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FEATURED Q&A

How Will a Delayed Vote Alter Bolivia's Presidential Race?



Citing the coronavirus pandemic, interim Bolivian President Jeanine Áñez's government postponed the country's presidential election, which had been planned for May 3. // File Photo: Bolivian Government.

Q Bolivia's interim government has postponed the country's May 3 presidential election amid the coronavirus pandemic. The May vote had been planned as a re-do following the disputed re-election victory and subsequent self-exile of then-President Evo Morales last year. Since then, the national ombudsman and human rights groups have accused interim President Jeanine Áñez of presiding over the detentions of hundreds of political opponents, the silencing of journalists and a campaign of so-called "national pacification" that has left dozens of people dead. How is Bolivia's presidential race shaping up? What effect will the delayed election and the coronavirus outbreak have on the country's politics? What should be done about the human rights abuse accusations lodged against Áñez's interim government?

A Iván C. Rebollo, managing partner at TerraNova Strategic Partners and president of the Bolivian-American Chamber of Commerce: "The pre-electoral cycle is filled with notable hiccups, from the Covid-19 outbreak, detention of numerous MAS political opponents and intolerance by this transition government on numerous fronts. The Áñez government is clearly doing what it believes has to be done to avoid a MAS triumph in the upcoming election and the return of Evo Morales and his nefarious grip on the country. The Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) has ordered the suspension of the electoral calendar by 14 days to match the national quarantine. However, it has yet to set a new official date for the actual vote. Unfortunately, this administration does not respond well to international media criticism. Local protests

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TODAY'S NEWS

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Bolivia Extends Border Lockdown, Panama Halts Domestic Flights

Several countries took additional actions to fight the spread of coronavirus. Among them, Bolivia extended its border closures until April 15, and Panama barred domestic passenger flights.

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Venezuela Opens Financial Rescue Talks With China

Venezuela is seeking economic support from China amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

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POLITICAL

Brazil Governors Blast Bolsonaro's Plan to Reopen Schools, Stores

Brazilian governors rebelled against President Jair Bolsonaro, blasting the president's call to reopen schools and businesses and saying Bolsonaro is jeopardizing states' efforts to fight coronavirus.

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Bolsonaro // File Photo: Brazilian Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Brazilian Governors Blast Bolsonaro's Call to Reopen Schools

Brazilian governors on Wednesday rebelled against President Jair Bolsonaro's call to return to normalcy, saying his urge to reopen schools and businesses contradicts health experts' recommendations and puts Latin America's largest population at risk, the Associated Press reported. State governors, many of whom have ordered tough measures to limit gatherings in their regions, defied the president's instructions

“You are the president, and you have to set the example.”

— João Doria

a day earlier that they limit isolation only to the elderly and those with longstanding health problems. In a videoconference on Wednesday between Bolsonaro and governors from Brazil's southeast region, São Paulo Gov. João Doria threatened to sue the federal government if it tried to interfere with his state's efforts to combat the virus, according to video of the private meeting, the Associated Press reported. “You are the president and you have to set the example,” said Doria, who supported Bolsonaro's presidential run. “You have to be the representative to command, guide and lead this country, not divide it,” he said. Many others rejected Bolsonaro's call to lift the restrictions. Virus plans that Bolsonaro had challenged were upheld by the Supreme Court, the heads of both congressional houses criticized the president's nationwide address, and companies donated supplies to state anti-virus efforts. Cities are turning Brazil's most famous stadiums into field hospitals to treat infected patients, including Rio de Janeiro's Maracanã and São Paulo's Pacaembu stadiums, the Voice of America reported. Brazil has registered more than 2,500 confirmed cases and 60 deaths.

