

Bolivians reject fourth term for Evo Morales in constitutional referendum

By Neil Hardt
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Initial results from Sunday's constitutional referendum to grant Bolivian President Evo Morales a fourth term show the controversial measure failing by a slim margin. With over 85 percent of the vote counted, the results from the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) show the "no" vote substantially ahead, with 53.3 percent of the vote, of the "yes" campaign's 46.7 percent.

In an official press conference Monday, Morales refrained from conceding defeat but said he would respect the result. The "no" campaign "shouldn't celebrate too early," he said. This was followed Tuesday morning by a press conference in which Vice President Álvaro García Linera denounced the release of the initial results as an "electoral fraud against the peasant vote" based on the claim that the uncounted ballots were from rural areas where the government thought it would fare better.

The defeat of the referendum would mean that Morales would be constitutionally prohibited from running in the 2019 elections and his term will conclude in 2020. Morales, who leads the ruling "Movement For Socialism" party (MAS), was elected president in 2005 as a self-proclaimed "socialist" and was reelected in 2009 and 2014. In the lead-up to the referendum, Morales proclaimed the vote was to determine "whether the people want me or don't want me."

The "no" vote reveals the declining popularity of the Morales government, particularly within the Bolivian working class, with the government facing defeat in virtually every major Bolivian city. Turnout on Sunday was 88 percent due to Bolivia's compulsory voting laws.

On the Wednesday before the vote, thousands demonstrated in the working class neighborhood of El

Alto in response to revelations of poor conditions in the area's public schools. Demonstrators were refused an audience by El Alto Mayor Soledad Chapeton, a member of the right-wing opposition National Unity (UN) party. After the demonstrators dispersed, an explosion and fire struck a nearby government office, leaving six dead.

Antagonism between the Bolivian working class and the Morales administration has grown in recent years as the government has responded with fierce hostility to strikes and protests. In July, police fired into crowds of striking miners who demanded the Morales government implement promised economic reforms.

Last year, Morales announced that multi-national energy corporations would be allowed to begin oil and gas exploration within Bolivia's national parks, which were established to protect Bolivia's large indigenous population. Morales received the praise of Wall Street rating agencies Fitch and Moody's, which hailed the administration for its "prudent fiscal policy" in favor of foreign corporate investors.

The vote also took place with Bolivia at the center of a struggle by Washington to counter growing Chinese economic and political influence in what US imperialism long regarded as its "backyard."

A scandal that surfaced in the run-up to the referendum was indicative of both the class character of the Morales government and of the geostrategic tensions that underlie Washington's hostility to the Morales government. It was revealed that a woman with whom Morales had a child during a two-year relationship, Gabriela Zapata, had been given a top post at a Chinese company which signed \$576 million worth of contracts with his administration.

The US is primarily concerned with China's increased investments in the region. In 2015, Chinese

President Xi Jinping announced that his government would invest \$250 billion in Latin America over the next decade.

In a 2015 US Army War College journal article titled “Expanding the Rebalance: Confronting China in Latin America,” Colonel Daniel Morgan argues that the Obama administration’s pivot to Asia must be accompanied by a pivot to target Latin America. In it he notes that Bolivia has “formed anti-western alternatives that deny US access and facilitate China’s expansion.” The article warns, “In the past decade, China sold 58 million dollars worth of K-8 Karakorum jets to Bolivia,” as well as other military and space exploration equipment.

Even as Morales has proven himself capable of waging attacks on the working class on behalf of the Bolivian bourgeoisie and international finance capital, his government’s ties to China have provoked hostility from the United States.

According to 2006-2009 US government documents released last week by WikiLeaks, the US government was funneling millions of dollars into Bolivian opposition groups who planned to assassinate Morales in 2008. As Norwegian journalist Eirik Vold said last week, “The US had full knowledge of opposition groups’ terrorist plans,” which also included attacks on Bolivia’s natural gas pipelines.

According to Vold, the cables “give an understanding of the importance of Bolivia, a country rich in hydrocarbons and other natural resources, to American strategy.”

In December 2015, Bolivia expelled US Vice Consul Ari Avidar, who was revealed to be a Central Intelligence Agency operative working within Bolivia. Earlier in 2015, a longtime confidential informant for the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) named Carlos Toro filed court papers confirming that the DEA was involved in a plot to destabilize the Morales administration. The plot, which the DEA codenamed “Operation Naked King,” attempted to link top Morales officials with cocaine trafficking operations.

There is no doubt the United States was backing the “no” campaign, whose ultimate aim is to remove Morales from power.

The corrupt bourgeois government of Evo Morales is incapable of mounting any defense against the machinations of US imperialism because its rule is

based on crushing working class opposition to its own anti-social capitalist program.

After eleven years in power, the significance of the period of Morales rule is increasingly clear.

Morales was brought to power in 2005 after five years of social protest which rocked La Paz and brought the country to a veritable standstill. Efforts to privatize the water supply of the city of Cochabamba in 2000 provoked nationwide protests and forced the government to declare a national emergency and a state of siege. From 2003 to 2005, massive demonstrations against corporate exploitation of the country’s natural gas supply forced the resignation of President Carlos Mesa after 500,000 workers and peasants descended upon the capital.

Morales’ election in December 2005 provided a means of diverting this mass social movement with the promises of reforms within the existing bourgeois state setup. Over a decade later, the experiment of “left” bourgeois governments in countries like Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador and Venezuela has been revealed as a failure for the workers and peasants of South America.

In Bolivia and across South America, popular disillusionment with the self-proclaimed “left” governments is only emboldening the more extreme right-wing tendencies of the ruling class. After Sunday’s vote, both Morales and the pro-US opposition will use the referendum to pave the way for new attacks on the living standards of Bolivian workers and peasants.

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