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(Coordinators)

Political Crisis in Bolivia 2019-2020

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By way of introduction: outlines of the crisis

Luis Claros

I

This book was born of a need to discuss the political crisis that began in Bolivia in 2019 and lasted through 2020. The book aims to enable a more complex and nuanced understanding of the crisis through the exchange of perspectives, avoiding an uncritical reproduction of the polarized positions existing within the political arena. If the intellectual domain fails to distance itself from the disputes and desires of the political field, and therefore reproduces similar positions within its own, we believed that one way to achieve a more complex understanding was to bring together different interpretations of the crisis, so that whoever has access to the book will consequently have access to a plurality of explanations and outlooks.

Consequently, this publication brings together a number of important voices from different locations, who offer readings of the political crisis in Bolivia based on different perspectives and emphases. Some of the works focus on understanding the background and causes of the crisis, and we can see how the various texts complement or contradict each other. The essay by Fernando Prado, for instance, argues that one of the main causes of the crisis was the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the MAS's (Movimiento al Socialismo) political strategy and conception of the state, and on the other, the values of the urban middle classes.

In Lorgio Orellana's essay, we find an interpretation that both complements and problematizes that of Prado, tracing what is considered to be the class and ethnic content of the values expressed by those who opposed the MAS, and in this sense, presenting the crisis as the eruption of long-established sociocultural contradictions. In both cases, rich and evocative analyses are offered to us regarding the values and conceptions of duty that formed a large part of the disagreement with, and resistance to, what MAS represented. The difference between the two interpretations lies mainly in the type of values encountered, and the way in which these are explained. For example, we find identifications of the causes that both complement each

other and at the same time provide contradictory interpretations. In another of the essays that investigates root causes, that of Franz Flores, we find a description and explanation of the way in which the population of Potosí, which at one point provided broad based support to the MAS, moved away from and mobilized against the MAS government. Here, we find an account of the lack of state response to the problems caused by mining, as well as the deterioration of political relations with urban organizations. The attention given by Flores to these processes allows him to temper the emphasis placed on the middle classes and racial discrimination as the main explanatory variables of the 2019 demonstrations. For his part, Huascar Salazar seeks to understand the cumulative processes that created the conditions for the 2019 crisis. In his research we notice, once again, that attention is focused on other issues, for example, the relationship of MAS with the traditional ruling classes, and state policies implemented within that framework related to the production, uptake, and distribution of the economic surplus. Salazar surmises that some factors underlying the crisis can be traced to the preservation of traditional economic power structures, as well as to the generation of contradictions and processes of decomposition within Bolivian society. As can be seen, these distinct readings of the conditions and background of the crisis offer a panorama that includes a greater number of variables and ways to understand what gave specific shape to the events of 2019.

Other essays, rather than concentrating on the background or causes of the crisis, provide a description and explanation of the progression of events in 2019. With an account of historical accumulation that helps us understand the rise of MAS and the subsequent crisis, Luis Tapia both explains the situation that arose in 2019 and describes the composition of the demonstrations and their results. He identifies the articulation of what, in political terms, could be called people struggling against a dominant political oligarchy embodied within MAS. This type of interpretation contrasts with that provided by Helena Argirakis, where we find the characterization of a combined coup d'état that could be key to understanding what happened in 2019.

Argirakis' essay offers a description of the various phases of a 'combined coup,' and the strategies and tactics deployed by the various actors. In the last section, she analyses the Añez government, characterizing it as a "soft dictatorship." For her part, María Teresa Zegada presents a rewarding analysis of the political crisis in its different dimensions, showing that what was at

stake was the dispute over the idea of "democracy" and a linking of *equivalential chains*¹ that could explain the breakdown of the discursive ideological hegemony of MAS. Zegada's analytical account of the dispute over the meaning of democracy is also taken up by Fernando Mayorga, who notes how ultra-conservative codes linked to the "defense of democracy" emerged during the dispute. Mayorga also shows how religion was a central component of the discourse and actions of those promoting the fall of the MAS government, and demonstrating the openness of certain social strata to ultra-conservative and racist positions. María Galindo's critical line also points out the ultra-conservative characteristics that came to the fore during the overthrow of Evo Morales, and shows that such characteristics are not exclusive to any of the sectors in the dispute. Galindo likewise evidences the limits and risks of both dichotomies and dominant interpretative theses, which force us to ask ourselves if there was actually a coup d'état or electoral fraud. Criticizing such alternatives and going beyond them, Galindo demonstrates the existence of what she calls a police/military model of government and a 'machocracy' that existed before the overthrow of Morales, and which simply intensified during the crisis and the Áñez government of. As can be appreciated, these readings differ on several points while on others are complementary, but it is precisely the differences or dissimilar assessments of the events that allow us to envision much of what was, and is, in dispute in contemporary political processes in Bolivia.

