

Three and a half years of government by Evo Morales. The campaign atmosphere in Bolivia: People are disillusioned with the government, disappointed with the opposition

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On December 6 of this year, Bolivia's next parliament and president will be elected, with the incumbent, Evo Morales, aiming at re-election. The opposition will be fielding seven candidates, having failed to forge an alliance against Mr Morales and his party, the MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo). Traditional parties no longer play a part, and the population is divided.

Conflicts have been ample in Bolivia's recent history. For a long time, military dictatorships took turns with democratic governments that were mostly shaky. Well into the eighties, the country was regarded as the prototype of Latin American instability, until its eagerness for reform turned it into a role model in the nineties. President Sánchez de Lozada's first term in office was dominated by a reform of the constitution and other ambitious projects, but his endeavours were nullified when the former dictator, Hugo Banzer, was elected head of state in 1997. 2002 witnessed the marginalization of several big parties and the rise of new groups, while the MAS became a catchall party for several protest movements.

When Evo Morales took over power in 2005, the citizens voted as they did not because they intended to support him and the MAS but because they wanted to protest against the political establishment. The traditional parties completely lost their backing. The MMA (Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario), the MIR (Movimiento Izquierda Revolucionario), the NFR (Nueva Fuerza Revolucionaria), and the UCS (Unión Cívica Solidaridad) all disappeared from the political scene. The ADN (Acción Nacionalista Democrática) did not put in an appearance, and its figurehead, Jorge Quiroga, founded PODEMOS to challenge the MAS.

Even three and a half years after his election, Mr Morales has failed to make good on his promise to implement a unifying, forward-looking policy. There was no such thing as a policy for Bolivians. Founded in 1987 as the political arm of the cocalero trade union, Mr Morales' party, the MAS, essentially consists of an alliance of diverse organizations held together by an ideology mix composed of Marxist ideas, the glorification of pre-colonial indigenous societies, the rejection of globalization, and a vehement distaste for neoliberalism.

The MAS' most important campaign promise had been to convene a constituent assembly in which 16 parties and groups would be represented. The people initially celebrated this promise with enthusiasm, for they hoped that it would result in a constitution that would be acceptable to all Bolivians. How-

ever, when the text was adopted late in 2007, the opposition was excluded, which raised a storm of protest.

Even before that, the constitutional process and the implementation laws had revealed clearly the main lines of conflict within society. Bolivia defines itself as a plurinational state in its constitution. Indigenous communities enjoy special rights: the plurinational constitutional court, the plurinational supreme court, and the plurinational electoral authority, the fourth power in the state, all have to include a certain quota of indigenes. Moreover, traditional law ranks on par with ordinary jurisdiction. All autonomies are on the same hierarchical level. Thus, Bolivia's current constitution follows a common trend in Latin America's recent history; moreover, the text was changed repeatedly after 1990 to mobilize a society worn down by disgust with politics. The MAS certainly did deliver on its promise to pave the way for a constituent assembly. However, the land has not yet seen any solution for the conflicts that are smouldering in its society.

In the economic field, the most important promise of the MAS was to nationalize the natural-gas sector, so that all Bolivians might receive a share in the country's natural resources on which the government's vision of the future is based. However, the uncertainty of the sector was revealed when the export prices of gas and oil declined and the state-owned petroleum enterprise YPFB went into the red, not having invested anything in promoting production.

The country's foreign-trade policy is similarly charged with ideology. La Paz did not respond when the USA offered to reopen negotiations on the suppression of drugs. The negotiations about a free-trade agreement between the EU and the Andean Community that were initiated in 2007 were similarly blocked by Bolivia, so that the Europeans are now conducting separate talks with Peru, Colombia, and Ecuador.

Mr Morales' policy has also affected the labour market where jobs were created in the public but not in the productive sector. Investments declined because investors are deterred by deficiencies in legal security and the uncertain consequences of the new constitution.

In its platform for the elections of 2005, the MAS announced that traditional coca products were to be commercialized although drug production and trafficking are supposed to be suppressed. In the production of narcotics, Bolivia ranks third after Colombia and Peru worldwide, with Mr Morales still leading the union of coca farmers. Another target which the MAS intended to suppress was corruption. Shortly before the end of the last millennium, a public service reform had been implemented to enhance the transparency of the processes by which applicants were selected for jobs. Nevertheless, the MAS replaced many public employees by followers of its own in 2006. There is

even talk of public jobs being put up for sale by functionaries of the ruling party.

