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FEATURED Q&A

Is Evo Morales Overstaying His Welcome in Bolivia?



In 2016, Bolivians voted down a constitutional referendum that would have allowed President Evo Morales to run for a fourth term. However, Bolivia's courts later threw out the country's term limits. // File Photo: Bolivian Government.

Q A Bolivian court in early December ruled that President Evo Morales can seek a fourth term in office in the country's presidential election next year, a ruling that opponents say is unconstitutional. What does the court's decision mean for Bolivia's democracy, and was it the right one? What are the chances that Morales will win next year's vote? Does he risk a rebellion from citizens who feel he has overstayed his welcome?

A Robert Albro, research associate professor of the Center for Latin American & Latino Studies at American University: "Morales' disregard for term limits and for a referendum rejecting his intention to run for a fourth term reflect a trend of hyper-presidentialism in left-leaning Latin American democracies. Part of the problem is the non-emergence of potential successors to Morales from within his own party, the Movement Toward Socialism, who might extend his historic legacies of indigenous enfranchisement, social redistribution and economic stability. But this is the same reason why, despite growing discontent among some constituencies composing his electoral coalition, Morales will likely win a fourth term. The president's popularity has declined from the impressive heights he enjoyed through the first half of his administration. In recent years, his government has provoked political conflicts with indigenous groups, most notoriously around the so-called TIPNIS controversy, where he sought to build a highway through protected indigenous territory to benefit commerce with Brazil. Morales also endured negative media attention in response to some personal scandals. And Bolivians appear increasingly nonplussed

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Epsy Campbell, who has been serving as Costa Rica's vice president and foreign minister, stepped down from the latter position after appointments she made sparked controversy.

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The airline said a repossession of aircraft by leasing companies threatened its operations.

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POLITICAL

Sonnenholzner Tapped as Ecuador's VP

Ecuador's Congress named Otto Sonnenholzner as the country's vice president. He was sworn in a week after his predecessor, María Alejandra Vicuña, resigned amid an investigation into payments she received as a legislator. Sonnenholzner is the country's third vice president in a year.

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Sonnenholzner // File Photo: Ecuadorean Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Sonnenholzner Becomes Ecuador's Third VP in a Year

Ecuadorian legislators on Tuesday named Otto Sonnenholzner, a 35-year-old economist and radio broadcaster, as the country's third vice president in a year, *El Comercio* reported. Sonnenholzner was tapped for the position a week after his predecessor, María Alejandra Vicuña, stepped down amid an investigation into payments she received years ago during her time

“ I will always put the national interest above personal interests.”

— Otto Sonnenholzner

as a lawmaker. Vicuña had been vice president for less than a year, taking over last January for Jorge Glas who was convicted and sentenced to six years in prison in connection with the multi-country Odebrecht bribery scandal. In his swearing-in ceremony, Sonnenholzner vowed to carry out his new role faithfully. “I will always put the national interest above personal interests,” he said, adding that he had known President Lenín Moreno for years, *Reuters* reported. Ninety-four of the 128 legislators registered for the vote backed Sonnenholzner, while 27 voted against him and seven abstained, *MercoPress* reported. Seventy votes were needed for him to take office as vice president. Legislators aligned with former President Rafael Correa voted against confirming Sonnenholzner. Correa had endorsed Moreno during his run for president, but the two men had a falling out after Moreno took office last year. Moreno, who is currently on a trip to China, tweeted that Sonnenholzner “is a young entrepreneur who is committed to working with all Ecuadorians and the government team for the future

of the country.” Sonnenholzner was sworn in following the vote. He was the top candidate on a list of three that Moreno had submitted to lawmakers. Nancy Fabiola Elizabeth Vasco Noboa and Agustín Guillermo Albán Maldonado were the other two candidates, *MercoPress* reported. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in Monday's Advisor.]