Bolivia Extends Border Lockdown, Panama Halts Flights

Bolivia's government on Wednesday extended its border closures to April 15, from March 31 previously, and declared a national health emergency amid the fast-moving spread of coronavirus, Reuters reported. Interim President Jeanine Áñez said in a public address that no one will be able to enter or leave the country during the lockdown. Áñez's government had previously declared a 14-day nationwide quarantine, but it tightened restrictions on Wednesday, saying that only one person per household would be permitted to leave home between the hours of 7 a.m. and noon, Monday through Friday. “In recent days, non-compliance with the quarantine has increased the risk of contagion,” said Áñez, adding that the military and the national police would enforce the restrictions. Bolivia has 39 confirmed cases of Covid-19 and no reported deaths from it. Elsewhere in the region, Panama suspended domestic passenger flights in an attempt to contain the virus, according to the country's civil aviation authority. Only humanitarian flights and aircraft carrying cargo will be exempt. The Central American nation last Sunday barred all international flights. Colombia's government also tightened its restrictions, imposing a lockdown until April 12, Agence France-Presse reported. In Chile, officials ordered schools shut down until May, after suspending classes on March 16. Some 1.3 million residents of Santiago will also be on lockdown for at least a week, starting today. The areas of the capital where residents' movement will be restricted contain the greatest number of cases, said Health Minister Jaime Mañalich. “The movement of people can generate more contagion,” he said. “This means that people will have to stay at home,” he added. Colombia currently has 470 confirmed cases of Covid-19 and four deaths, while Chile has 1,142 confirmed cases and three deaths. In Mexico City, dozens of people waited in line on the sidewalk and in their cars at a laboratory in an upscale area of the city to be tested for coronavirus, Reuters reported.

NEWS BRIEFS

Nespresso Says Probe Finds Child Labor Violations in Guatemala

Nestlé's Nespresso coffee unit on Wednesday said an internal investigation has found evidence of child labor violations in Guatemala after allegations surfaced several weeks ago. The Switzerland-based company said that out of 374 visited farms in the region that supply Nespresso, the investigation identified three confirmed cases of child labor. “Firm action has been taken,” the company said. Among the changes, Nespresso will double its team of agronomists in Guatemala by the end of June and hire dedicated social workers.

Sumitomo Suspends Operations at Bolivia Mining Project

Japan-based Sumitomo Corporation today announced the temporary suspension of operations at Minera San Cristobal, a silver, zinc and lead mining project in Bolivia, in order to prevent the spread of coronavirus. All-day or night curfews have been imposed in the area, and public transportation has been suspended. “Considering the impact of these measures, including difficulties of securing access to the operations for employees and the effects of logistic stagnation, we have decided to suspend operations temporarily to ensure the safety of employees and their families,” the company said in a statement.

Mexico to Receive Cruise Ships But ‘Fumigate’ Arriving Passengers

Amid the Covid-19 pandemic, Mexico's government said Wednesday that it would allow cruise ship passengers to disembark in the country, the Associated Press reported. The government added that passengers would be “individually fumigated” before being taken to airports to return to their home countries.

"My body hurts, I don't have energy, I climb the stairs and I feel like I can't breathe," Alejandra Quintero, a 46-year-old yoga teacher among the people who went to the Biomedica lab, told the wire service. She said President Andrés Manuel López Obrador should conduct more public testing. Mexico has 475 confirmed cases of the disease, though some experts say the actual number of cases could be much higher because of the government's limited testing.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Venezuela Opens Financial Rescue Talks With China

The government of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has opened talks with China over possible financial support in the face of the coronavirus pandemic and plunge in global oil prices, Reuters reported Wednesday, citing unnamed sources familiar with the negotiations. The talks involve renegotiating oil-for-loan deals made more than a decade ago during the administration of the late Hugo Chávez. Venezuela has been the largest recipient of Chinese lending among Latin American countries, with more than \$62 billion in loans made between 2007 and 2016, according to the Inter-American Dialogue's China-Latin America Finance Database. But those inflows stopped completely over the past three years. Last week, Maduro's government in a surprise move asked the International Monetary Fund for \$5 billion in financing to confront the virus, but the IMF rejected the request, saying its members did not all recognize Maduro as the legitimate leader of the country. With its economy in near collapse, Venezuela's health system has lacked medicines and basic supplies for years, and development experts worry that the pandemic could hit the Andean nation particularly hard. [Editor's note: See also [Advisor Audio](#) of the Dialogue's March 19 event with Alicia Bárcena of ECLAC and Santiago Levy with the Brookings Institution.]

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are at times criminalized, and charges of sedition and terrorism are being leveled for disagreeing or questioning the current government. At the moment, all political campaigns have been put on pause, and they are all focusing on prevention and informing the public of the perils of Covid-19. President Áñez' government has been very aggressive on the fight against this pandemic with progressive economic and social policies, a 14-day mandatory quarantine of all Bolivians, job safety and other initiatives. However, the overall effect on the Bolivian economy will be disastrous for years to come. Undoubtedly, Áñez's administration is leaving a strong conservative mark, and it will not easily give up control. We have swung from one side of the pendulum to the other. Only fair and transparent elections will decide. The issue of probing human rights abuses by this government will mostly likely happen during the next administration."

