



Bolivia's Regional Elections 2010

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Abstract

Following closely the national elections of December 2009, Bolivia's regional elections of April 2010 determined two outcomes: On the one hand, they decided the size and strength of the opposition towards current president Evo Morales and his political organization, Movement towards Socialism (MAS). On the other hand, they decided the distribution of power during the implementation of the country's new constitution. This will establish, amongst other issues, the level of regional, municipal, as well as indigenous autonomy. Here, the plans of the indigenous-based MAS face opposition from the relatively affluent and mainly white and mixed-race region in the eastern lowlands of the country. The election results indicate that the MAS maintained widespread support among Bolivians. It secured the majority of departments and municipalities, yet had to record some losses at the local level. The right-wing opposition won in the departments of the eastern lowlands, which indicates a deepening regional cleavage.

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1. Bolivia's Regional Elections 2010

In December 2009, Juan Evo Morales Ayma was comfortably re-elected as the president of Bolivia, obtaining 64.2 per cent of the vote. Four months later, in April 2010, Bolivians were asked to vote again, this time in regional and municipal elections. These elections were the first held according to the stipulations of a new constitution and determined the distribution of power during its further implementation. Morales' political organization, Movement towards Socialism–Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples (*Movimiento al Socialismo–Instrumento Político por la Soberanía de los Pueblos*, MAS-IPSP, in the following MAS), was expected to maintain its widespread support, with fierce opposition in the eastern lowlands of the country.

2. Background

Bolivia is the country with the highest proportion of indigenous people in Latin America. While estimates of the size of this proportion vary, values typically range between 60 to 80 per cent of the total Bolivian population (Madrid, 2005). In a census conducted in 2001, 62 per cent of the population self-identified as belonging to an indigenous people (van Cott, 2005).

The indigenous population is not homogenous: it consists of 37 different peoples, including a small minority of Afro-Bolivians. The largest peoples are the Quechua and the Aymara, which together make up more than half of Bolivia's indigenous population. Both are concentrated in the Andean highlands in the west of the country and differ from the indigenous peoples of the eastern lowlands in their forms of social organization and their relationship with the state (van Cott, 2005).

According to the 2001 census, indigenous people are a majority of the population in five of Bolivia's nine departments, situated in the Andean highlands: Chuquisaca, Cochabamba, La Paz, Oruro, and Potosí (see map in Figure 1). On the other hand, the departments in the eastern lowlands of the country, the so-called half moon (*media luna*) composed of Beni,

Pando, Santa Cruz, and Tarija, are predominantly white and mixed-race (*mestizo*) (van Cott, 2005).

FIGURE 1: DEPARTMENTS OF BOLIVIA



Source: WorldWide Connection Project (2010)

With the exception of Guyana, Bolivia is the least developed country in South America with income, literacy rates, and life expectancy far lower than the average (UNDP, 2009). Considerably more indigenous than *mestizo* or white Bolivians live in poverty, and while ethnic boundaries are fluid in that there is a ‘possibility of “whitening” oneself’ through economic advancement (van Cott, 2005: 12; see also Madrid, 2008), differences in language, access to education, and employment opportunities in the public and private sphere

reinforce the socio-economic cleavage between indigenous and non-indigenous Bolivians (Thorp et al., nd).

Various indigenous social movements and parties emerged both on a local and country-wide level to address the inequalities, yet none of these managed to mobilize significant numbers of indigenous voters, until the formation of the MAS in 1995 (van Cott, 2005). In the elections of 2002, MAS grew to be the second strongest political organization in a fragmented party system. Three years later, in 2005, it won the early presidential election with an unprecedented 53.7 per cent of the vote, making Evo Morales, a coca farmer of Aymara origins, the first indigenous president in Latin America. In the same year, the MAS also managed to win the majority of seats in the legislative assembly as well as three out of nine departmental governments.

Morales' presidency is marked by policies designed to end poverty and social inequality and thus, effectively, indigenous marginalization (Larson, 2009). These include the nationalization of the country's gas resources to redistribute wealth and land reforms to benefit small-scale, mainly indigenous, peasants. But the main instrument to achieve said aims is a new constitution, which, after 15 months of heated political debate, was approved in a national referendum in January 2009 with 61.4 per cent of the vote. This constitution formally established Bolivia as the Plurinational State of Bolivia (*Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia*), in special recognition of the country's 36 indigenous nations as well as its Afro-Bolivian population. All indigenous languages were recognized as official state languages, and each department needs to cater for its population in at least one of them, in addition to Spanish. Besides establishing departmental, provincial, and municipal autonomy, the constitution also grants autonomy status to indigenous territories.