Campbell Resigns as Costa Rica's Foreign Minister

Costa Rican Vice President Epsy Campbell on Tuesday resigned her position as the country's foreign minister after a series of her appointments within the ministry sparked criticism, *La Nación* reported. She will remain vice president. “This morning, I told the president of my decision to resign as the foreign minister. I have understood that my responsibility for the country transcends being at the head of a portfolio,” Campbell said as she presented her resignation to Congress in the afternoon, *El*



Campbell // File Photo: Costa Rican Government.

País reported. “My commitment to Costa Rica makes me understand that we need to go back to the real topics, the in-depth debates, the seeking of solutions for problems that Costa Ricans face daily,” she added. For the past five months, Campbell had come under fire for alleged irregularities in several of her appointments for top positions within the foreign ministry. She is accused of selecting individuals without the required experience, such as her goddaughter, which she explained by saying they were appointed to posts of “confidence.” However, Costa Rica's prosecutor general's office last Friday issued a binding statement

NEWS BRIEFS

Gunman Kills at Least Four in Brazil Cathedral Before Killing Self

A gunman opened fire and killed at least four people inside a Catholic cathedral in the Brazilian city of Campinas on Tuesday, *Reuters* reported. Security cameras show the shooter, identified as Euler Fernando Gandolfo, come in and sit down before shooting the worshippers praying in front of him, authorities said. After a shootout with police left him wounded, Gandolfo committed suicide at the altar. Four other people were injured. Police have not established a motive.

Mexican Lawmakers OK Restructuring of Attorney General's Office

The lower house of Mexico's Congress on Tuesday approved a bill that restructures the attorney general's office, the *Associated Press* reported. The legislation would allow the Senate to play a role in the nomination of candidates for the top prosecutor post and limits the number of specialized assistant prosecutors' offices. The Senate passed the measure last month. The bill, which ruling Morena party legislators supported, must still be signed by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to become law.

Peru's Economy to Grow 4% Next Year: Scotiabank

Peru's economy will experience 4 percent growth next year, driven by private investment, as well as the beginning of the Quellaveco and Mina Justa mining projects, *Scotiabank* said Tuesday in a forecast, state-run news agency *Andina* reported. “Quellaveco and Mina Justa mining projects mark the difference since they add about half a percentage point to [GDP] growth,” the bank's economic studies department said. The bank had projected 3.8 percent growth for this year.

that said the positions under review required workers with a certain foreign service status, El País reported. The foreign ministry will move to replace the individuals under question.

BUSINESS NEWS

Avianca Brasil Files for Bankruptcy Protection

Avianca Brasil on Monday filed for bankruptcy protection, saying a potential repossession of aircraft by leasing companies had threatened its operations, Valor Econômico reported. The companies are claiming back approximately 30 percent of the airline's fleet, which Avianca said threatened its ability to serve some 77,000 passengers this month, according to the bankruptcy filing. One of its lessors, Aircastle, said on Monday it was moving to repossess

The airline said its flights would not be affected by the bankruptcy filing.

11 airplanes after terminating the leases with Avianca, Reuters reported. Aircastle was not mentioned in the bankruptcy filing. Avianca, which is the country's fourth-largest airline, is asking a Brazilian court to allow it to keep the aircrafts temporarily. In the filing, the carrier said high fuel prices and the strength of the dollar were the main reasons for its troubles. Most Latin American airlines have to pay a large amount of their expenses, including fuel, in dollars while charging their customers in more volatile currencies such as Brazil's real, the wire service reported. Avianca Brasil, an unlisted airline, is controlled by the same owners of Colombia-based Avianca, whose shares dropped as much as 25 percent after news of the bankruptcy broke out. It later pared losses to 2 percent. The company said its flights will not be affected.

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by their president's insistence that he is the only one able to continue and extend the work of de-colonizing their country. Ordinarily these factors might make a difference in a contested election. But, Morales is still popular with most of his supporters, if not as much as previously. His opponent, Carlos Mesa, a former president and vice president under Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, who fled the country in 2003, will be unable to unify a fractured opposition. Mesa represents an era in Bolivian politics to which ordinary Bolivians will not choose to return."

