

Bolivia: Commentary on the Coup Underway

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I am not going to offer a hot take on the situation in Bolivia. But I can offer an opinion as a historian who has studied Bolivian history and as a revolutionary.

First, I want to underscore that the coup in Bolivia is more than a simple overthrow of Evo Morales. Just like the 1973 coup in Chile was more than the overthrow of Allende. There is a reason why thousands of people were tortured, executed, and exiled: the military coup intended to wipe out an entire generation of socialists and communists. The coup in Bolivia was organized by the white Santa Cruz elite, who have hated Evo Morales since day one. They routinely call him “dirty Indian” in public and at political events. The fact that there are reports about burning the Wipala flag, native social centers, and arresting indigenous folks who are either members of the senate or Morales’ cabinet, demonstrates how this new government in power is motivated by racism against native Bolivians. I think folks remember, that it was indigenous female-led coca farmer organizations that put Morales in power, and who have also organized mass rallies criticizing his governance in recent years.

Second, the fact that the far-right in Bolivia has been able to tap into popular anger from the left against Morales’ rule is a story repeated in other countries in Latin America that were part of the “Pink Tide.” We have seen this in Brazil, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. I was telling a comrade yesterday that if Bachelet was president of Chile right now [former center-left Socialist Party President that preceded Sebastián Piñera], then we might have a more complicated situation. But since the uprising took place during a right-wing government that has refused to compromise with popular demands, the far-left demands are spreading and infecting even moderate folks. The claims about election fraud against Morales’ government are most-likely valid and represent an inability by him and his supporters to win over a sector of society, including those who became disillusioned with his rule.

Third, as a historian, I also want to recognize the considerable importance that Morales’ win was for indigenous people. He is not akin to Obama. Morales did bring about significant changes, especially the new 2009 constitution that declared Bolivia a Plurinational country that recognized the indigenous population for the first time and their religions. Bolivia’s 1952 Revolution still looms heavy over the population as the first uprising where indigenous people in a majority indigenous nation demanded social rights. Before the ’52 revolution, indigenous people were indentured to white landowners, slept outside in the haciendas, received starvation wages or none, and could not vote. After the ’52 Revolution was defeated (but not entirely overturned)

and the uprising that took place after Che and his followers were murdered, Morales' coalition was the first attempt after decades for indigenous people to reclaim power.

Yes, it was through elections, and, yes, it did create social inequalities, including the development of a bourgeois indigenous class, but it was a historical and important gain for indigenous communities. It gave them a sense of pride to be political subjects, wear their indigenous clothing, and speak their language. When I was visiting Argentina recently, I saw Bolivian Aymara tourists taking photos and wearing their indigenous dress. That scene would have been highly unlikely before Morales' win. Whether sectors of that new wealthy indigenous class are supporting Morales or the new government is not known yet.

I think we should oppose the coup and support the indigenous people of Bolivia. But as revolutionaries in the US, we have an even greater duty to oppose the US's role – primarily its connection with the OAS – that made this fascist coup possible.

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Negra comrade in Latin America on the current situation.*

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