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FEATURED Q&A

Will Bolivia's Morales Remain in Power for 19 Years?



Bolivian President Evo Morales said Nov. 29 that he will seek a fourth term, despite voters' rejection of that possibility in a referendum last year. // File Photo: Bolivian Government.

Q More than half of the Bolivians who went to the polls in the country's Dec. 3 judicial elections nullified their ballots, which the opposition said was a sign of crumbling support for President Evo Morales, an assertion Morales denied. The judicial vote came just days after the country's constitutional court ruled that Morales can run for a fourth term in 2019, potentially extending his time in office to 19 years. The court's action annulled the results of a 2016 referendum in which voters rejected a proposal to change the Constitution to allow him to run again. Are Bolivians tiring of Morales? What are his chances of winning a fourth term if he does run again? What does the Constitutional Court's decision mean for Bolivia's democracy?

A Jaime Aparicio Otero, former Bolivian ambassador to the United States: "The government, filled with Cuban-style tactics, might have poisoned the country. Promises and calls to social values have been betrayed by a procession of scandals, corruption and political errors that have exposed the government's hypocrisy and its poor democratic standards. Last year, Morales lost a referendum that would have allowed him to run for a fourth term. Last month, thousands of Bolivians across the country protested an illegal decision by the Constitutional Tribunal, manipulated by the government, to clear the way for Morales to be re-elected. Earlier this month, Bolivians were called to vote to elect magistrates. Only judges selected by the parliament, controlled by Morales, obtained the right to stand for election. And as a result, these elections took over the appearance of a plebiscite. According to the results, 70 percent of voters voted null or

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Hernández Declared Winner of Honduras Vote

Three weeks after Honduras' presidential election, following a count marked by delays and deadly protests, incumbent President Juan Orlando Hernández was declared the winner.

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ECONOMIC

Peru, Uruguay, Ink Customs Pacts With South Korea

The agreements, signed last week in Brussels at a meeting of the World Customs Organization, call for the quick clearing of goods made by authorized producers as well as priority in customs processing.

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POLITICAL

Chileans Return Piñera to Presidency

Conservative former President Sebastián Piñera was elected Chile's president in the country's runoff election on Sunday, defeating his opponent, Senator Alejandro Guillier.

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Piñera // File Photo: Piñera Campaign.

POLITICAL NEWS

Chileans Return Piñera to Presidency in Decisive Vote

Former President Sebastián Piñera on Sunday decisively won Chile's presidential runoff election to return to the office that he previously occupied from 2010 to 2014. Piñera, a 68-year-old billionaire, won 54.6 percent of the vote, while his opponent, Senator Alejandro Guillier, garnered 45.4 percent, Bloomberg News

“Chile needs dialogue and collaboration more than confrontation.”

— Sebastián Piñera

reported. “Together, we can transform Chile into a developed nation ... into a Chile without poverty, with opportunity for all. Chile will recover the path of progress and development.” after a meeting with Guillier, Piñera vowed to govern for all Chileans. “Chile needs dialogue and collaboration more than confrontation,” he said, The New York Times reported. Guillier conceded and congratulated Piñera on what he called a “solid victory.” Guillier added that he would help to lead a “constructive opposition” in Congress. Piñera’s nine-point victory came as a surprise as polls before the vote showed him and Guillier in a much tighter race. The conservative’s win was seen as decision by Chileans that Piñera would be best suited to spur the country’s economic growth. Piñera’s victory also was the latest move to the right in Latin America, where conservative presidents have taken office in Brazil, Argentina and Peru. Piñera is to take office in March, for the second time succeeding Michelle Bachelet, who served a previous term as Chile’s president from 2006 to 2010.

Hernández Declared Winner of Honduran Presidential Election

Honduras’ electoral court on Sunday, three weeks after the country’s Nov. 26 presidential election, declared incumbent President Juan Orlando Hernández the winner of the vote, the Associated Press reported. Delays in the tally following the election and challenger Salvador Nasralla’s early lead, which disappeared as the counting wore on, led to allegations of fraud and violent protests, in which at least 17 people were killed. According to the electoral court’s official count, Hernández was re-elected with 42.95 percent of the vote, while Nasralla had the support of 41.42 percent of voters. “We have fulfilled our obligation [and] we wish for there to be peace in our country,” said the electoral court’s president, David Matamoros. Earlier on Sunday, Nasralla traveled to Washington in order to present what he alleged were “numerous” examples of fraud to the Organization of American States, which has said the vote was marred by irregularities.

