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# Bolivia: 2020 presidential election

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# Summary

Bolivia held elections on Sunday 18 October 2020. As well as electing a president and vice-president, the electorate also voted for members of both houses of Congress. Originally planned for 3 May 2020, the elections were postponed due to Covid-19: first to 6 September and then to 18 October.

These were the first presidential elections since 2002 in which former president Evo Morales did not appear on the ballot, although he led the MAS party's campaign from exile and actively supported Luis Arce.

Arce secured an outright majority, thus avoiding the need for a run-off poll. His victory marks a return to the left for Bolivia.

# 1. Background

Elections in Bolivia take place every five years. Presidential candidates must win at least 50 per cent of the vote, or secure at least 40 per cent with a 10-point margin over the closest competitor, to claim an outright victory. If this does not happen, a run-off takes place; in this instance it would have happened on 29 November 2020.[1]

The 2009 constitution provided for the President and Vice-President to put themselves forward for re-election only once, limiting the number of terms they can serve to two. However, in a 2016 constitutional referendum, Evo Morales and his governing party proposed extending term limits to three consecutive terms. This would have allowed him to run for a fourth term in office as his 2006 election win is not counted, with it taking place before the two-term limit was introduced in the 2009 constitution. Morales narrowly lost this referendum and initially accepted the results; however, he later changed his mind and asked Bolivia's highest court to overturn the limits on re-election, citing human rights laws.[2]

The decision was upheld. Morales and his deputy fought the 2019 elections, winning the first round with 47.1% of the vote and beating his rival, Carlos Mesa, by more than 10 percentage points, thereby avoiding a run-off.[3]

After accusations of vote fraud and mass street protests and strikes, the military asked Morales to resign and the election was annulled. He fled Bolivia, claiming asylum in Mexico and is now exiled in Argentina.[4]

In November 2019 an interim government was formed by Jeanine Añez, the head of Bolivia's Senate and a right-wing opponent of Morales.[5] Mass protests ensued across the country with supporters of Morales and his Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) party clashing with security forces. The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights later recorded at least four deaths, with a further 426 injured and 227 detained.[6]

The Supreme Electoral Court of Bolivia announced that the new election would be held on 3 May 2020.[7] However, this was later postponed to 6 September 2020 and then to 18 October 2020 due to Covid-19.[8]

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[1]   'Bolivia election: Five things to know about', *BBC News*, 18 October 2020
[2]   'Bolivian court clears way for Morales to run for fourth term, *Reuters*, 28 November 2017
[3]   'Bolivia election: Protests as Evo Morales officially declared winner, *BBC News*, 25 October 2019
[4]   Bolivia: October 18, 2020, General Elections, Congressional Research Service, 7 October 2020
[5]   'Jeanine Anez declares herself Bolivia interim president', *Al Jazeera*, 13 November 2019
[6]   IACHR rejects generalized violence in Bolivia and calls for the respect democratic institutions in the country, The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, 12 November 2019
[7]   'For May the new elections in Bolivia', *El Vocero de Puerto Rico*, 3 January 2020
[8]   'Bolivia election delayed to October as pandemic bites, opposition cries foul', *Reuters*, 23 July 2020

# 2.  2020 Presidential election

## 2.1 Candidates

Eight presidential candidates were registered by the [Supreme Electoral Tribunal](#) to run in the planned 3 May general election. Interim president Jeanine Áñez later dropped out of the race, citing concerns about potentially splitting the vote and allowing Morales and his MAS party to return to office.[9]

A week before the postponed 18 October 2020 elections, former president Jorge Quiroga announced that he and his Liberty and Democracy (Libre21) party were also withdrawing from the race,[10] leaving five candidates.

Most analysts agreed that the race was between Luis Arce (Evo Morales' chosen candidate) and the opposition centrist, Carlos Mesa.

## Luis Arce

Luis Arce was born on 28 September 1963 in La Paz, Bolivia. He is married with three children and, in addition to his native Spanish, speaks English and Portuguese. He holds a degree in Economics from the Higher University of San Andres (UMSA) and gained a Master's in Economic Science from the University of Warwick, UK (1996-1997).

Arce worked at the Central Bank of Bolivia (CBC) from 1987 to 2006. On 23 January 2006, he was sworn in as Minister of Finance in President Evo Morales' first cabinet. He was reappointed to the post seven times and was widely credited with restoring Bolivia's economy. When Morales resigned in November 2019, Arce was one of several ministers to resign with him. The interim government granted Arce and his wife safe passage to leave Bolivia and they joined Morales in exile in Mexico.

