

Opinion
OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Bolivia's Fire-Proof President

By Martín Sivak

BUENOS AIRES — On Sunday, Bolivians are widely expected to re-elect their president, Evo Morales, for an unprecedented third term. He is still overwhelmingly popular, including among the indigenous people from whom he has sprung. Their conditions of life have improved dramatically since he first took office in 2006, and so has the general economy. But that extraordinary popularity could ultimately prove a weakness for Bolivia, since he has so far shown no inclination to groom a successor and a strong political party to assure that his transformation of Bolivia does not fade when he inevitably leaves office.

For certain, Bolivia has shown the world an assertive, if sometimes startling, national image of late. Thanks to loans from China, the Internet reaches rural schools via a satellite that bears the name of Tupac Katari, the leader of an important indigenous uprising against Spanish colonial rule. Like Mr. Morales, Bolivia's current foreign minister, David Choquehuanca, belongs to the Aymara, one of the 36 ethnic groups recognized by Bolivia. Following a visit to London, he proposed to change the hands of the clock at the Plurinational Legislative Assembly, the Bolivian equivalent of Congress, so that they move counterclockwise — symbol of Bolivia's recent spirit of change and independence in the Southern Hemisphere. Another example: the government maintains a vehemently anti-American discourse even as it promises Bolivian students scholarships to study at Harvard and Stanford.

What seems clear is that Bolivia is defying longstanding caricatures of itself as an icon of political instability. Economic stability has followed the political achievement, and opinion polls have given the president a 40 percent advantage over his closest rival. If he wins, it will give him a third term — a possibility based on a constitutional change that he initiated but that his detractors say he is misusing.

Even so, his popularity endures. Under his Movement Toward Socialism, poverty dropped to 45 percent in 2011. In 2005, it had been 64 percent. Mr. Morales is also the first indigenous president of Bolivia, where 48 percent of the population declared themselves indigenous in the last census, and his government has proven itself adept at reconciling ancestral knowledge with economic modernization.

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All of this has left Bolivia in the grip of the leftist or populist trend in South American politics that was rising at the turn of the 21st century, even though that trend has slowed in Venezuela, Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina. In the United States, business and foreign policy figures have long portrayed Mr. Morales as an authoritarian strongman who connects emotionally to the masses and was bankrolled by Hugo Chávez, the populist leader and ally of Cuba who governed Venezuela from 1999 until his death last year.

But the notion of a mentor/student relationship underestimates Mr. Morales and overestimates Mr. Chávez. With Mr. Chávez gone, there is little Venezuelan aid to speak of today. But Bolivia is expected to finish the year with the highest growth rate in South America — above 5 percent. During his time in office, per capita income has grown from \$1,000 to \$2,550 and unemployment levels have remained below double digits. Between 2006 and 2014, \$8 billion of oil income was disbursed to social programs for young people, the elderly and young mothers. Mr. Morales's most emphatic opponents accuse him of being authoritarian, uneducated and intransigent, but don't challenge his personal integrity.

In Bolivia, presidents govern from the Palacio Quemado (the Burnt Palace), a name earned in 1875 when it was set on fire with torches. It hints at Bolivia's well-earned identity as a flammable country: of 83 governments, 36 lasted a year or less and 37 were anti-democratic.

If he is re-elected and serves out his term, Mr. Morales will have achieved the longest staying power of any president: 14 years. During his first term, the resource-rich east seemed on the verge of secession, but he managed to dismantle the regional opposition. Since then, domestic political opposition has been erratic. For this election, most of the other contenders are simply framing themselves as better administrators of the existing system.

Nationalizations, most importantly of the hydrocarbon industry, have been the pillars supporting this agenda. Another point in the government's favor was the country's new constitution, which improved representation in a country long characterized by crippling social exclusion. Not long ago, in La Paz, I asked a street soup vendor's 11-year-old son what he wanted to be when he grew up. "President," he said. "President like Evo." That the son of a *mujer de pollera*, an urban indigenous woman, can see himself as president illustrates the seismic change in Bolivia.

Relations with the United States are touchy at best, principally over coca production. President Obama has again declared that Bolivia "failed demonstrably" in its counternarcotics efforts, which meant the United States would continue to withhold aid.

But the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has praised the Bolivian government's efforts to tackle coca production, so the American move may only have isolated the United States in the region. The plant's leaves, chewed for extra energy at Andean altitudes, are deep in Bolivian tradition, and Mr. Morales himself once led the coca growers union. So framing relations within the context of the fight against drugs is a perspective that has severe limitations in Bolivia.

If Mr. Morales wins the election, he must now look forward, and use his third term to create the necessary conditions for a plausible successor. That the political process is so strongly identified with him has only contributed to the lack of potential successors. No important leaders have emerged; President Morales's ruling party has not grown stronger; and up to now, he has not considered stepping down. On the contrary, he has increasingly concentrated his power and made decisions on his own.

The problem of this strong personal identification with the presidency will only grow more acute if his legislators press to modify the constitution in order to guarantee Mr. Morales's unlimited re-election (all he needs is two-thirds of the vote on Sunday). Any eternalization will ultimately be a blow to the economic boom and the social progress achieved. The new Bolivia should not allow a president's cold to escalate into a raging disease.

Martín Sivak, an Argentine journalist, is the author of "Evo Morales: The Extraordinary Rise of the First Indigenous President of Bolivia." This essay was translated by Kristina Cordero from the Spanish.

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