Although support for Morales' policies is not homogeneously indigenous,¹ some analysts are wary about the growing cleavage between Bolivia's mainly indigenous departments in the

¹ Madrid (2008) reports that approximately 32 per cent of the MAS' vote share in the 2005 elections were from Bolivians identifying themselves as white.

west and the traditionally white *media luna* departments in the east (Crabtree, 2009; Larson, 2009). While regionalism goes back to the nineteenth century, the cleavage recently increased over disputes over the content of the new constitution. The governments of the *media luna* departments oppose the nationalization of the country's natural resources – of which the largest share is located in their departments (Larson, 2009) – as well as indigenous autonomy, as this, they argue, would lead to a *de facto* discrimination of non-indigenous Bolivians (Crabtree, 2009). In a bid to back their demand for greater departmental autonomy, autonomy referenda were conducted in Beni, Pando, Tarija, and Santa Cruz in the summer of 2008. Opposition to these referenda was high at the national level as well as within the departments themselves, and voter participation was relatively low. Those who voted endorsed greater autonomy, yet the results were not recognized as the referenda were deemed unconstitutional by the National Electoral Court (*Corte Nacional Electoral*, CNE). Tensions increased when the departmental governments called for general strikes and anti-government protesters clashed with the police. In September, violent clashes between protesters and indigenous farmers in Pando left at least 16 people dead (Vogler, 2008).

The constitution was approved, but now it has to be implemented. This requires negotiation between the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate in Bolivia's Plurinational Assembly as well as across the different regional levels. The presidential and congressional elections on 9 December 2009 saw the re-election of Morales with 64.2 per cent of the vote and left the MAS with a two-third majority of seats in both legislative chambers. The regional elections on 4 April 2010 determined the size and strength of the opposition to the MAS and decided who is going to draft the autonomy statutes for Bolivia's departments and municipalities.

3. Elections

The April 2010 regional elections represented the first step towards the implementation of departmental autonomy and the strengthening and consolidation of municipal autonomy, as laid out in the new constitution. For the first time, citizens directly elected the governors and legislators of all of the country's nine departments as well as the mayors of the municipal governments. Moreover, a new system of communal democracy as outlined in

the constitution was applied for the first time, which allows that indigenous representatives in departmental legislatures are elected according to their own norms and procedures (*usos y costumbres*) (CNE, 2010a).

All in all, 24 political organizations put forward candidates. About five million voters were registered to elect the nine departmental governors, 144 congress men and women for departmental assemblies, 337 mayors, 1,887 councilmen and women, as well as 23 indigenous leaders (CNE, 2010a).

In eight of the nine departments, the departmental governors are elected by simple majority. In Santa Cruz, candidates need an absolute majority. If this is not achieved, a simple majority run-off takes place. Mayors are elected by simple majority as well, while departmental and municipal legislative assemblies are elected through proportional representation (CNE, 2010a).

According to pre-election polls, the outcomes in six of the nine departments were already quite certain: Cochabamba, La Paz, Oruro, and Potosí were expected to be won by MAS candidates, whereas the *media luna* departments Santa Cruz and Beni would go to the right-wing opposition. In Chuquisaca, Pando, and Tarija, on the other hand, the races were expected to be relatively close (La Prensa, 31.03.2010).

As in most Latin American countries voting is compulsory in Bolivia, and voter turnout was thus high. Yet the almost 86 per cent turnout was unprecedented in earlier elections (La Prensa, 20.04.2010). International observers from the Organization of American States and the United Nations were satisfied with the conduct and congratulated the country for its peaceful elections (La Prensa, 05.04.2010). However, claims of fraud came from the candidates with Morales accusing the electoral courts of the four *media luna* departments (La Prensa, 07.04.2010). Irregularities have been confirmed in 153 voting stations in 45 municipalities in Santa Cruz, Beni, La Paz, and Pando, and the CNE announced that repeat elections were to be held on 18 April 2010. The court dismissed claims of both MAS and opposition organizations for fraud in other stations (CNE, 2010b).

The election results provided hardly any surprises (data from CNE, 2010c; for an overview of the results, see Table 1). As expected from pre-election polls, MAS candidates won the governorship comfortably in four departments: Cochabamba, La Paz, Oruro, and Potosí. In Chuquisaca, MAS candidate Esteban Urquizu also won with an 18.1 percentage point winning margin over John Cava from the regional political organization We all are Chuquisaca (*Chuquisaca Somos Todos*, CST). Moreover, MAS candidate Luis Flores won a close race against Paulo Bravo from the opposing Popular Consensus (*Consenso Popular*, CP) in the *media luna* department Pando. This is an important symbolic victory for the MAS, given that in the short history of Bolivia's democracy, the department was always governed by rightist politicians and two years ago this was the place of the most violent anti-government protests.

Governorships in Beni, Santa Cruz, and Tarija were won by candidates of the opposing organizations Beni First (*Primero el Beni*, Primero), Truth and Social Democracy (*Verdad y Democracia Social*, Verdes), and Route to Change (*Camino al Cambio*, CC), respectively. However, as can be seen in Table 1, races in all three departments were relatively close, with MAS candidates obtaining over one third of the vote.

