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**Bolivia**

# **We Must Call a Coup a Coup**

- IV Online magazine - 2020 - IV540 - January 2020 -

Publication date: Monday 6 January 2020

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**In November, the Bolivian military forced Evo Morales to step down: the classic definition of a coup. Despite the evidence, some commentators – even on the Left – have failed to identify it for what it was: an elite plot to oust a progressive president whose program of reforms had transformed the lives of many of the country’s most excluded people.**

The overthrow of Evo Morales’s progressive government in Bolivia in November was a traditional coup d’etat. It was stoked by right-wing elite, and has now been consolidated by a proto-fascist leadership. Coup leaders celebrated their victory by burning Whipalpas in the streets – a flag representing indigenous nationalities – and boasted of having defeated communism.

Accounts of what has happened in the aftermath of the coup are, to say the least, disturbing. Assassinations, disappearances, torture, mass rape (including of children), persecutions, and the burning of houses have all been reported amongst Morales’s Movement for Socialism (MAS) supporters. There has been a shocking outpouring of revanchist, racist barbarism.

Though one might expect unanimous repudiation of the coup by all democrats, this hasn’t been the case. In Bolivia and internationally, many progressives – especially intellectuals – have refused to repudiate the coup; some have even gone so far as to back the mobilizations against Morales. For these commentators, what has occurred in Bolivia is not a coup, but a popular rebellion against fraud and an increasingly authoritarian left-wing government. While this is obviously an implausible analysis, the influence these intellectuals carry means that they cannot be ignored completely.

## Autonomism Against the State

Luis Tapia, former member of the Autonomous Community group – to which former Vice President Garc a Linera also belonged – was one of the leading apologists for the coup. For Tapia, the MAS is a right-wing party that has inspired a popular and democratic resistance culminating in Morales’s resignation. This position is supported by a report published by the Organization of American States’ (OEA), which was expected to confirm fraud and place the blame for violence on “mobs financed” by the MAS. Pablo Sol n, a former minister in Morales’s government, supports a similar thesis: Sol n explicitly called for Morales’s resignation and also held him responsible for the ongoing violence.

Similar positions are being expressed beyond Bolivia. The US-based Belgian theoretician Bruno Bosteels issued a surprising call to take sides against taking sides. He made the case that we should defer from taking a stand in the debate over whether or not a coup was underway in Bolivia.

A number of autonomous feminists have echoed these arguments. Maria Galindo, a member of the group, Mujeres Creando (Women Creating), has opposed Morales since the beginning, and has characterized his MAS government as “neoliberal,” even going so far as to insist on an equivalence between Morales and the fascist leader Luis Fernando Camacho, arguing that they “both assume the role of the delusional political boss and tough guy who is convinced that they are the source of all truth, law, and well-being.” Galindo initially denied that there was a coup – and even supported mobilizations against Evo – though she later shifted her position, though she continued to blame Morales. Given this ambiguity, she argued, “the most subversive position is not taking a side.” Other prominent

feminists, such as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar in Mexico put machismo at the center of their analysis, ultimately failing to denounce the coup.

Raúl Zibechi, an influential Uruguayan autonomist intellectual, has characterized recent events as “a popular uprising that was exploited by the extreme right.” In his writing he has argued that after their resignation, Morales and García Linera incited their supporters to both rioting and looting, “probably in order to force military intervention and thus provide justification for their resignations under the pressure of a ‘coup’ that never existed.” Although Zibechi acknowledges the presence of proto-fascist sectors, he stresses that the forces mobilized against Morales “did not fall for the extreme right’s ploy.”

## Rejecting Dogmatism

Zibechi’s reasoning follows the simple precept wherein everything that comes “from below” is progressive, and everything that comes from the state is reactionary. This binary conception, which was already foolhardy when it emerged during the cycle of Latin American insurrections between 2000 and 2005, is now forthrightly reactionary.

What comes “from above” might very well be a left-wing government, while what comes “from below” might just as well be a reactionary mass mobilization. Zibechi completely overlooks that a substantial part of the continent has witnessed right-wing social mobilizations in the last few years, mobilizations in which middle-class sectors opposed to “progressive” governments have served as a mass base for conservative or authoritarian reaction (for instance, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina). Yet, he prefers not to amend his a priori dichotomy, which remains, as Kant would say, independent of experience.

Sartre famously wrote in *Search for a Method* that the main feature of dogmatism is to submit facts to an a priori idea, writing that “Budapest’s subway was real in Rakosi’s head. If Budapest’s subsoil did not allow him to construct the subway, this was because the subsoil was counter-revolutionary.” Zibechi submits Bolivian events to an analogous, arbitrary dichotomy: the state is repressive, authoritarian, macho; the multitude is pure.