Lawmakers Seek Impeachment of Peru’s President

Peruvian lawmakers on Friday began a process that could lead to President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski’s removal from office, following accusations that he had been involved in the Odebrecht corruption scandal, which has ensnared politicians across Latin America, The New York Times reported. Last year, Brazilian construction conglomerate Odebrecht admitted to paying a total of \$800 million in bribes to politicians in several countries in exchange for lucrative government contracts. According to documents sent to Peru’s Congress and released last week, the company paid \$782,000 in advisory fees to Westfield Capital, a company owned by Kuczynski. The majority of the payments occurred between 2004 and 2007, while Kuczynski was serving as economy

NEWS BRIEFS

Mexico’s Congress OKs Stronger Role for Military in Fighting Crime

Mexico’s Congress on Friday approved legislation, which President Enrique Peña Nieto is expected to sign, to strengthen the military’s role in fighting organized crime, The New York Times reported. Human rights groups, police experts and United Nations officials have criticized the legislation, saying it will lead to abuses. The measure establishes a legal framework to deploy soldiers to areas that are under the control of drug gangs. Supporters say it is needed to formalize improvised orders that have placed soldiers on the streets without a clear mission.

Brazil’s Economic Activity Rises in October

Brazil’s economic activity unexpectedly rose by 0.29 percent in October from the month before after seasonal adjustments, according to central bank data released today, Reuters reported. The data suggests Brazil may be further recovering from its deepest recession on record. The median prediction in a Reuters poll had been a 0.15 percent decline in October from the previous month. Brazil’s economic activity rose 0.27 percent in September from the month before.

Banco do Brasil Unit to Keep Neoenergia Stake Following Canceled IPO

A subsidiary of Banco do Brasil, BB Banco de Investimento, will keep its 9.35 percent stake in electricity company Neoenergia following the utility’s decision to cancel plans for an initial public offering, the bank said in a securities filing Thursday, Reuters reported. The utility withdrew plans for its primary and secondary share offerings, which had first been announced in August, after pricing did not reach domestic shareholders’ expectations.

minister and prime minister under former Presidents Alejandro Toledo and Alan García. Kuczynski has said he did not have a role in managing his firm when Westfield received payments from Odebrecht, and that a business partner signed contracts with Odebrecht during the time he was serving as economy minister and prime minister, *The Wall Street Journal* reported. The Toledo administration awarded several contracts to Odebrecht, and local media in Peru have reported that Kuczynski was involved in the awarding of the contracts. Amid the impeachment proceedings, Kuczynski is expected to present a defense at a hearing on Thursday. A two-thirds majority vote in Congress would be required to remove the president from office. Kuczynski on Dec. 14 said he would not step down from his position and denied wrongdoing, *The Guardian* reported. He also pledged to produce his personal banking records.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Peru, Uruguay Sign Customs Pacts With South Korea

Peru and Uruguay have signed customs agreements with South Korea that will facilitate trade with the Asian country, the Yonhap news agency reported today. The Korea Customs Service said the pacts were signed during a general meeting of the World Customs Organization, held last week in Brussels. South Korea has been in talks with Peru and Uruguay since 2015 over the authorized economic operator and Mutual recognition agreement. The pacts call for quick clearing of goods produced by authorized operators and priority in customs processing. According to the Korea Customs Service, South Korea now has 19 such arrangements. Sport-utility vehicles made in South Korea currently top the Peruvian market, and other South Korea-made items, including computers and machinery, are exported to Latin America.

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blank. Morales is fully aware that he has lost ground and that re-election under the conditions of a regular competition would be far from assured. But while Morales has the levers of the state (including the electoral tribunal) at his disposal, it is unlikely that an opponent can reach the presidency. Humberto Vacaflor, a journalist, is worried that 'Morales could transform the parliament into a Constituent Assembly in order to continue to run the country; a solution recommended by his Cuban advisors, already successfully implemented in Venezuela.' Nobody doubts that Morales will use all the tricks, and more despotism if necessary, to maintain power. He is afraid that, once out of power, his fate will be similar to that of his former colleagues, Lula, Kirchner and Correa."

A Miguel Centellas, Croft instructional assistant professor of sociology and international studies at the University of