On 19 January 2020, former President Evo Morales announced that Luis Arce would be the candidate for the left-wing MAS party in the presidential election, with former Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca as his running mate. Arce returned to Bolivia on 28 January.

## Carlos Mesa

Carlos Mesa was born on 12 August 1953 in La Paz. He is married with two children and one grandchild. He began his university education at the Universidad Complutense of Madrid, where he studied literature. He graduated from the Universidad Mayor de San Andres in La Paz with a degree in Literature.

Before entering politics, Mesa had an extensive career in journalism and the arts, working in radio, print and television and writing numerous books on Bolivian history, for which he received several awards.

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[9]   '[Bolivia's interim leader Jeanine Áñez quits presidential race](#)', *BBC News*, 18 September 2020

[10]   '[Tuto declines his candidacy seven days before the elections](#)', *Pagina Siete*, 11 October 2020

Mesa entered national politics in 2002, when he ran as the vice-presidential candidate of the centre-right Nationalist Revolutionary Movement (MNR) with Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada standing as president. He was sworn in as vice-president on 6 August 2002. Following the resignation of President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, Mesa was sworn in as President of Bolivia on 17 October 2003. He served as president for two years, before resigning in June 2005 following mass protests and blockades in La Paz.

He was unsuccessful in his presidential election campaign in 2019, but re-entered the race for the 2020 election as candidate for the centrist Citizen's Community alliance, with Gustavo Pedraza his running mate.

## 2.2 Election campaign

From the resignation of President Evo Morales and the subsequent installation of an interim government, it took a year for Bolivia to elect a new president. Since then, the coronavirus pandemic delayed planned elections and altered the dynamics of the campaign.

The elections came at a time of deep division within Bolivia, with interim President Jeanne Añez initially consolidating her grip on power, before resigning during the campaign. She had clamped down on MAS supporters and charged Morales with terrorism, further polarising the country. Añez's government was also accused of mismanaging the response to Covid-19, one of the major issues in the election campaign.

The 2020 presidential election was the first since 2002 in which Morales did not stand, although he led the MAS party's campaign from exile in Argentina. He still commands considerable support in Bolivia, especially among its indigenous population and the unions, and has been vocal in his support for Luis Arce. Morales also promised to return to Bolivia should Arce win the election.

As well as divisions along ethnic, regional and socioeconomic lines, Bolivia is also divided between those who believe Morales became corrupt and authoritarian during his premiership and those who champion his support for the poor and disenfranchised communities. Either way, the candidates' positions have been shaped by the presence of Morales.

## 2.3 Election results

Bolivia's electoral organisation (the OEP) published the official results of the presidential election on 23 October.

Luis Arce secured an outright majority and easily avoided a run-off. His victory marks a return to the left for Bolivia.

| Candidate | Party | No. of votes | % of votes |
|---|---|---|---|
| Luis Arce | Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) | 3,393,978 | 55.10 |
| Carlos Mesa | Citizens Community (CC) | 1,775,943 | 28.83 |
| Luis Camacho | We Believe (Creemos) | 862,184 | 14.00 |
| Chi Hyun Chung | Front for Victory (FPV) | 95,252 | 1.55 |
| Feliciano Mamani | Bolivian National Action Party (PAN-BOL) | 31,765 | 0.52 |
| Total | | 6,159,122 | 100.00 |

Source: Plurinational Electoral Organ (OEP)

## 2.4 International reaction

The United States congratulated Luis Arce on his victory in the presidential elections, with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issuing a press release in which he added: "The United States looks forward to working with the new, democratically elected government on matters of mutual interest."[11]

The European Union also sent a message of congratulations to Arce, commending the peaceful way in which the election took place, and noting the EU "will continue to support its democratic institutions, the reinforcement of the rule of Law, human rights and its economic and social development."[12]

President Xi of China, in congratulating Arce, highlighted the strategic partnership between the two nations and the various bilateral exchanges that had taken place.[13]

A host of Latin American leaders – including those from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Mexico, Uruguay and Venezuela – also congratulated President-elect Arce on his success.[14]

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[11]   Congratulations to Bolivia's President-Elect Luis Arce, US Department of State, 21 October 2020
[12]   Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on the general elections in Bolivia, Council of the EU, 23 October 2020
[13]   'Xi congratulates Arce on election as Bolivian president', *Xinhua.net*, 27 October 2020
[14]   'Government hails Arce's win as Bolivia's election returns a regional ally', *Buenos Aires Times*, 24 October 2020

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