Essays can also be found that, while offering an interpretation of the processes that led to the rise and decline of MAS in the second decade of the 21st century, also offer insights to the aftermath of the initial crisis. Fernando Garcia, for instance, analyzes how, after the crisis, and in the context of the actions of the Áñez Government and delays in the restoration of the democratic process, in a type of politics from below, an occupation of territory by unstructured indigenous peasant groups took place that made the return of democracy possible. For Garcia, this represents the incursion of national and popular forces in the face of the political actions of conservative sectors such as the Áñez Government and the main parties opposed to MAS. Roger Cortez' essay, on the other hand, analyzes how MAS abandoned the state's decolonization project, and how the 2019 crisis was a symbol of that abandonment. Following up on this idea, he demonstrates that both during the crisis and after it, no option was envisioned other than the state project, when an alternative might have slowed down the hegemonic

¹ *Cadenas equivalenciales* is a phrase used by the Argentinian political theorist and philosopher Ernesto Laclau.

collapse of MAS. Both essays provide perspective, although with different indications. One case highlights the reemergence of forces and ways of doing politics that could form the basis of new projections on the social transformation horizon, the other points to the absence of proposed alternatives and envisages a long decline of the currently dominant political force. These distinct perspectives help generate dialogue and debate over the differences between them, thus broadening the interpretation of the conditions, limits, and accessible political possibilities.

The reader will also find analyses of the representations produced during the political crisis, i.e., the type of perceptions that circulated at different times and in different media. These analyses permit some of the interpretative hypotheses raised in other essays to be either reinforced or modified. For example, as to the positions that assumed the existence of electoral fraud, Natalia Rocha carefully analyzes how these produced an image of the 'masista' as 'savage,' a 'vandal,' 'uncivilized,' etc., thus enabling and legitimizing forms of discursive violence by the state, as well as on a more local and spontaneous level. Rocha shows that the image produced with respect to the 'masista' invokes hierarchies that date back to colonial times and demonstrates their persistence in the 2019 crisis. With a similar line of analysis, Wilmer Machaca studied social networks, examining the way in which racism was established as an important issue in the imagination of the period, with instances of misinformation linked to forms of discrimination that come to light on analyzing the type of media coverage afforded to incidents that took place in the city of El Alto. Taking us outside the country, Dawn Paley offers a critical analysis of the coverage of the political crisis in Bolivia by left-wing North American media. Paley reveals the simplifications and distortions produced by such media, not simply as a result of geographical distance, but also due to a manifest intention to denounce the interference of the United States government, something that was detrimental to a more complex reading that could have helped to understand what was actually happening in Bolivia. The three essays mentioned provide analyses of the type of images produced and the effects these triggered, constituting an important variable in the understanding of certain political actions, given that such actions are derived from or validated by particular ways of representing situations and subjects.

Finally, we close the book with an essay by Vladimir Díaz Cuéllar, coordinator of this publication, where the reader will find an account and explanation of the political processes of 2019 leading up to the October 2020 elections, and the consequent return of MAS to the government.

So closes a book that offers different perspectives that bring together and generate, as we have mentioned, not only points of convergence and complementarity, but also noteworthy contrasts and differences. Taken together, the complementarity and contrasts, together with the various explanatory hypotheses and descriptive emphases, provide us with an overview that goes beyond simplified readings of contemporary political reality and facilitates progress in the analysis and understanding of the current situation, its past events, and open horizons.

