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LATIN AMERICA

Bolivia's President Declares State of Emergency in Election Dispute

Incumbent Evo Morales claims election victory and accuses opposition of coup as protesters demand election runoff



A demonstrator throwing a stone during clashes in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, on Wednesday. PHOTO: STRINGER /REUTERS

By John Otis

Updated Oct. 23, 2019 2:19 pm ET

LA PAZ, Bolivia—President Evo Morales claimed victory in Bolivia's disputed election and declared a state of emergency amid protests and the burning of electoral offices by opposition supporters demanding a runoff.

"This is a coup d'état," he said Wednesday in a nine-minute statement at the presidential palace in La Paz in his first public appearance since Sunday's vote.

Shortly after he spoke, protesters, some draped in red, yellow and green Bolivian flags gathered in the capital's downtown where they chanted slogans and accused the government of stealing the election.

“They are carrying out electoral fraud and people don’t like it,” said Sylvia Ayala, a pathologist at a state-run hospital. “Despite all the evidence, the government is declaring that it has won.”

Mr. Morales on Wednesday claimed he won by more than half a million votes and called on supporters to take to the streets to defend his victory which, if confirmed, would give the left-wing Aymara Indian a fourth consecutive term and nearly 19 years in power.



Bolivia's president, Evo Morales, speaking at the presidential palace in La Paz on Wednesday. PHOTO: STRINGER/REUTERS

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gency would entail, but accused the opposition of conspiring with foreign agents to depose him. “To the people of Bolivia, brothers and sisters, let’s organize, stand up, and defend democracy,” he said.

A mission of electoral observers headed by the Organization of American States on Wednesday urged Bolivian authorities to hold a runoff no matter what the final vote count is due to numerous irregularities in the first round.

Sunday’s presidential election was marred by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal’s sudden decision early that evening to stop publishing the preliminary results. At that point, Mr. Morales was short of the 10-point margin needed under law to avert a second-round runoff: He was about 7 points ahead of Carlos Mesa, his closest rival among eight opposition candidates.

A so-called quick count by an independent polling firm showed an even tighter race.

When the tribunal—whose members are appointed by the senate, currently held by Mr. Morales’s party—resumed publishing results almost 24 hours later, the incumbent’s lead jumped to nearly 10 points over Mr. Mesa.

The OAS observers have expressed “deep concern and surprise at the drastic and hard-to-explain change in the trend of the preliminary results.”

As of Wednesday, with nearly 97% of the ballots counted, the official results showed Mr. Morales within striking distance of a first-round victory, with 46.5% of the votes compared with 37% for Mr. Mesa.

In his remarks to reporters Wednesday, Mr. Morales said he would respect the final results but also insisted that “we have already won.”

Analysts say that Mr. Morales is desperate to avoid a second round of voting because nearly all polls indicate that he would lose in a head-to-head contest with Mr. Mesa, a centrist former president.

The government “is doing whatever it takes to win in the first round,” said Eduardo Gamarra, an expert on Latin American elections at Florida International University. “Only in fraudulent elections are trend lines changed after 80% of the vote has been counted.”

The tribunal didn’t respond to requests for comment.

Its vice president, Antonio Costas, stepped down in protest on Tuesday. In his resignation letter, he said that interrupting the vote count was a “foolish” decision that had discredited the entire electoral process.

An international election observer said everything was proceeding smoothly on election day, with results coming in faster than expected. When the vote count was suspended Sunday night, he said, the results clearly pointed toward a runoff.



Demonstrators take part in clashes in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, on Wednesday. PHOTO: STRINGER /REUTERS

Since then, angry protesters have burned five of the tribunal’s regional offices. That would likely make a recount or audit of the votes far more difficult, the observer said.

“This electoral process is rotten now,” the observer said. “There is no way to fix it.”

The turmoil was a reminder of political instability that has in the past convulsed Bolivia, where Mr. Morales, a 59-year-old former union leader, came to prominence leading protests against past governments. Mr. Morales was first inaugurated in 2006 and re-elected in 2009 and 2014 by landslides. He mixed market-oriented policies with revolutionary, anti-U.S. rhetoric to rule the country of 11 million.

Economic growth has exceeded 4% a year on average, and his government used the windfall from mineral and natural-gas exports to build roads and hospitals and lower poverty by half.

But dissatisfaction has grown with Mr. Morales and his Movement Toward Socialism party, which dominates all branches of government and controls much of the news media, according to press-freedom groups. When Bolivians voted against Mr. Morales's effort to amend the constitution so that he could run for a fourth term in a 2016 referendum, judges allied with the government ruled that his candidacy could go forward.

—Ryan Dube in La Paz contributed to this article.

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