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FEATURED Q&A

Will Bolivia's Vote Be Held in October as Scheduled?



Interim Bolivian President Jeanine Áñez is among the candidates in the country's presidential election, which is planned for October but has been delayed twice. // File Photo: Bolivian Government.

Q Bolivia's Legislative Assembly this month passed a law mandating that the country's delayed presidential election be held Oct. 18, despite calls from supporters of former President Evo Morales that it be held earlier. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal endorsed the resolution, calling the October date "final, immovable and unpostponable." The tribunal has delayed the vote twice this year, saying the postponements were necessary because of the Covid-19 pandemic, though the delays have led to weeks of crippling protests. Will the vote be held peacefully on Oct. 18 as scheduled? What effects have the delays had on the presidential race? Which candidate is best positioned to win, and why?

A Jaime Aparicio, Bolivia's ambassador to the Organization of American States and former Bolivian ambassador to the United States: "The Supreme Electoral Tribunal postponed the election based on public health criteria derived from the Covid-19 crisis and the fact that the electoral observation missions of the OAS and the European Union, were not in a position to send observers due to the severity of the pandemic at that time. The Carter Center said it supported 'the decision by Bolivia's Supreme Electoral Tribunal to postpone Bolivia's election from Sept. 6 to Oct. 18 in response to concerns about the current spread of Covid-19.' The facts have shown that Bolivia will have elections on Oct. 18. However, an extensive international disinformation campaign, grounded on ideology, has tried to impose the false narrative that the postponement of the elections is a government strategy to stay in power. This kind of 'fake news' is a consequence of some jour-

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Venezuelan Politician Accused in Drone Case Released From Jail

Venezuelan authorities have released opposition politician Juan Requesens, who had been imprisoned for two years in connection with an incident in which a drone detonated at an event where President Nicolás Maduro was speaking.

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BUSINESS

Colombia's Avianca Getting \$370 Million Loan

The Colombian government's disaster fund will loan airline Avianca \$370 million to aid in its restructuring.

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ECONOMIC

Minister Seeking Reforms to DR's Mining Law

The Dominican Republic's new energy and mines minister, Antonio Almonte, said he is seeking reforms to the country's mining law.

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Almonte // File Photo: Government of the Dominican Republic.

POLITICAL NEWS

Authorities Release Venezuelan Accused in Drone Case

Authorities in Venezuela have released an opposition politician who was jailed two years ago and accused in a drone attack against President Nicolás Maduro, the Associated Press reported Friday, citing his family members. Video posted on social media showed Juan Requesens arriving home, with relatives greeting him with emotional embraces. “My brother Juan is home,” his sister Rafaela said in a posting on Twitter. Requesens had been imprisoned since Aug. 7, 2018 at the Helicoide prison in Caracas, which Venezuela’s Sebin intelligence agency runs, Reuters reported. The country’s opposition considered him a political prisoner. “Although today my brother will be able to sleep in his house and in his bed, there are many INNOCENT Venezuelans who cannot do that. We won’t stop fighting for them,” Rafaela Requesens tweeted. She added that her brother had been released to house arrest. Venezuelan authorities did not say why they had released Requesens, the AP reported. Security forces had arrested him 31 days after an incident in which two drones detonated at an outdoor military ceremony where Maduro was speaking. Maduro was not injured in the incident, and Requesens has denied involvement. Other opposition figures, including politician Julio Borges who lives in exile in Colombia, are also accused in the incident. The United Nations high commissioner for human rights, Michelle Bachelet, welcomed Requesens’ release from prison. “This decision is a very positive gesture,” said Bachelet, the AP reported. “I encourage the authorities to continue taking similar measures that contribute to improving the human rights situation in the country and that allow progress in the political dialogue.” Requesens was released just months before Venezuela’s planned December legislative elections, which the opposition has vowed to boycott over concerns that the vote will be rigged.