II

As we have shown, albeit briefly, the essays gathered together in this book approach the analysis of the political crisis of 2019 and 2020 in different ways, offering narratives with distinct timelines and emphasizing different moments. In this second section, despite the risk of redundancy, we provide a nominal chronology of events with the aim of providing time-based markers that will help the reader follow the authors' arguments with ease. And while the objective is to accurately indicate relevant facts, we are aware that even in the case of a minimal chronology, the selection of facts and the succinct way in which they are described implies an interpretation in itself. However, in addition to being brief, this segment also forms part of an introduction and, thanks to the essays that follow, the reader will be able to expand on or criticize the points made here. In any case, we hope this short chronology will be useful for following the selections contained in the book.²

² Given that the crisis was unleashed by the dispute over a national election, and whose most important element was a referendum, this chronology will emphasize the data related to national elections. Unless otherwise indicated, all voting data was obtained from the Electoral Atlas of Bolivia, available at <https://atlaselectoral.oep.org.bo/>.

MAS came to power after winning the general elections of December 18th 2005 with an absolute majority, or 53.74% of the votes, leaving PODEMOS, the second most powerful political force, far behind with 28.59%.³ Less than three years later, on August 10th, 2008, a referendum was held on the possible revocation of the MAS mandate: the question posed being “Do you agree with the continuity of the process of change led by President Evo Morales Ayma and Vice President Alvaro García Linera? The “Yes” option prevailed with 67.41% of the votes. President Morales would then put his presidency to the test for a second time in a referendum on the new Political Constitution of the State; that second referendum was held on January 25th, 2009, as part of another election. The constitution was approved with 61.43% of votes. That same year, general elections were held with Morales as a presidential candidate; he won 63.91% of the votes, leaving the PPB-CN candidate in second place, with 26.68%. In the following general election, held on October 12th, 2014, MAS again won by a wide margin, obtaining 61.01% of the votes, with the second-place finisher drawing only 24.52%. The electoral trajectory of MAS, and of Morales in particular, offers a clear idea of the level of confidence behind the MAS’ constitutional referendum of February 21st, 2016, which sought to enable Morales’ candidacy in the upcoming presidential elections. The question posed by the referendum was: “Do you agree to reform article 168 of the Political Constitution of the State so that the President and the Vice President the State can be re-elected or re-elected twice consecutively? The “No” vote imposed itself with 51.34%, making this being the first national level election that MAS had lost in more than 10 years, albeit by a very slim margin. The subsequent disregarding of this result was one of the central issues in the accumulated grievances that led to the 2019 crisis.

Turning to a legal strategy that would enable Morales’ candidacy in the 2019 general elections, an action of unconstitutionality was presented to and admitted by the Plurinational Constitutional Court (PCC) on September 29th, 2017, and on November 28th the PCC issued a constitutional ruling that allowed for his reelection. Consequently, 21 months after losing the referendum, a legal strategy allowed the results of that vote to be ignored. A year later, the approval process for the Morales-García electoral team moved to the Supreme Electoral Tribunal

³ This was the first time since the return of democracy in the early 1980s, that a party had won with an absolute majority. In the 2002 elections, the last before the MAS victories, the MNR came out on top with only 22.46%, while in 1997, Acción Democrática Nacionalista (ADN) won with a similar figure (22.23%). The contrast allows us to assess what the MAS represented in electoral terms, given that in all the general elections from 2005 until 2020 its percentage of the vote exceeded 50%.

(SET); and on October 22nd, 2018, the president of SET, Katya Uriona, resigned, while resignations and dismissals of technical staff also took place, thereby generating criticism of the court itself. On December 4th, 2018, the SET ratified Evo Morales and Álvaro García as the MAS candidates for President and Vice President, respectively, and on May 27th, 2019, it issued a call for general elections to be held on October 20th of that same year.

In preparation for the general elections, SET ordered the implementation of the Preliminary Electoral Results Transmission system (PERT), an information structure that allowed voting results to be provided quickly and in a non-binding manner, that is, for information purposes only and with no relevance to the final vote count. The transmission of PERT results was unexpectedly interrupted at 7:40 p.m. on the day of the election with 83.85% of the votes counted, and preliminary information showed that MAS had won 45.7% of the vote, with the second-placed 'Comunidad Ciudadana' (CC) at 37.8%. Being less than the legally required 10%, the difference of 7.9% would require a second round of voting between the two parties with the most votes. The dissemination of PERT results resumed the following day at 6:30 p.m. with 95.63% of votes counted; this count now indicated that MAS had reached 46.85%, while CC stood at 36.74%, a difference 10.11%. If this data were to be confirmed by the official vote count, MAS would win the election outright, in the first round. Conflicts broke out after the information was broadcast, and that same night, opponents of MAS attacked and burned down the departmental electoral tribunals of Potosí, Pando, Chuquisaca, Beni, and Santa Cruz. These incidents marked the beginning of the conflict and the demonstrations of October and November 2019 that were spurred on by claims of electoral fraud.⁴ On October 22nd, the Civic

