

Bolivia's coup plotters in jail as elections loom

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Five months after Luis Arce's landslide election victory as president of the Republic, the president of the "interim" government, Jeanine Añez, was arrested and remanded in prison on 14 March 2021 for the crimes of "terrorism, sedition and conspiracy in the context of the November 2019 coup". Imprisoned with her are former Justice Minister Alvaro Coimbre and Energy Minister Rodrigo Guzmán.

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The sentence expected by the Minister of Justice is 30 years in prison because, in addition to these accusations about the organisation of the coup, there is also a demand for justice for the victims of the Senkata and Sacaba massacres perpetrated by the forces of repression with impunity in the first weeks of the coup.

Contestation within the MAS

This judicial firmness was accompanied by a political reorientation defined by the new president as "moderate socialism". The main social measure implemented as soon as he took office was the announcement of the new hunger voucher, aimed at the four million poorest people in the country. At the same time, in the context of the economic crisis aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic, there will be no pause in the exploitation of the subsoil. On the contrary, the exploitation of lithium has been largely relaunched, while investments in the fossil fuel sectors remain the cornerstone of the development model in Bolivia.

In his first speech on the evening of his victory, Luis Arce clearly announced a policy of national reconciliation, which never bodes well. A first indication of this is that he has certainly explained that he will not make any outright cuts in public spending, while acknowledging that he will have to implement austerity measures.

Also, when Luis Arce declares he does "not want to repeat the mistakes of the past", it is not just a simple formula. It corresponds mainly to the emergence of debates within the MAS, debates that were stifled under the presidency of Evo Morales. However, since the latter's exile and despite his aura, the struggle against the Añez government has been led by new MAS figures. In addition to this question of individuals, a twofold debate has really begun over the past year. Firstly, on the place of social movements within the MAS, which raises the question of internal democracy; and also on the political orientation. Back from exile, Morales took over the leadership of the MAS, but things have changed for him.

The Bolivian people still mobilized

It was in this context that the “sub-national” elections (the name given to the elections of governors, mayors of municipalities and departmental and local authorities) took place on 7 March 2021. As a sign of internal conflicts, the nomination of MAS candidates was sometimes problematic. Eva Copa, a MAS senator who was president of the Plurinational Legislative Assembly during the Añez government, and one of the new MAS personalities to emerge during the putschist interlude, was a candidate for mayor of El Alto, supported by local MAS activists. Morales refused this candidacy, which provoked an outcry among MAS militants. Excluded from the party, Eva Copa was forced to run under a different name. She was elected in the first round with 68.7% of the votes, with the MAS candidate dropping to 18%. There were similar movements challenging Evo Morales’ leadership in the nomination of candidates in Potosi, Santa Cruz, Cochabamba, etc.

Thus, whereas in 2015, in the last similar elections, MAS won hands down, winning six out of nine governors, on the evening of the first round on 7 March 2021, MAS won three departments and is not in a particularly favourable position in three others for the second round on 11 April. It is also worth noting the very high score of the far-right candidate, Luis Fernando Camacho, in the department of Santa Cruz, Bolivia’s economic heartland, who was elected governor with 55.6% of the vote.

In such a context, the Bolivian people, who have been able to mobilize despite the repression against the Añez government, show that they do not give a blank cheque to anyone. If Arce was elected, it was because he rejected the policies of the Añez government. The MAS therefore has many challenges to face and with the social and health crisis under Covid-19, it is not certain that the population will be satisfied with a policy of renovation and openness that subjects it even more to the world market, whose political representatives have supported the 2019 putsch without any qualms, notably the European Union, the USA and the Organisation of American States (OAS).

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P.S.

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