Mississippi: "One must be careful not to misread Bolivian public opinion. True, more than half of voters nullified their votes in the recent judicial elections. That re-energized the opposition, which remains a sizeable and vocal portion of the population. It's tempting to see this election as a plebiscite on Morales—just like the 2015 municipal and regional elections. But it's important to remember that Morales consistently outperforms his party. MAS always wins more votes when Morales is at the top of the ticket. Public opinion polls provide mixed evidence. In late November, after the constitutional court ruled that Morales could seek a fourth term, a *Mercados y Muestras* poll showed 75 percent opposed Morales as a perpetual candidate. But only 60 percent thought the court's ruling was unconstitutional. Meanwhile, an October Ipsos poll pegged Morales' public approval at 57 percent. Few presidents in the region have approval ratings that high. Barring a major economic crisis, I don't think Morales is worried about his chances for re-election. He

has weathered social crises and corruption scandals, and after more than a dozen years in power he has tremendous incumbency advantages. Plus, he doesn't need to win a majority of the vote: Morales only needs to win 40 percent of the vote and surpass his nearest rival by 10 points to avoid a runoff. That means any one of his opponents will probably need to win about 40 percent to force Morales into a runoff. In large part because the opposition is so disunited, no opposition candidate has ever come close to that. So long as Morales' base holds strong, the opposition has a difficult uphill battle to unseat him at the ballot box."

A Kathryn Ledebur, director of the Andean Information Network in Cochabamba: "It is unwise to

interpret nullified ballots in the judicial elections as a plebiscite on Morales' popularity. In 2011, an opposition campaign to cancel out ballots, with a similar percentage of nonparticipation in the first judicial elections, led to a judiciary, including the Constitutional Tribunal, chosen by a smaller group of citizens. The jury is still out on the potential efficacy of high-level judicial elections. It is paradoxical that voters would choose to protest the tribunal's ruling on Morales' eligibility for re-election by again refusing to vote for candidates in elections certified by the OAS as transparent. The tribunal ruled against legal norms stipulating more than two consecutive terms for all officials. The head of the electoral tribunal has formally requested legal clarification of the ruling's impact on the referendum. Several constitutional experts have filed motions arguing that tribunal's rulings are not retroactive. It will be important to see the response of the new judiciary to these petitions. The most recent poll results from last October rated Morales approval at 57 percent. Bolivian voters evaluate complex factors during national elections. In the past, the majority has been unwilling to vote against Morales without a strong oppo-

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ment with grassroots support or concrete proposals. It's important to remember that two years, the time remaining until the next presidential elections, is an eternity in Bolivian politics. The future of Bolivia's democracy will depend on compliance with the rule of law and active engagement of all citizens and political sectors."

A **Roberto Laserna, director of the Center for the Study of Economic and Social Reality (CERES) in Cochabamba, Bolivia:** "The court's action defines that the San José Agreement must be applied with preference to the national Constitution. But it did not rule out the outcome of the 2016 referendum. It could not do that. No court can ignore a referendum, and the electoral court has suggested this as a serious problem for Morales. No matter what, Morales will try and may be able to impose its candidacy, based on social and military threats and even actions. He still has the loyalty of key corporations, such as the coca growers, some urban dwellers, small miners and even entrepreneurs that benefit from public spending and favors. The military, as most public servants, are also under Morales' control. However, at the same time, we can see that the urban middle class is disillusioned, as are peasants and indigenous groups that feel manipulated and see that the infrastructure that made them happy are now doing very little to improve their wellbeing. The economic decline is already eroding the rentier populism. The vote on Dec. 3 was an opportunity for the electorate to voice its rejection of the judicial reform, including rulings like the one that supposedly suspends constitutional limits for re-election, but it was also a chance to measure discontent with the Morales government. More than two-thirds distanced themselves from the government. But the future of democracy will depend on what has the opposition to offer. We must remember that an active minority can control a fragmented majority."

A **George Gray Molina, Bolivian policy consultant:** "The constitutional court's decision revealed both a legal and a political conundrum for the ruling Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS). The legal dilemma is relatively straightforward. Beyond the substantive question of re-election, the current Bolivian Constitution does not grant the court powers to annul articles of the Constitution (Article 202). It can interpret the constitutionality of laws, decrees, statutes and other lower-level legal instruments, but the court cannot suspend, amend or modify articles of the Constitution itself. A constitutional reform would be required for that purpose. Ultimately, the re-election ruling undermines both the court and the standing of the constitutional text. The political dilemma is more far-reaching. Until very recently, the presumption was that Evo Morales would beat any opposition candidate in an electoral runoff. No opposition leader could pull off an electoral victory against the sitting president. However, the recent judicial elections showed an electoral weakness. Evo Morales lost the last two electoral contests when faced with a 'yes/no' style plebiscitary vote. Rather than seek a grand electoral coalition to beat the president in the first electoral round, the opposition is coming around to the conclusion that it merely needs to reach the second round, thus changing the dynamics of the election. In the first round, the president is widely expected to win amid a crowded field. In a second round, however, the election becomes a plebiscite on an indefinite Morales administration. Current polls suggest a majority of the electorate will not deliver such a blank check. Is democracy strengthened by a 19-year presidency? On the flipside, is that how long it takes for a weak opposition to build a plausible alternative to 19-year rule? We will find out in 2019."

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