⁴ The result of the PERT, which was similar to the official result announced five days later, cannot be classified as surprising if we take into account surveys carried out earlier. Here it is necessary to note that between July and October 2019, 12 surveys were carried out at the national level, whose technical sheets can be downloaded from <https://www.oep.org.bo/elecciones-generales-2019/>. If only the intention of a valid vote is taken into account, that is, the data of those who indicated a candidate for whom they would vote, it can be seen that in nine of the 12 surveys the MAS wins in first round; in 11 of the 12 surveys the MAS exceeds 43%, and in two of them it even exceeds 51%. However, the regulations governing the dissemination of the polls did not consider projections using the criteria of valid votes, the polls therefore created the idea that the MAS voting range was between 31% to 40%. This error caused confusion, and was corrected by the SET in the survey regulations corresponding to the 2020 electoral process, in which surveys should now also disseminate projections based on valid votes, since the official results themselves are based on valid votes. Another interesting fact is that when reviewing the technical data sheets of the surveys, one of the companies hired by *Página Siete* and *Los Tiempos* asked three times, in July, August and September: "Do you believe that the 2019 presidential elections will be clean or will there be fraud?", which shows how the idea of "electoral fraud" was circulating long before the elections were held. We should also point out that the two quick counts presented on the night of the election, indicated that the process would go to a second round even though in both counts the MAS vote exceeded 43%. It could be argued that this way of

Committee for Santa Cruz, chaired by Luis Fernando Camacho, called for an indefinite strike. That same day it was reported that the government had asked the Organization of American States (OAS) to conduct an audit of the electoral process. On October 25th, SET announced the official results: MAS obtaining 47.08% and CC 36.51%, thus confirming a MAS victory in the first round. On October 29th, an 81-year-old person was attacked during a demonstration related to MAS: he died a month later due to the injuries he sustained. On October 30th, two people who were part of the opposition to the MAS were killed by firearms as a result of clashes in Montero. On October 31st, a large demonstration in the city of La Paz demanded Morales' resignation. A third death, that of a member of the Cochala Youth Resistance,⁵ was registered in the city of Cochabamba on November 6th. On November 8th, the first police mutiny took place in Cochabamba, and was followed by police units in Santa Cruz, Sucre, and Oruro. Units from La Paz joined in on November 9th. In the early hours of November 10th, the OAS delivered a preliminary report which stated that irregularities had been found in the electoral process, and given the result of the report, Morales announced the replacement of the SET members and issued a call for fresh elections. A caravan of buses on its way from Potosí to La Paz, seeking Morales's resignation, was attacked with firearms, causing three injuries. Demonstrators also set fire to the homes of a minister, a congress person, and the governor of Oruro, who were all members of MAS, as well as that of Morales' sister. Faced with threats, several MAS authorities resigned from their posts. At noon, the COB (Central Obrera Boliviana or Bolivian Union Central) issued a statement; it did not ask Morales to resign, but when asked by a journalist: "Should the President resign, Mr. Guarachi?", the executive secretary of COB responded: "If there resignation is necessary to pacify the Bolivian people, President, we will do it. We tell you from the Bolivian Workers Central to pacify the country at the national level." The civic committees of Santa Cruz and Potosí reiterated the demand for resignation, and at a 3:45 p.m. press conference, the commander of the Bolivian Armed Forces suggested that Morales resign his mandate. At 4:50 p.m., Morales and Garcia both resigned. An hour later, the President of the Senate made the same decision. That night, there was violence in La Paz: the Puma Katari buses of the La Paz

disseminating survey results without the aforementioned projection; added to the question of the independence of the TSE and its internal institutional crisis; the unforeseen interruption of the PERT; and the results of the two quick counts, created the conditions for a strong sense of mistrust regarding the results issued by the plurinational electoral body.

⁵ Organized group opposed to the MAS that was characterized by violent actions against people connected to the MAS.

mayor's office, and the houses of Waldo Albarracín, a leading actor in the mobilizations for the resignation, and Casimira Lema, a journalist connected to sectors opposed to MAS, were set on fire. On November 11th, Morales fled the country for Mexico.

