

# Bolivia: October 18, 2020, General Elections

Updated October 13, 2020

Bolivia is scheduled to hold parliamentary and presidential elections on October 18, 2020, with a presidential runoff on November 29, if necessary. The country has been extremely polarized since the [November 2019 resignation](#) of President Evo Morales of the Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party following annulled October 2019 elections. New elections originally were scheduled for May 2020, but Bolivia's electoral tribunal postponed them twice due to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The United States has expressed concern about political volatility in Bolivia and supported efforts to ensure the upcoming elections are free and fair.

## October Elections Annulled

Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president, [transformed Bolivia](#), but [observers](#) have criticized his efforts 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 that would have allowed Morales to run again.

Allegations of [fraud](#) marred Bolivia's October 2019 election. The electoral tribunal said Morales exceeded the 10-point margin necessary to avoid a runoff against former president Carlos Mesa, but Mesa rejected that result. Protests ensued, with some pushing for a new election and others calling for Morales's resignation.

On November 10, the Organization of American States (OAS) issued [preliminary findings](#) suggesting enough irregularities to merit a new election. (Some experts have [challenged](#) aspects of those findings.) Morales agreed to hold new elections, but the opposition rejected his offer. Morales resigned after police refused to suppress protests and the military urged him to step down. He now has asylum in Argentina. In late November 2019, the MAS-led Congress passed a [law](#) to annul the elections and select a new electoral tribunal. In December, the final OAS election [report](#) found "intentional manipulation" of the results.

**Figure 1. Map of Bolivia**



**Source:** CRS Graphics.

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## Interim Government

Jeanine Áñez, a little-known opposition senator, became president following the resignations of several MAS officials ahead of her in the line of succession. Áñez's [conservative cabinet](#) and history of anti-indigenous rhetoric [raised concerns](#) among Bolivia's indigenous population, which became empowered under Morales. The MAS-led Congress initially refused to accept Áñez's government, and MAS supporters protested. The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights [recorded](#) 36 deaths and 400 injuries due to clashes between security forces and protesters in mid-November 2019, including two [massacres](#) involving state forces. Observers fear a resurgence in postelection violence if any of the candidates refuse to accept the election results.

According to Bolivia's constitution, the interim government has a limited mandate: to convene new elections. Observers have criticized Áñez for exceeding that mandate, particularly after she decided to run for president in January 2020. Áñez's government has reversed Bolivia's foreign policy positions vis-à-vis Venezuela and Cuba, charged Morales with [terrorism](#), pursued cases against former MAS officials, and criminalized "[disinformation](#)" about its troubled response to COVID-19.

## 2020 Elections

The 2020 elections could prove pivotal to Bolivia's future and its relations with the United States and other countries in Latin America. Since Áñez dropped out of the race in September, the leading candidates include

- **Luis Arce (MAS):** Former minister of the economy (2006-2019). Leading in most polls, Arce [espouses](#) the state-led economic model and pro-indigenous policies of the Morales era but could receive limited foreign investment and face strained U.S. relations. Clashes between the central government and eastern, opposition-led provinces could occur under an Arce government, particularly if Morales seeks to return to Bolivia or exert undue influence on the government from Argentina (as he [reportedly](#) has during the campaign).
- **Carlos Mesa:** Former journalist who served as president (2003-2005). Mesa has opposed the MAS but has more moderate positions than Camacho (see below). Mesa's platform endorses multiculturalism, economic diversification beyond hydrocarbons revenue, and openness to U.S. investment and relations. Some predict Mesa could bring the divided country together, whereas others predict conflict and protests would ensue if he took office.
- **Luis Camacho:** Lawyer and civic leader from the eastern state of Santa Cruz who led [nationwide protests](#) urging Morales's resignation and could push to erase the pro-indigenous policies of the Morales era. Camacho would be likely to adopt pro-U.S. policies but could antagonize the MAS even more than Mesa.

Although some polls suggest Arce could win in the [first round](#), several others suggest a runoff likely will be necessary. Should the anti-MAS candidates unite, they could defeat Arce in a second round. Due to COVID-19, the European Union, and the Carter Center have sent small electoral expert missions to monitor the elections; the OAS has sent an electoral mission. As tensions have escalated, the interim government has warned of "[consequences](#)" if MAS supporters protest the election results.

## U.S. Concerns

The United States remains concerned about political volatility in Bolivia, but its role in supporting a return to democracy may be limited due to tension in Bolivia-U.S. relations under Morales.

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The Trump Administration has sought to bolster ties with the Áñez government while expressing [support](#) for “free, fair, and transparent elections.” U.S. officials have praised the Áñez government for expelling Cuban officials and recognizing Juan Guaidó as Venezuela’s president. In January 2020, President Trump waived restrictions on U.S. assistance to Bolivia. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has provided \$3 million in support for the upcoming elections, and, as of August 2020, the State Department had provided \$900,000 in aid to help Bolivia respond to COVID-19.

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. H.Rept. 116-444 accompanying H.R. 7608 would prohibit U.S. assistance appropriated in FY2021 from being used to impede free and fair elections in Bolivia. A July 2020 [Senate letter](#) to the Administration expresses concerns regarding abuses and civil liberties violations committed by the Áñez government that could damage the electoral process. A September 2020 [letter](#) urges the Administration to work with other OAS member states to ensure the OAS conducts its upcoming electoral observation in Bolivia in an “independent, impartial” manner.

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