Once upon a time, the MAS was planning to use elements of 'participative democracy' to enhance the quality of democracy in Bolivia. Yet the country came in last among 18 countries investigated in the democracy index for Latin America under the heading of democracy implementation. One reason for this lies in the critical situation of the democratic institutions which the powers-that-be regard as relics of the hated old system. Another lies in the lack of legal certainty in Bolivia, where journalists that are critical of the government are still being physically attacked by MAS adherents. The government of Mr Morales does not intend to cultivate independent institutions or safeguard a system of checks and balances, saying instead that democracy has been achieved if power is held by the people.

Next to Evo Morales, seven candidates will stand for the presidency under conditions that are as bad as can be for the opposition, not least because of its lack of funds. While state party financing has been abolished, it is supposed that Mr Morales himself is receiving vast sums from Venezuela with which to gratify political friends and/or buy votes. The official beginning of the election campaign is scheduled for October 4. Meanwhile, however, the government has launched an extensive campaign, funded by the state, to inform the public about its 'achievements'.

In the house of representatives, the MAS holds a simple majority, while the opposition holds a majority in the senate. It is the stated aim of the MAS to obtain control over both houses. Because of the situation prevailing in the country, the opposition fears that the elections might be gerrymandered, particularly because irregularities occurred during the constitutional referendum of January. The opponents of Mr Morales are hoping that, at best, the current introduction of biometrical electoral registers might make it more difficult for fraudsters to operate.

Candidates wishing to participate in the elections must stand for a registered party, a movement, or an indigenous nation. It is evident that everything revolves around candidates, not platforms. Still represented in parliament, the strongest oppositional party, PODEMOS, will be out of the running: the old alliance of convenience appears to be disintegrating, and many PODEMOS MPs are negotiating with other opposition parties for a place on their lists. Even Jorge Quiroga himself was forced to withdraw his candidature. Another party that will be out of the running for the first time in 50 years is the MIR. For months, the opposition tried to forge a comprehensive alliance in order to improve its chances against Mr Morales, who is regarded as the favourite – unfortunately, it failed.

After the misfire of an attempt to bring about an alliance between Hugo Cárdenas, Jimena Costa, a politologist, José Luis Paredes, the former prefect of La Paz, and Manfred Reyes Villa, the former mayor of Cochabamba, Mr Reyes Villa introduced Leopoldo Fernández, the prefect of Pando, as his runningmate. Mr Fernández is currently in jail because the government is holding him responsible for the clashes between farmers and autonomy activists that took place in Pando in 2008. Standing for president and vice president, respectively, Mr Reyes Villa and Mr Fernández now plan to challenge Mr Morales at the head of their party, the PPB-CN (Plan Progreso para Bolivia – Convergencia Nacional), fight for democracy and institutionality, and secure true equality for all Bolivians in the constitution.

Another candidate resolved to stand is Samuel Doria Medina, a successful entrepreneur and former minister who is generally thought to be competent in economic matters; he leads the UN (Unidad Nacional) that was founded by him.

Standing for the MAS are the current incumbent, Mr Morales, and Álvaro García Linera. They intend to advance the implementation of the new constitution, promote industrialization, and turn the country into the region's biggest exporter.

Surveys say that Mr Morales leads with about 40 percent of the vote nationwide, although some of the data given fluctuate considerably between one institute and the next. Mr Reyes Villa ranks second and Mr Doria Medina third. While the Reyes Villa/Fernández team belongs to the right wing, most of the other candidates and teams come from the left-hand corner.

There can be no doubt that the policy pursued by the Morales administration is highly charged with ideology. The record of the current government clearly shows that the MAS has little regard for efficient administration and the day-to-day business of politics. When the Bolivians elected Evo Morales in 2005, they did so because their confidence in the traditional party system had been destroyed, and because they hoped for an ethically-motivated turnaround and the suppression of corruption. Although the government failed on all these counts, Mr Morales can still rely on the support of rural labourers, trade unions, and social movements, all the more so as the opposition has no credible alternative to offer. Evo Morales will predictably win the pending elections. All that remains for his opponents to do is to nullify the MAS' claims to hegemony in a democratic process, and to try and obtain a hearing for another understanding of democracy and equality by constructively cooperating in the implementation of the constitution.