That same day, in an attack on a police command post in the city of El Alto, a police sergeant was seriously injured and died three days later. On November 12th, Jeanine Áñez assumed the presidency. During those two days, two deaths were recorded in Cochabamba, one "caused by the imposition of torture while being transported in a vehicle belonging to the Armed Forces,"⁶ while three were recorded in the city of La Paz, and one in Potosí during police and military operations. On November 13th, one death was reported in Montero when police intervened in a demonstration of people affiliated to MAS, and another in Yapacaní, due to police and military intervention.

One of Áñez' first measures, on November 14th, was the promulgation of Decree 4078, which targeted Armed Forces personnel participating in the restoration of internal order, exempting them from criminal liability. The following day, the Armed Forces repressed a march in Sacaba calling for the return of Morales, causing the death of 10 people by firearms, while another 36 were wounded. Four days later, on November 19th, in Senkata, in the city of El Alto, in the face of protests produced to a large extent by an offense against the Whipala⁷, repression by the Armed Forces and police resulted in 10 people killed and 31 wounded by firearms. The IGIE⁸ report described both events as massacres.

On November 24th, legislation related to the holding of general elections was passed, and on January 6th, 2020, the new SET called elections for May 3rd. However, in a context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the rigid quarantine ordered by the transitional government, on March 21st, SET announced the suspension of elections. The Plurinational Legislative Assembly promulgated Law 1297 on May 2nd, which stated that the elections must be held within a maximum period of 90 days from May 3rd, while Law 1304 of June 21st extended the period for

⁶ 5 Data on repression, deaths, and massacres were obtained from GIEI Bolivia: Report on the acts of violence and violation of human rights that occurred between September 1st and December 31st, 2019.

⁷ The Whipala is a flag that represents some native peoples of the Andes: including Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador,

⁸ Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (IGIE), created by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR).

holding the elections to 127 days. On August 13th, Law 1315 was passed, further extending the term to 168 days and setting October 18th as the decisive date. All this occurred in the context of protests calling for, amongst other demands, the holding of general elections. The elections were finally held on October 18th. The MAS presidential and vice-presidential candidates, Luis Arce and David Choquehuanca, won in the first round with 54.73% of the votes, leaving the CC in second place with 29.16%. With this election, the cycle of political crisis that had begun in 2019 finally came to an end.

As we mentioned previously, this brief compilation of facts is intended to provide concrete data and time-based markers to support the information in question. Fundamental events and processes, alongside descriptions of the demonstrations have consequently, and inevitably, been omitted. However, exclusions were made not simply because they would have required explanations not relevant to an introduction, but also because these very explanations can be found in the essays contained in the book itself.

III

Readers may now immerse themselves in the 15 texts ahead. We should emphasize, once again, the plural nature of the publication and, as we have pointed out, the diversity to be found in the different analytical perspectives and distinct moments and dimensions of the crisis covered by the different timelines and subjects contained in the readings. However, we should also clarify that this plurality is demarcated by a basic criterion, one that represented the starting point for the book: bringing together readings from analysts who share, or shared, the criticisms and horizons opened up by the insurgent cycle of 2000 to 2005, i.e., the challenge to neoliberalism and the projection of plurinationality as an advance toward the desired organization of society. The differences lie in the specific ways of undertaking, analyzing, and evaluating the realization or absence of realization of the various dimensions of these horizons. Our aim was to foster dialogue between voices we considered to be critical of the diverse ways of limiting democratization processes; voices that with their analyses would allow us to identify limits to, and risks inherent to, the deployment of radical forms of democratization. But in using the term 'democratization,' we are not referring to a minimalist formal procedural democracy. On the contrary, we consider this book to be a contribution to reflections on instances of democratization that, in spite of this reduced mode of democracy, manage to go beyond it. That

is why bringing together these critical and analytical voices to consider a crisis in which, amongst other things, the very meaning of democracy was at stake, seemed to us to be an important contribution to a necessary task.

Finally, we would like to thank the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and Plural editors for their support in preparing this book, a task that would have been impossible without them. Thanks also to all the authors who contributed to the publication for generously sharing the results of their research and analysis, and for their willingness to dialogue and contribute to the opening up of discussion about a difficult situation. We hope the exertions demonstrated in these pages will foster continuing dialogue through the building of shared horizons.