Court Temporarily Removes Governor of Rio Amid Graft Case

A Brazilian court has temporarily removed Rio de Janeiro’s governor, Wilson Witzel, from office due to corruption charges, as officials on Friday said they were conducting a series of raids and more than a dozen arrests related to the case, the Associated Press reported. Brazil’s main prosecutor’s office said Witzel, a former federal judge, was removed from office for 180 days while the investigation continues. Prosecutors have accused the governor, a critic



Witzel // File Photo: Brazilian Government.

of President Jair Bolsonaro, of being at the “top of the pyramid” of an alleged corruption scheme involving bribes and kickbacks for government contracts that included projects seeking to fight the spread of coronavirus in the South American country, which has the world’s second-highest number of confirmed cases of Covid-19 at nearly 3.8 million, The Washington Post reported. Witzel, who has denied the charges, is also facing impeachment proceedings. He has alleged the investigation was politically orchestrated by Bolsonaro. “Until my final days, I will not allow this president, whom I unfortunately helped elect, become another dictator in Latin America,” Witzel said when the probe began, The Washington Post reported. Brazil’s main prosecutor’s office said it had raided Witzel’s office and residence, as well as the residence of the vice governor, who by law succeeds Witzel while he is suspended, the AP reported. In total, there were 72 search and seizure warrants in six states, the federal district and Uruguay, as well as 17 arrest warrants.

NEWS BRIEFS

Argentina Expecting to Announce Results of Debt Restructuring Talks

Argentina’s debt restructuring deadline passed on Friday following four months of tense debt talks, several delays and amendments since the government’s initial offer in April, with the government “confident” of strong backing from bondholders, Reuters reported, citing an unnamed official source. The results are likely to be announced today as formally scheduled. The main three creditor groups, which hold a large portion of the bonds, have already expressed support for the deal to restructure \$65 billion in debt.

Dominican Republic Minister Seeking Reform to Mining Law

The Dominican Republic’s new energy and mines minister, Antonio Almonte, has announced that he will push for Congress to reform the country’s mining law, Mining.com reported Sunday. The minister has said he wants an updated legal framework that allows for the safeguarding of the interests of the state and of the community. Almonte also reportedly wants to update legislation on the provision of incentives for alternative and renewable energy sources, particularly to the private sector. [Editor’s note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Aug. 25 issue of the Advisor.]

Chile’s Unemployment Rate Hits 13.1 Percent

Chile’s unemployment rate has risen to 13.1 percent, the national statistics institute announced Friday, Agence France-Presse reported. The country’s unemployment rate increased 5.6 percent in the three-month period ending in July as compared to the same period last year. The institute said it was the highest unemployment rate on record since the agency changed its calculation method in 2010.

BUSINESS NEWS

Colombia's Disaster Fund Giving Avianca \$370 Million Loan

The Colombian government's disaster fund will lend as much as \$370 million to airline Avianca to help with its restructuring after a coronavirus-related halt in travel left the company in bankruptcy, the country's finance ministry said in a statement, Bloomberg News reported Sunday. The emergency mitigation fund's committee approved the government-backed loan under the framework of debtor-in-possession financing the carrier is seeking in a U.S. bankruptcy court case, the ministry said. "With a view to guaranteeing service, air connectivity for Colombians and general economic activity,

The Colombia-based airline filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in New York last May.

the national government will participate in Avianca's restructuring process," the ministry said, Reuters reported. "The operation will take place through a credit of up to \$370 million in an 18-month transaction that corresponds to the estimated time the company's restructuring process will last," it added. Avianca, one of Latin America's largest airlines, filed for Chapter 11 protection in New York in May as travel restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic forced the company to ground its fleet. Earlier this month, it reached an agreement with lenders for a significant part of the \$2 billion it's trying to raise as it restructures. Avianca is offering one of the highest premiums yet seen on a \$1.3 billion debt-in-possession loan, Bloomberg News reported. The fall in demand for air travel has also forced Avianca competitors Latam Airlines Group and Grupo Aeroméxico to seek bankruptcy protection.

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nalists' and academics' tendency to go only to sources of information that confirm their previous opinions about what is happening in Bolivia. Recently, two events have eroded electoral support for MAS. First, there have been roadblocks using explosives, which have prevented ambulances and trucks carrying oxygen from reaching hospitals. As a consequence, more than 30 people have died. Second, Mr. Morales' prestige suffered a further blow last month when he was accused of statutory rape. According to the latest polls, 58 percent would vote against MAS candidate Luis Arce, which means that there will be a runoff and that the opposition to MAS has the best chance of winning the second round. Since the end of last year, a new majority has emerged in Bolivia, that of citizens worn out, not only with 14 years of abuse of power and corruption, but also with the moral decomposition of Morales and his party."

