

Middle classes in Latin America (6). Between political instability and authoritarianism in Bolivia

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A context of economic crisis could send many people back to poverty in Bolivia, fueling a situation of discontent that could bring back the climate of instability and political uncertainty. [Español](#)



Bolivia's President Evo Morales speaks at the Presidential Palace, in La Paz, Bolivia, Sunday, May 1, 2016. AP Photo/Juan Karita

During the last few years of the past Century and the early 2000's, Bolivia showed levels of political instability that were high even for a region historically used to swift government changes both within and outside democratic rules. A civil society that was well organized both in urban and rural areas, altogether with an economic situation that offered little opportunities for personal and national improvement and the politicization of key issues (such as natural gas extraction and commerce) produced a climate of popular effervescence that challenged democratic governance. With almost two-thirds of the national population under the poverty line, high levels of inequality and a historically small middle class, the structural conditions for political turmoil were set. During the first six years of the century, the country had six different presidents, who had to rule from institutions with very low levels of legitimacy and a bankrupted party-system.

Only ten years after that the country has a very different situation. The government of Evo Morales, in office since 2006, has enjoyed political stability and economic growth at an uprecedent rate in the nation's recent history. Morales was elected in 2005 and agoon in 2009, under a new Constitution, which allowed him the right, after much debate, of running again and winning the national election of 2014. By 2016 Morales was already the person who had occupied the Presidency for the longest period of time in Bolivia's history. And while his government had some difficult moments, particularly as a result of the tension with the regional movement in the East of the country, in general terms his presidency has had very few turbulences.

At the same time, national economic indicators have shown a positive evolution during the last decade. The low GDP growth rates have to about 5%, among the highest in the region, where they have stayed. Public investment has been

multiplied by 8 in ten years, making the state the central actor in the economy and the engine of national development. GDP per capita has tripled and the proportion of poor has dropped 20 points in the same period of time (according to official data, extreme poverty has gone down from 39 to 18% and moderate poverty has shrunk from 63 to 43%). And while there is still much to be done in terms of the reduction of the ethnic gap, important steps have been taken towards the construction of a society of equals, a necessary condition for modern democracies.

This combination of relative economic prosperity and political stability has installed a sense of optimism in public opinion. This optimism reflects in high levels of approval of the President and his government. Data from LAPOP, the Latin American Public Opinion Project, show an important increase in the levels of legitimacy of government institutions; with the exception of the judiciary and the Police, most institutions have substantially increased their levels of citizen trust. But the same source also warns that average levels of political tolerance, or the willingness to support the political rights of those who think different than the majority, have decreased sharply.

In hand with the sense of optimism, a particular form of political exercise has been installed in the country, one that is strongly personalized and focused in the figure of the leader, in this case in the person of Evo Morales. Morales' leadership is strongly influenced by his social and trade-union origins, his personal charisma, and his ability to negotiate and compromise with leaders from different organizations, producing a presidency with a high dose of decisionism.

One of the consequences of this way of doing politics has been the weakening of the check and oversight role of the institutions that divide and balance power; this translates into authoritarian tendencies within the executive, with concentration of power, lack of transparency in public administration and increasingly common corruption scandals. Another consequence is the elimination of new leaderships that could take the place of Morales and become viable candidates for his party in the future; the "process of change", as this period has been known, has not produced a natural and visible replacement for Morales.

On February 21 this year, the country held a referendum on a constitutional amendment that would allow Morales to run again for President in 2019 (the constitution currently only allows one reelection for the president and the vice-president). The referendum is a proposal of social organizations that are close to the government. As it is known, the constitutional change was rejected by the majority of the population, and MAS, the Movimiento al Socialismo, Morales' party, will have to run with a candidate different than Morales for that election.

What is relevant here is that for many, including the government and their official campaign, the referendum forced the electorate to choose between the stability and prosperity that supposedly was only guaranteed under a Morales government and returning to an obscure past marked by turmoil and scarcity that everyone seeks to avoid. This means that the popular vote won over the fear that was part of the official campaign.

But why the threat of instability was not enough for the referendum to pass allowing a new candidacy for Morales? One of the explanations for the defeat of the proposal has to do with the success of the social and economic policy put in practice during the last decade: Many of the Bolivian citizens that massively participated in public demonstrations 15 years ago are not poor anymore, and some have become part of a new and growing middle class (or at least aspire to be part of the middle class). And middle classes are not interested nor have the time to embark themselves in costly ideological battles; they seek to consolidate their newly acquired social and economic capital, and want to exercise the rights and opportunities that are now within their reach.

Besides being less likely to participate in contentious political action, this emerging middle class seems to have doubts about supporting Morales in the most recent elections. The big cities in the country, particularly La Paz / El Alto, Cochabamba and Santa Cruz, are according to the latest UNDP Human Development Report home to most of those who have left poverty; and MAS has lost the races both in the referendum and in 2014 subnational election of governors and mayors (MAS lost all major cities then). While it is not clear whether MAS lost because of perceived flaws in the local administrations they had in charge or because people explicitly avoided concentrating power, emerging middle classes do not seem to be extremely supportive of the governing party.

However, the social mobility that we see now might not be as permanent as triumphal voices claim. Many of those who ceased to be poor are vulnerable middle classes, which means that they could return to a state of unsatisfied needs; they have not consolidated their economic position mainly because the labor structure has not been modified to accommodate them. And the international economic recession that has already hit other countries in the region threatens to affect the national government income and capacity for investment in the near future. In a context in which the productive basis has not diversified much and the national government has a preponderant role in the economy, these are important risk factors that could determine that many of these vulnerable families return to poverty.

The existence of a proportionally large middle class whose expectations of political participation and access to services are satisfied by government action are one of the conditions for the thriving and stability of a democracy. This middle class should, in turn, become a contention for potential authoritarian tendencies within the political system. In the Bolivian case, the last years have witnessed a large number of individuals and families leaving poverty, though many of them are still vulnerable and cannot be thought of as middle classes.

Understanding the emerging groups is a key ingredient for understanding the risks and challenges that Bolivia and other Latin American nations face. A context of economic crisis could force many of these new non-poor back into poverty, producing a sense of malaise and dissatisfaction that could fuel political instability and turmoil. On the other side, the unconditional support for an already strong government could consolidate an authoritarian project that ignores the constitution and the mechanisms that guarantee the division of powers that are basic for a republican government. A combination of responsible management of the economic and prudent democratic leadership could lead these emerging groups to consolidate themselves as the majoritarian middle class the country never had. But a combination of economic crisis and abusive leadership could imply the return to a past of instability that many think is gone forever.