

In the Shadow of the 2019 Bolivia Coup: Democracy and the 2025 Election

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Summary

- As Bolivia moves beyond its 2025 presidential election, the memory of the 2019 political upheaval still defines the country's democratic landscape.
- What began six years earlier as an election dispute ended in a military-backed ouster of President Evo Morales.
- The shadow of that coup continues to shape Bolivian institutions and the credibility of democracy across the region.

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As Bolivia moves beyond its 2025 presidential election, the memory of the 2019 political upheaval still defines the country's democratic landscape. What began six years earlier as an election dispute ended in a military-backed ouster of President Evo Morales, Bolivia's first Indigenous leader. The question that remains is whether Bolivia ever truly recovered.

The 2025 vote, marred by disqualifications, distrust, and low turnout, shows that the wounds of 2019 have not healed. The shadow of that coup continues to shape Bolivian institutions and the credibility of democracy across the region. ¹

Morales' Presidency and the Road to Crisis

Evo Morales' rise in 2006 was a political milestone. His government nationalized hydrocarbons, reduced extreme poverty, and expanded Indigenous representation in ways no prior administration had achieved. Bolivia experienced one of Latin America's

strongest growth rates between 2006 and 2014, driven largely by natural-gas exports and Chinese demand. ²

But Morales' long tenure eroded the same democratic institutions he had once strengthened. After the 2016 referendum narrowly rejected his proposal to run again, the Constitutional Court ruled in 2017 that term limits violated his human rights—allowing him to stand for a fourth term. ³ This judicial maneuver set the stage for the 2019 confrontation and the loss of faith in Bolivia's rule of law.

The 2019 Election and the Turning Point

The October 2019 presidential election began smoothly but descended into crisis when the preliminary vote transmission was suspended for nearly a day. The delay occurred as rural precincts—Morales' strongholds—were still reporting votes. When counting resumed, his lead expanded enough to avoid a runoff, a statistically plausible outcome but one that appeared suspicious to opponents. ⁴

The OAS report cited “irregularities” and recommended a new election but stopped short of declaring fraud. Later analysis by the Center for Economic and Policy Research found that the OAS conclusions overstated statistical anomalies and lacked empirical proof of manipulation. ⁵

Violent protests followed the contested vote. As demonstrations spread, the Bolivian armed forces publicly “suggested” that President Morales resign “for the good of the nation.” The suggestion carried the unmistakable weight of command. Morales' police forces had already withdrawn from the streets, and the military's televised message left no viable option but exile. ⁶

The award-winning documentary *Fue Golpe: Documental sobre el Golpe de Estado en Bolivia* (“It Was a Coup”) presents real-time footage showing coordination between opposition leaders, police units, and senior officers before Morales' ouster. It documents how the security forces refused orders to quell unrest and instead demanded the president's resignation. ⁷ The film corroborates reports that Morales' house in Cochabamba was set ablaze and that threats against his family and cabinet intensified in the hours before he left La Paz.

These events make clear that Morales did not “step down” under constitutional norms but was forced out through coercion by the armed forces. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights later found that state forces and allied civilian groups committed serious

human-rights violations in Sacaba and Senkata as part of the post-coup repression.⁸ Human Rights Watch likewise concluded that the killings were unlawful and that no senior official has been held accountable.⁹

The absence of a legislative quorum when Senator Jeanine Áñez declared herself president—standing before a nearly empty chamber holding an oversized Bible—underscored the rupture of constitutional order. The military literally escorted her into the palace. This, combined with the intimidation of MAS legislators and the army's public endorsement of the succession, satisfies every legal and political definition of a coup.¹⁰

The Transitional Government and the Question of Legitimacy

Senator Jeanine Áñez, from the conservative opposition, declared herself interim president without a legislative quorum, citing constitutional succession. Within days, security forces killed more than thirty protesters in Sacaba and Senkata, two largely Indigenous communities demonstrating against the transition.¹¹

Áñez promised new elections but also initiated prosecutions against former MAS officials, including Morales. International observers and the United Nations described her administration as transitional but warned of “selective justice” and retaliation against political opponents.¹²

The Return of Democracy—and Lingering Distrust

New elections were finally held in October 2020. Luis Arce, Morales' former finance minister, won decisively with about 55 percent of the vote. The peaceful transfer of power was praised internationally, but deep polarization persisted.¹³

USAID, which Morales had expelled in 2013, re-engaged only at the request of the transitional government, providing technical assistance through the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. That support helped ensure a credible election process.¹⁴

When COVID-19 struck, the United States also provided humanitarian assistance—ventilators, vaccines, and medical supplies—that saved lives. China's Sinovac vaccines, by contrast, were sold commercially rather than donated. Yet the Arce administration downplayed U.S. contributions, underscoring the enduring ideological rift.¹⁵

A Democracy Still Under Siege

By 2025, the institutional scars of 2019 were still visible. Morales was again disqualified from running, citing the same constitutional provisions he once challenged. Luis Arce declined to stand for reelection, citing internal divisions within the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS). The Supreme Electoral Tribunal barred several other figures, including Jaime Dunn, on procedural grounds—actions many observers viewed as political rather than legal.¹⁶

The first round of voting on August 17, 2025, produced no clear majority. Centrist candidate Rodrigo Paz led with roughly 32 percent of the vote, followed by former president Jorge “Tuto” Quiroga at 27 percent, forcing a runoff (Reuters, *Bolivia’s Left Faces Historic Defeat in Presidential Vote* (Aug. 18, 2025)). On October 19, 2025, Paz defeated Quiroga in the second round with about 55 percent to 45 percent.¹⁷ He was inaugurated on November 8, 2025, pledging national unity and pragmatic reform.

While his victory marked the first centrist presidency in nearly two decades, the challenges ahead are formidable: rebuilding trust in electoral institutions, reducing polarization, and revitalizing the economy without reigniting ideological conflict (Steven E. Hendrix, *Democracy’s Fragile Institutions in the Andes*, Inter-Am. Dialogue Comment. (May 2025)). Paz inherits a nation still divided by narratives of betrayal and legitimacy—a country where every election reopens the wounds of 2019.

Bolivia’s experience also mirrors broader regional trends. In Argentina, economic instability and ideological fatigue likewise propelled a centrist-populist realignment, revealing how democracies across the Southern Cone are searching for equilibrium after years of polarization.¹⁸

This erosion of public trust is not unique to Bolivia. Across the region, the precedent of 2019—when elites and security forces redefined constitutional order—has influenced neighboring states confronting their own populist crises. Bolivia remains a case study in how fragile democratic legitimacy becomes when institutions yield to political power.

Conclusion

The 2019 coup reshaped Bolivia’s democratic trajectory. It revealed both the dangers of over-centralized leadership and the ease with which external and domestic actors can exploit institutional weakness. The 2025 election did not erase that past; it confirmed how enduring its legacy remains.

For policymakers and legal scholars alike, Bolivia's experience underscores that democracy is not undone in a single moment of crisis—but through gradual corrosion of trust, legality, and the rule of law. The coup may be over, but its shadow endures.

Endnotes

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