A **Roberto Laserna, director of the Center for the Study of Economic and Social Reality (CERES) in Cochabamba, Bolivia:** "The new date for the election provided MAS and its allies with the justification to accuse President Áñez of trying to remain in power, and they launched a major political offensive with roadblocks. The date was a pretext. Many citizens requested a tough response in defense of the law. They suffered the violation of their rights to travel and work. The government refrained from using force, fearing that the protests would lead to clashes and deaths, as has happened several times before, giving MAS and its leaders the opportunity to present themselves as the victims. Instead, the government pushed for dialogue, demanding that the Electoral Court and the Legislative Assembly provide an institutional framework for that. Simultaneously, the government launched a symbolic offensive. While providing emergency oxygen to the hospitals by plane, it organized a caravan of trucks to seek the removal of

blockades. At the end, protests dissolved with no violence. MAS' political chances have been hurt by the failure of its offensive, but it is not yet clear whether President Áñez

“The electoral process is still under pressure from groups that demand more guarantees against fraud.”

— Roberto Laserna

will gain support from the way she handled the crisis. The electoral process is still under pressure from groups that demand more guarantees against fraud. In recent days, Evo Morales' moral qualifications came under scrutiny, and there are also allegations of illegal use of public money and property, such as vans, planes and helicopters. Since Morales is the backbone of MAS, this issue may damage the party in the coming elections."

A **Iván Rebolledo, managing partner of TerraNova Strategic Partners and president of the Bolivian American Chamber of Commerce:** "The transition government of President Áñez has been accused of several human rights violations and curtailments of civil liberties—often framed as responses to the pandemic—that undermine and intimidate political adversaries ahead of the elections. Many in the international community are concerned that the interim authorities seek to perpetuate their stay in power and have clearly overstepped their transitional role. The decision that President Áñez made to campaign for the presidency was a mistake that has polarized Bolivian society, especially during this pandemic. The constantly changing electoral calendar, albeit for health concerns, has added to the political tensions. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal's decision regarding the

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Oct. 18 election date must not be altered, and the current administration must not attempt to unilaterally postpone the elections or frustrate efforts by electoral authorities to ensure a free and fair vote with adequate health safeguards. It would be difficult to imagine that the vote could be delayed yet again, but the peak of Covid-19 is estimated to hit by mid-September. In recent weeks,

“**The decision that President Ñez made to campaign for the presidency was a mistake that has polarized Bolivian society...**”

— Iván Rebolledo

thousands of Evo Morales supporters have taken part in demonstrations and blocked roads around the country to demand that the elections take place as originally planned on Sept. 6. After much careful but lengthy internal debate, the Ñez government ordered police and military onto the streets to protect key installations and the transportation of medical supplies after numerous Covid patients died during the blockades due to a lack of oxygen. The popularity of MAS candidate Luis Arce should begin to wane due to the recent revelation of a corruption scandal at the Social Security Fund that directly involves him, when he was economy minister, as well as accusations against Evo Morales of statutory rape, which will affect Arce by association. Carlos Mesa, who is neck-and-neck in the polls (at 23 percent) with the MAS candidate, would seem the most capable candidate to govern Bolivia because of his centrist pragmatic approach

on the economy, social inclusion, justice reform and foreign policy, as well as faring best in a runoff.”

A **Miguel Centellas, Croft instructional assistant professor of sociology and international studies at the University of Mississippi:** “This is a very complicated moment for Bolivia. Months after Evo Morales resigned and fled the country, questions continue to linger about the October 2019 elections (although most credible observers are certain the elections were not ‘free and fair’). Because the country was so polarized, Jeanine Ñez was always going to face stiff opposition from many sectors—and not just MAS loyalists. But just as Bolivia was preparing for new elections, the Covid-19 pandemic hit. Like many countries in the region, Bolivia was not well equipped to deal with such a massive health emergency. This puts Ñez in an intractable position. Because she is increasingly unpopular and not likely to do well in the presidential contest, postponing the election looks like a way to stay in power. But holding nationwide in-person elections (Bolivia simply is not equipped to hold at-home voting) during a pandemic could produce a health care catastrophe. Perhaps the wisest course of action would be for Ñez to resign her candidacy, which she should never have announced, given the political climate. Besides, the race is increasingly dominated by Luis Arce, the MAS candidate, and former president Carlos Mesa, a centrist. It is clear that the traditional conservative movement in Bolivia is small and splintered. After nearly two decades in power, MAS has transformed the Bolivian political landscape in much the same way that the MNR did after the 1952 National Revolution.”

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