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Latin America Advisor

www.thedialogue.org

Tuesday, April 7, 2026

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FEATURED Q&A

What Do Local Election Results Mean for Bolivia?



Local elections last month in Bolivia produced highly fragmented results, with the formerly dominant MAS party failing to even compete as a unified national party. The country's capital, La Paz, is pictured. // File Photo: Parallelepiped09 via Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

Q Bolivians went to the polls on March 22 to elect nine departmental governors, more than 300 mayors and thousands of local legislators. The results were highly fragmented, with the formerly dominant MAS party of ex-President Evo Morales failing to compete as a unified national party and the allies of President Rodrigo Paz winning only the governorship of Tarija department outright. What are the most significant results from the election? What do the fragmented results suggest about the state of Bolivian politics? What issues resonated with voters in the election, and what do the results mean for Paz's agenda as president?

A Callan Hummel, assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of British Columbia: "The subnational elections reinforced that Bolivian politics have fragmented across all levels of government. The personalities who rushed to fill the vacuum left by the electoral collapse of the MAS have not formed cohesive slates or party platforms. In La Paz, El Alto, Cochabamba, Oruro, Potosí and Sucre, mayors won with an often shockingly low plurality of the vote and a handful of supporters on city council. In some places, like El Alto, more people cast blank or spoiled ballots than a vote for the winning mayoral candidate. A notable exception is Mamén Saavedra, who won 71 percent of the votes for mayor of Santa Cruz and whose party won a majority of the seats in the city council through a social media-driven campaign around anti-corruption. Bolivian municipalities control substantial resources, following a 1994 decentralization re-

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Venezuelan Gov't, Opposition Seeking to Protect Assets

Venezuela's interim government and the country's opposition are reportedly seeking to coordinate their legal defenses to protect Venezuelan assets in the United States.

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POLITICAL

Two U.S. Lawmakers Blast Oil Restrictions

Following a visit to Cuba, two Democratic U.S. lawmakers blasted U.S. restrictions that have cut off nearly all of the island's oil imports.

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BUSINESS

Ecopetrol Removes Roa as Chief Executive

The board of Colombian state oil company Ecopetrol on Monday removed Ricardo Roa as CEO. He faces allegations of influence peddling and campaign finance violations, which he denies.

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Roa // File Photo: MiyojinYahiko via Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

POLITICAL NEWS

Venezuelan Gov't, Opposition Seeking to Protect Assets

The government of interim Venezuelan President Delcy Rodríguez and the country's opposition are seeking to coordinate their legal defenses of Venezuelan assets in the United States, Reuters reported Monday. The development came after the U.S. government's recognition of Rodríguez as Venezuela's acting leader raised questions about who would represent the South American country in U.S. courts, the wire service reported. Attorneys for Rodríguez's government and the opposition on Monday asked U.S. Magistrate Judge Sarah Netburn to pause a case in which creditors want to seize money connected to Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA while they determined who would represent the country's interests, Reuters reported. Netburn agreed to pause the case for 45 days. The Venezuelan government and the opposition are expected to update Netburn on May 21 on which lawyers will represent the country's interests, the wire service reported. The letter that Rodríguez's government and the opposition sent to the judge indicated that they are cooperating on

protecting Venezuelan assets, including Houston-based Citgo Petroleum, from creditors, Reuters reported. The creditors include holders of debt issued by Venezuela's government and PDVSA, as well as companies whose assets in Venezuela were expropriated and victims of alleged acts of terrorism, the wire service reported. Venezuela's opposition has controlled assets including Citgo since 2019, when the United States imposed sanctions on PDVSA in an effort to pressure Nicolás Maduro to leave office as Venezuela's president. Reuters reported. In March, the U.S. government recognized Rodríguez as Venezuela's leader following U.S. forces' seizure on Maduro in an early-morning raid in January. [Editor's note: See [Q&A](#) on Venezuela's oil sector in the March 6 issue of the weekly Energy Advisor.]

Two U.S. Lawmakers Blast Oil Restrictions After Visiting Cuba

Two Democratic U.S. lawmakers are calling for a resolution to Cuba's deepening humanitarian crisis following an official five-day visit to the island, the Associated Press reported Monday. Representatives Pramila Jayapal of Washington and Jonathan Jackson of Illinois met with Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel, Foreign

NEWS BRIEFS

Brazilian Record Bank Defaults May Reportedly Continue Rising

Brazilian banks' levels of defaults, which are already at record levels, may continue to rise amid doubts about the pace of the central bank's interest rate cuts, Bloomberg News reported April 7. The central bank in March cut its benchmark Selic interest rate to 14.75 percent. However, the Iran war and rising oil prices could slow the pace of future rate cuts.