TABLE 1: POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS FILLING GOVERNORSHIPS

	Governor by	Runner up
Beni	Primero (42.5%)	MAS-IPSP (40.1%)
Chuquisaca	MAS-IPSP (53.6%)	CST (35.5%)
Cochabamba	MAS-IPSP (61.9%)	UN-CP (26%)
La Paz	MAS-IPSP (50%)	MSM (23.2%)
Oruro	MAS-IPSP (59.6%)	MSM (29.5%)
Pando	MAS-IPSP (49.7%)	CP (48.4%)
Potosí	MAS-IPSP (66.8%)	AS (12.9%)
Santa Cruz	Verdes (52.6%)	MAS-IPSP (38.2%)
Tarija	CC (48.9%)	MAS-IPSP (44.1%)

Source: CNE (2010c)

In two departments, governors will have difficulty governing as they do not have a legislative majority behind them. In Tarija, Governor Mario Cossío's political organization CC only has 11 seats, compared to 11 seats filled by the MAS and five by the newly founded citizen association National Autonomous Power (*Poder Autnómico Nacional*, PAN). In

Pando, Flores is backed by only seven MAS legislators, opposed to eight CP legislators (La Prensa, 04.05.2010). Thus, while the MAS could increase the number of departments under its government from three in 2005 to six in 2010, the *media luna* rightist opposition is still relatively well-established at the departmental level.

Opposition organizations dispute the legitimacy of the vote-to-seat calculation for departmental assemblies as the formula used by the CNE in the current elections favours the majority. Through this formula, they claim, the MAS has 33 seats more than it would have under the formula normally used in Bolivian elections (La Prensa, 27.04.2010).

In the mayoral elections, MAS candidates won 229 out of Bolivia's 337 municipalities and thus increased the organization's representation at the local level. On the other hand, the MAS lost most of the mayorships of the country's major cities, including the seat of government, La Paz. Key losses were to the Movement without Fear (*Movimiento sin Miedo*, MSM), which was a close ally of the MAS from 2006 until the beginning of 2010, when MSM politicians declared that they would put forward their own candidates for the April elections (La Prensa, 27.03.2010). MSM candidates also attained a number of assembly seats in Chuquisaca, Cochabamba, Oruro, and Potosí, and the movement is thus all in all the second strongest political organization in the country. As the municipalities in question are covered on the departmental level by MAS administrations, the loss to Morales' political organization is limited, yet negotiations might become fierce and MSM politicians might be able to further convert MAS voters.

4. Implications

The regional elections overall confirmed the MAS' and Morales' popularity, even though the movement suffered some defeats at the local level. Both the MAS' losses and wins have implications for the future of the movement and the country as a whole. First, MAS' loss of important mayorships as well as declined vote shares in rural and thus mainly indigenous constituencies (Centellas, 2010) indicate a decrease in support for the MAS in its core electorate and thus in its credibility as grass-root based movement. Second, the MAS' hegemony of the indigenous vote is further threatened as its losses were not distributed

over several political organizations but mainly to the MSM, which has a largely similar agenda to the MAS. It remains to be seen whether the MSM can uphold this good performance, and to be hoped that future election campaigning of the two organizations does not result in increasingly ethno-centric promises to the indigenous electorate in search of its support. This process of ethnic outbidding has been observed elsewhere in the world, such as in Sri Lanka (for example, Horowitz, 1985), yet some analysts doubt that it will take place in Latin America, due to the higher fluidity of ethnic boundaries (for example, Madrid, 2005b). Third, the MAS' overall increase in seats and positions obtained, both on the local and regional level, weakened the opposition considerably. In addition to facing an absolute majority in both legislative chambers at the national level, it now controls less than a third of the country's municipalities and only three departments. In one of the latter, Tarija, its decision-making capacity thereby depends on support of unlikely partners. Moreover, the opposition itself is divided and hence unlikely to form unified resistance against MAS' policies. While a strong MAS was willed by the Bolivian citizenry, it is now important that Morales and his movement do not implement policies without consideration of minority interests. A fair revision of the vote-to-seat formulae used in future elections presents a good starting point.

Another opportunity presents itself in the implementation process of the new constitution. It is now in the hands of the departmental and municipal governments to elaborate and approve autonomy statutes. These will differ between the departments, with the *media luna* departments demanding more extensive autonomy than the Morales administration is, so far, prepared to give. Big questions in the autonomy negotiations will concern the distribution of the costs of the process as well as the autonomy of indigenous peoples, which will necessitate territorial restructuring. As the *media luna* departments have most to lose in both issues, it is unlikely that the swelling regionalism debates end soon.

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