communities have called for in the coming days and weeks. Institutional procedures and legal manoeuvres will not be the deciding factor in the outcome of the contest for political power.

Unfortunately, in the new dictatorial climate, the private Bolivian media will not cover these mobilizations except to stigmatize, racialize, and criminalize them, and both government media and local miners’ and peasants’ radio stations have been taken over and shut down. The media blackout is one of the key tactics of the coup regime and has prompted us to write in spite of considerable hesitation.

What we have tried to do here, to quote Marx, is "to show how…the class struggle…created circumstances and conditions which allowed a mediocre and grotesque individual to play the hero's role."

Source 15 November 2019, ***Verso***.

PS:

If you like this article or have found it useful, please consider donating towards the work of International Viewpoint. Simply follow this link: Donate then enter an amount of your choice. One-off donations are very welcome. But regular donations by standing order are also vital to our continuing functioning. See the last paragraph of this article for our bank account details and take out a standing order. Thanks.