Brazil Adds China's BYD to List of Employers Accused of Slave-Like Conditions

Brazil has added Chinese automaker BYD to its official registry of employers accused of subjecting workers to slave-like conditions, following a 2024 scandal involving 163 Chinese workers allegedly trafficked and held under abusive contracts, Reuters reported today. The listing bars BYD from certain Brazilian bank loans but does not affect its auto plant in the country. Contractor Jinjiang Group, which hired the workers, has denied the allegations. BYD did not respond to a request for comment.

Brazil's Free Cooking Gas Program Under Threat Amid Escalating Costs

Six months ahead of Brazil's presidential election, the country's flagship "People's Gas" program, which provides free cooking gas to around 50 million low-income Brazilians, is under threat as the Iran war drives up energy prices, Reuters reported Monday. Resellers say fixed program rates are forcing them to absorb losses, with many threatening to quit, the wire service reported. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva vowed to annul a Petrobras auction after premiums doubled, news website Terra reported. The government has announced an import subsidy of 33 million reais (\$64 million) to help offset rising costs.

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form. Mayors in most major cities and many small ones will have to negotiate with local political opponents in order to pass budgets and policy. It is possible that local leaders will be able to forge a new era of constructive dialogue leading to consensus-based, consultative policymaking. However, it is much more likely that fractured city councils will deadlock without clear majorities or empowered mayoral leadership. Governability and the quality of services that millions of Bolivians depend on will likely suffer as the churn of candidates without cohesive party organizations increases the gridlock already present in Bolivian municipal politics."



Kathryn Ledebur, director of the Andean Information Network in Cochabamba:

"Traditionally, Bolivian voters choose opposition local candidates to create a counterweight to the ruling party. Erratic, politically motivated electoral court rulings blocked four attempts by Morales supporters to form their own party or establish alliances. Those candidates ran on diverse party tickets, winning the governor's office and 75 percent of the municipal governments in Cochabamba department. 2019 coup leader and former head of the Santa Cruz Civic Committee, Fernando Camacho lost the governor's race,

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Minister Bruno Rodríguez and members of Cuba's legislature. "This is cruel collective punishment—effectively an economic bombing of the infrastructure of the country—that has produced permanent damage. It must stop immediately," Jayapal and Jackson said in a joint statement, referring to U.S. restrictions that have blocked nearly all of Cuba's oil imports. Díaz-Canel said on social media site X that upon meeting the representatives he "denounced the criminal damage caused by the #blockade, particularly the consequences of the energy embargo imposed by the current U.S. administration and its threats of even more aggressive actions." Both governments have acknowledged that high-level talks are ongoing, though no details have been disclosed. Jayapal cited recent gestures by Cuba—including opening the country's economy to some investments by Cubans living outside the country, its pardoning of more than 2,000 prisoners and its cooperation with the FBI in a shooting investigation—as signs the moment is ripe for genuine negotiations. Cuba, which produces only 40 percent of its oil needs, has endured months of blackouts, fuel shortages and paralyzed public services amid the de facto U.S. blockade. A Russian tanker recently delivered the island's first petroleum shipment in three months, though experts say it covers only about 10 days of demand. Jayapal and Jackson pledged to prepare a report and advance measures in the U.S. House of Representatives to lift sanctions.

BUSINESS NEWS

Ecopetrol Removes Roa as CEO Following Charges

The board of Colombian state oil company Ecopetrol on Monday removed Chief Executive Officer Ricardo Roa, a move that came after Colombian prosecutors charged him with influence peddling, Bloomberg News reported. Roa will take an extended vacation and an unpaid leave of absence that lasts until late June, Ecopetrol said in a statement. By then,

Colombia will have elected a new president who would then likely appoint new leadership for the company, Bloomberg News reported. Roa will be replaced by the company's chief operating officer, Juan Carlos Hurtado, Ecopetrol said. Colombia's attorney general charged Roa with influence peddling in connection with his purchase of a luxury apartment in Bogotá from an oil executive, Bloomberg News reported.

THE DIALOGUE CONTINUES

Will Díaz-Canel Be Able to Finish His Term in Cuba?