A Kathryn Ledebur, director of the Andean Information Network in Cochabamba, Bolivia: "In spite of a promise to only act as interim president, Áñez announced her candidacy, demonstrating a clear conflict of interest—she appointed the head of the National Electoral Tribunal and regional authorities. Political persecution continues, and the government has not complied with the international community's request for 'fair and free elections.' A divided opposition, growing grassroots rejection of state-led violence and a collapsing economy has made MAS candidate Luis Arce the clear leader in polls. The Áñez administration is completely unprepared for coronavirus. It eliminated the recognized Mi Salud program, combating communicable diseases, and expelled 700 Cuban doctors. On Feb. 28, Áñez purchased \$6 million worth of tear gas and weapons in lieu of investment in health equipment and protective gear to contain the epidemic. Reliance on the police and military to enforce strict quarantine norms, with no

daily subsistence provisions for the large informal sector, has led to 1,500 arrests and threats of martial law. The two-week suspension of elections could extend indefinitely, in spite of pushback from MAS. Human rights violations may well escalate as the epidemic expands. Within this context, it is crucial

“ The two-week suspension of elections could extend indefinitely...”

— Kathryn Ledebur

that international organizations and Áñez's allies, such as the United States and the European Union (the largest external funder), denounce violations and demand accountability for security forces and the officials who are responsible. They should publicly insist on protection for national human rights monitors and respect for the agreement to host an IACHR experts group. Silence from the United States and the European Union has facilitated further deterioration of the rule of law in Bolivia."

A John Walsh, director for drug policy and the Andes at the Washington Office on Latin America: "Postponing national elections should be reserved for only the most extreme circumstances. This is all the more true in a polarized environment like Bolivia's, where the executive branch does not have a mandate from the voters and where credible elections will be crucial to fostering social peace. The public health threat posed by Covid-19 meets this extraordinary threshold. But Bolivia's interim government under Jeanine Áñez does not have the authority on its own to postpone elections, much less to set a new voting date. Attempting to do so unilaterally would inflame an already tense situation—especially because Áñez is not only the interim executive but is herself

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campaigning for the presidency, despite having pledged that she would not run. The electoral authority (TSE) is seeking to promote dialogue across the competing parties on the key question of a new voting date. Ultimately, the political parties themselves will need to reach an agreement that can become law, in a legislature where MAS still holds majorities in both chambers. Reaching such an agreement will be complicated by deep mutual distrust among key actors and many of their supporters. MAS presidential candidate Luis Arce enjoys a sizable lead in the polls. MAS, having acknowledged the need to postpone the voting, can be expected to bargain for the briefest possible delay and to insist that the *Áñez* government's harassment of MAS candidates and partisans must cease immediately. All Bolivians must ultimately consider the electoral process to be credible in order for the voting results to help heal the country's divisions rather than exacerbate tensions and stoke renewed conflict and violence. As an agreement is forged on the legislation needed to set a new electoral calendar, technical and scientific criteria regarding the protection of both public health and electoral integrity must prevail so that all Bolivians can have confidence that they will be able to fully exercise their fundamental right to freely elect their own leaders as soon as possible."

A **Roberto Laserna, director of the Center for the Study of Economic and Social Reality (CERES) in Cochabamba, Bolivia:** "An independent body, the electoral tribunal, made the decision to postpone the election. The justice system in Bolivia, including the attorney general's office, was fully controlled by Evo Morales during his long and illegitimate government. It was used against political opponents and covered up criminal abuses, as former authorities—who defected and fled the country even before Evo's resignation—

confessed. *Áñez*' government runs the country with a Legislative Assembly that Morales' MAS party absolutely controls. *Áñez* barely has control of her own cabinet. Yet, she is managing the country. Most of the allegations on human rights violations have been or are under investigation by pro-Morales bodies. Preliminary findings do not support

“The electoral campaign was moving properly in most parts of the country.”

— Roberto Laserna

claims about political detentions, persecution of journalists nor 'massacres.' Those are accusations usually disseminated by interest groups closely associated with Morales and his allies. The electoral campaign was moving properly in most parts of the country, allowing for MAS to regain credibility in the absence of Morales, whose illegal and authoritarian behavior the electorate openly rejected last year. Competition was fierce on the other side, with Carlos Mesa and Jeanine *Áñez* competing vote-by-vote for the right to face MAS in a second round. However, the Covid-19 pandemic absorbed all efforts, revealing the critical condition in which the Morales government left the health system. Elections do not have a date, but the emergency is showing who is eager to take chances on the opportunity and who is able to act responsibly. Depending on the conditions after the pandemic, the electoral process will restart, or it may be reshaped with different actors."

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