A Raúl Peñaranda, Bolivian journalist and political analyst: "The Supreme Electoral Tribunal's decision to allow Evo Morales' presidential candidacy is an outrage and a blow to democracy. Morales himself called for a referendum in 2016 to establish whether or not citizens accepted a constitutional reform that would allow him to run for a fourth term. As we know, the vote's results were mostly negative and so Morales' re-election was rejected. With his decision to run despite the electoral result, Morales has demonstrated his authoritarian disposition and his disdain for democra-

cy. He currently controls all branches of government, including the electoral branch, and he has sufficient power to act in conflict with the popular vote. Unfortunately, from this point of view, Bolivian democracy is at

“ With his decision to run despite the electoral result, Morales has demonstrated his authoritarian disposition and his disdain for democracy.”

— Raúl Peñaranda

serious risk. Surveys show that former President Carlos Mesa could win the upcoming elections scheduled for 2019, but with Morales' precedent of ignoring the popular vote once, it is possible he will do so again in the future. For this reason, the Bolivian people should keep peacefully protesting so as to recover full democracy. The international community must help to avoid the country from slipping into violence and uncontrolled repression, as is the case in Nicaragua and Venezuela."

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Grupo Aval Vows to Cooperate With U.S. Probe

Colombian financial conglomerate Grupo Aval said Tuesday that it will cooperate with U.S. investigators in an inquiry involving a highway project on which one of its subsidiaries worked with Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht, Reuters reported. The Brazilian company in a 2016 leniency deal acknowledged bribing officials in several countries, including in Latin America. Grupo Aval said it had received an inquiry from the U.S. Justice Department about the investigation. Aval did not say what exactly the U.S. probe is looking into. It did, however,

say that the inquiry involves a partnership that was formed in 2010 between its Corficolombiana subsidiary as well as Odebrecht and Cass Constructores, which partnered to build the 328-mile Ruta del Sol 2 Highway. The contract to build the road to Colombia's Caribbean coast was worth approximately \$1.5 billion. "Grupo Aval has informed the DOJ, through its lawyers in the United States, that it will cooperate with the investigation of the DOJ, as it has been doing with other government entities," Aval said in a statement, adding that it will discuss developments in the case in its quarterly results. In Colombia, a witness who audited the highway project died Nov. 9, with the cause ruled as a heart attack. His son died two days later of cyanide poisoning after reportedly drinking from a water bottle on his father's desk.

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A Jonas Wolff, executive board member and head of the research department at the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt

(PRIF): “The court in question was Bolivia’s highest electoral court. In allowing Morales to run again, this court accepted a highly contested decision by the country’s constitutional court. Almost exactly a year ago, the Tribunal Constitucional Plurinacional had ruled that the constitution’s term limits were incompatible with the universal human right to be elected that is enshrined in the American Convention on Human Rights. This decision came after Bolivians had narrowly rejected a constitutional reform in February 2016 that would have allowed the current president and his vice president to run one more time. Technically speaking, the court’s decision did not contradict the result of this referendum—but politically, it clearly did. Also, the legal reasoning is generally considered as very weak (if not entirely without precedent). But still: This is not the end of democracy in Bolivia, and Morales’ ability to run for yet another term does not imply that he is now a dictator. Bolivians will have the possibility to decide on Morales’ future in the 2019 elections. Opinion polls suggest that an opposition alliance united behind a strong candidate could win, for the first time since

2005. Until now, however, the opposition has been unable to unite. Instead, it uses the unpopular decision to remove term limits to mobilize against the government. This is a legitimate strategy. But to mobilize people in the name of fighting a dictatorship is also

“Morales’ ability to run for yet another term does not imply that he is now a dictator.”

— Jonas Wolff

risky. For Bolivian democracy, the greatest threat is not that Morales will probably run and perhaps also win again, but rather it is that the current controversy might end up delegitimizing the country’s democratic procedures and institutions to the point that they are no longer able to peacefully handle socio-political conflict.”

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org.

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