Q **The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump, which has exerted heavy economic pressure on Cuba, wants Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel to be pushed out of office. The New York Times reported on March 16, citing people familiar with the talks between the two governments. Díaz-Canel, who has two years left on his current term, has headed Cuba's government since 2018, following nearly 60 years of rule by his predecessor, Raúl Castro, or Castro's brother Fidel. How likely is Díaz-Canel to be removed from office before his current term expires in 2028, and what would happen to him if that occurs? Who would be his most likely successor as Cuba's president? How do the Trump administration's goals for political change in Cuba compare to those in Venezuela, where the U.S. military in January deposed President Nicolás Maduro but left most of his government intact?**

A **Jonathan Benjamin-Alvarado, emeritus professor of political science at the University of Nebraska and principal at Miramar Associates LLC:** "The Cuban regime's complete collapse is no longer imminent because Trump has allowed a Russian oil tanker to deliver oil to the island. However, if it is part of a quid pro quo from the negotiations to have Díaz-Canel step down in return for promises of increased humanitarian assistance (food and medicine) on top

of energy imports, it will be a bitter pill for the Cuban regime to swallow. However, they have few options. If instructed to resign by the powers that be, he would be compelled to fade into the background. Given that members of the Castro family have placed themselves in important roles in the government, they still have a significant say in who the next president would be, especially as Raúl Castro is still alive. There have been suggestions that General Alejandro Castro Espín, Raúl's only son, or his great-nephew, Óscar Pérez-Oliva Fraga, currently Cuba's deputy prime minister and minister of foreign trade and foreign investment, could emerge as a potential leader. Someone else within the current leadership structure might emerge, but Díaz-Canel was Raúl's choice, and I do not see anyone else emerging unless Raúl and the ruling junta sign off on the choice. As of this moment, there is no 'Cuban Delcy' who would be acceptable to the diaspora in South Florida, as it demands total capitulation. This is problem for Trump. If Cuba can survive the collapse of the energy grid, will that provide it enough space to negotiate an off-ramp for the regime, or can we conceive of another iteration of the Cuban revolution?"

EDITOR'S NOTE: The comment above is a continuation of the [Q&A](#) published in the April 3 issue of the Advisor.

Roa is also accused of violating campaign spending limits when he served as head of President Gustavo Petro's campaign in 2022. Colombia's National Electoral Council fined Roa in November, alleging that he had exceeded spending limits by more than 5 billion pesos (\$1.4 million), Bloomberg News reported. Roa has denied wrongdoing in both cases. Roa has headed Ecopetrol since April 2023.

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although both runoff candidates are also right-wing. The Electoral Tribunal sparked further outrage by illegally accepting the NGP party's withdrawal from the runoff for La Paz governor, without the candidate's consent, declaring his opponent's victory. Recurring irregularities sparked widespread demands for electoral law reform across the political spectrum. Scores of unknown candidates and negligible voter education led to splintered votes, provoking runoffs in five departments, suggesting limited local governability. Continuing inflation, hydrocarbons and other corruption scandals, contradictory messaging, and growing divisions between Paz and cabinet members, allied with Samuel Doria Medina, fuel grassroots discontent. Right-wing opponent Jorge Quiroga frequently criticizes Paz's policies, hoping to replace him. Continued reliance on executive orders further debilitates the administration's legitimacy. Postponed conflicts will likely come to a head in the coming months. Triggers include rising international oil prices, union demands for a 20 percent salary raise, a new legislative package to reduce and restructure the state, modify land tenure and restructure and dramatically scale down state-owned companies. Scattered strikes and protests will intensify, increasing the probability of confrontations with the security forces."

A **Roberto Laserna, director of the Center for the Study of Economic and Social Reality (CERES) in Cochabamba, Bolivia:** "The recent elections in Bolivia's nine departments and 340 municipalities have been the first truly local elections since its democracy was restored. All previous ones were part of national political competition due to the decisive presence of political parties, which turned local elections into part of the national power struggle. Now, however, po-

litical parties have practically disappeared. In almost all cases, competition has been carried out by citizen groups that essentially 'belong' to local leaders and have no organic life beyond elections. Even organizations that have legal status as parties do not really

“ Political parties have practically disappeared.”

— Roberto Laserna

function as such. The first impression is one of great dispersion. Fourteen parties, 29 alliances and more than 140 citizen groups took part, making it impossible to aggregate them in a way that would allow for a clear national interpretation. Few organizations define themselves in ideological terms. Sympathizers or militants close to Evo Morales or President Rodrigo Paz will hold political positions in local governments, but they can hardly be considered pieces on the political chessboard that those leaders may want to play. Many will just hope that holding office will allow them to establish clientelist relations with the government. What is clear is that the rules regulating elections and political parties do not strengthen democracy. The crisis of representation will likely deepen further when this multitude of groups move beyond their local arenas and compete in the major leagues—something the laws allow them to do. That could transform the current dispersion into national fragmentation."

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta.

LATIN AMERICA ADVISOR

is published every business day by the Inter-American Dialogue ISSN 2163-7962

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Latin America Advisor is published every business day, except for major U.S. holidays, by the Inter-American Dialogue at 1155 15th Street NW, Suite 800 Washington, DC 20005 www.thedialogue.org

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