In the case of Bolivia, however, the mobilized masses overwhelmingly support Evo Morales and oppose the coup. Zibechi doubles down on his argument, along with Solón, Tapia, and Galindo, by reducing the masses to an instrument of the state, insisting the mobilized groups in defense of Morales and the MAS are merely its shock troops. Genuine self-organization, according to Zibechi, only arose among the urban middle-class sectors that confronted the government, unlike those “mobs financed by the MAS.”

## The Perennial Return of the “Third Period”

In the late 1920s, the leadership of the Communist International (Comintern), then dominated by Stalin, formulated an ultraleft interpretation of historical fascism. Fascism was understood, in the Comintern’s overwhelmingly “economicist” analysis, as the pure and simple dictatorial instrument of monopoly capital over society as a whole. Assuming a monolithic unity between the state and the ruling classes, the Comintern characterized all authoritarian regimes of the time as “fascist,” including the pre-Hitler German government of Hindenburg, the Polish dictatorship of Piłsudski, and Primo de Rivera’s regime in Spain.

Alongside these reactionary regimes, the Comintern also characterized liberal bourgeois and social-democratic parties as “social fascist.” Faced with the danger of genuine fascism, this position was reckless in the extreme. The

Comintern considered Nazism's rise to power as merely a short interval anticipating the proletarian revolution, with the slogan "after Hitler, our turn." This perspective led the German Communist Party to adopt a "class against class" tactic, which not only rejected a united platform of anti-fascist action with other parties, but also targeted social democracy as the main enemy, even when the fascists' assumption of power became imminent. This misunderstanding led, in Trotsky's words, to the "most tragic page of modern history." Hitler's rise to power thus encountered little resistance in the country with Europe's largest, best-organized, best-educated, and most-politicized working class.

Today, we are seeing a new form of the "third period" analysis that celebrates (imaginary) "autonomous" social movements. It is as if all governments or political regimes "are the same" from the point of view of the "anti-statist multitude," and every "popular uprising" is always progressive, even if it leads to a fascist coup. In the "multitude," the role of the Church, Trump's support, Camacho and his fascist supporters, paramilitary gangs that attack and insult MAS's female supporters, the army, and the police are all dissolved into an undifferentiated mass. We would do well to recall that historical fascism also enjoyed enormous popular support (the "revolution against the revolution," as Enzo Traverso has put it) and appeared to be a "bottom-up" movement. Many socialist intellectuals, like French theorist Georges Sorel, made the transition to fascism.

"After Camacho, our turn": this seems to be the argument of many autonomist intellectuals today. As Isaac Deutscher pointed out, the bureaucratization of the Stalinist Comintern "a very different sort of bureaucratization from the institutional parliamentary habits of the Second International" initially contained a certain "bureaucratic heroism." Following the example of the October Revolution, communists during the "third period" suffered brutal repression and persecution for maintaining their political affiliations. Today, far removed from any sort of heroism, we are witnessing the poverty of a certain strain of left academicism that lacks any political compass or sense of practical political responsibility.

## The Criticism of Criticism

Many of the intellectuals reluctant to denounce the coup have come in for sharp criticism. In their defense, they often appealed to their "right to criticism," denouncing, in their own words, a Stalinist political culture that sought to drown dissent. Of course, among those who defend Morales in Bolivia and abroad, there are some who do adopt such practices.

Nevertheless, this strategy, replacing analysis of the coup with a debate over whether or not one has the "right to criticism," seems designed to avoid taking ownership of one's political position. And worse still, these same intellectuals demonstrate a degree of intolerance when it comes to any "criticism of criticism."

The question is not whether one can criticize the Morales government or not. On the contrary, drawing lessons from that historical experience is essential. What is problematic is the content of the criticism put forward, which, whether implicitly or explicitly, positions some of these intellectuals in the pro-coup camp.

There are many questions that Morales and his government must answer for. But the most pressing questions tend to point in the opposite direction from those posed by his crypto-liberal critics. For example, why did Morales and his government fail to resist the coup when they had significant social and political resources at their disposal?

Actions and words are important, especially when issues of such magnitude are in play. When parts of the Left work to legitimize a counterrevolutionary coup, this is not a triviality. In the academic world everything is politely moderated and all opinions are supposed to be "respectable" and "interesting." The class struggle takes place on a rougher

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terrain, where life and limb are at stake.

We are living through extremely turbulent times in Latin America: a popular insurrection is unfolding in Chile at the same time as a reactionary coup has struck Bolivia. While the poor and peasant masses are resisting a brutal coup, we must hold to account those who have offered support to their enemies or provided them with a cloak of tacit legitimacy under the name of “left-wing critique.”

*Translation by Todd Chretien for [Jacobin](#).*

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