

## LATIN AMERICA

# Bolivian Authorities Withhold Vote Count as Chance of Evo Morales Win Fades

Opposition says results were halted once they showed long-time president headed for runoff



Bolivian President Evo Morales speaking to supporters at the presidential palace in La Paz on Sunday evening, when preliminary result indicated he would be facing a runoff against his main rival, Carlos Mesa. PHOTO: JORGE SAENZ/ASSOCIATED PRESS

*By John Otis*

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Bolivian opposition candidate Carlos Mesa has accused President Evo Morales and the country's electoral authority of manipulating the results of Sunday's election to give Mr. Morales a fourth-consecutive term and avoid a runoff.

With 83% of returns showing Mr. Morales leading Mr. Mesa but short of the votes needed to avoid a December runoff, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal abruptly stopped announcing the vote count at 7:40 p.m. Sunday and as of Monday afternoon hadn't published final results.

"The government is trying, through the Supreme Electoral Council, to eliminate the runoff that was clearly established yesterday," Mr. Mesa said Monday while calling on supporters to take to the streets to protest. In the largely indigenous city of Potosí, hundreds protested peacefully in front of the local electoral tribunal's offices, according to news reports.



Bolivian presidential candidate Carlos Mesa speaking in La Paz on Monday. PHOTO: UESLEI MARCELINO/REUTERS

Speaking with reporters in La Paz, the capital, Mr. Mesa said electoral authorities were taking these actions “obviously under the orders” of Mr. Morales. An election-observation mission led by the Organization of American States also demanded an explanation for why the electoral tribunal had suddenly gone silent.

Mr. Morales didn’t comment publicly on Monday. Communications Minister Manuel Canelas urged Bolivians to remain calm amid the confusion over the vote’s outcome.

A disputed result could bring a return of political instability to a country where few recent presidents other than Mr. Morales have ever finished their terms.

Outright victory on Sunday would have required Mr. Morales to garner at least 40% of the ballots in the nine-way race with at least a 10-point margin over the second-place finisher. He appeared to fall short of that result. With a little more than four of every five votes tallied by the electoral tribunal in its preliminary count, Mr. Morales was at 45% and Mr. Mesa at 38%.

An independent polling firm, VíaCiencia, conducted a so-called quick count showing an even tighter race, with Mr. Morales at 44% and Mr. Mesa at 39%.

Mr. Morales, a left-wing Aymara Indian who has held power for nearly 14 years, had been pushing hard to avoid a runoff because some polls show Mr. Mesa would beat him in a head-to-head contest. When one prominent poll in September showed a runoff to be likely, the electoral tribunal said the poll had been illegally conducted with foreign financing and warned Bolivian news outlets against publishing the results. Fearing stiff fines, few did.

“His possibilities of victory in a second round are slim,” wrote political analyst Rafael Archondo on Brújula Digital, a Bolivian news website. “Evo should pack his bags.”



People reading posted front pages of Bolivian newspapers in La Paz on Monday as the outcome of Sunday's presidential elections remained unclear. PHOTO: JORGE BERNAL/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

But the 59-year-old Mr. Morales, who was first inaugurated in 2006 and re-elected in 2009 and 2014, declared a “historic victory.” Surrounded by supporters at the presidential palace Sunday night, Mr. Morales said votes from remote jungle and mountain villages were still trickling in and that these ballots would likely put him over the top.

“We understand the preliminary information, and as always, brothers and sisters, we’re confident in the rural vote,” Mr. Morales said as the crowd waved the blue and white flag of the president’s political party. “It will be something historic, unforgettable for future generations.”

Mr. Mesa, a 66-year-old former president and historian, initially told supporters in La Paz on Sunday that a Dec. 15 runoff was assured.

But at a news conference just before midnight Sunday, María Eugenia Choque, the electoral tribunal’s president, said it stopped announcing preliminary tallies because final results from Bolivia’s nine departments, or provinces, were coming in at the same time.

“We don’t want confusion because there would have been two results,” she said. Ms. Choque didn’t elaborate, and as she left the news conference, protesters shouted “yes to democracy, no to dictatorship.” Mr. Mesa and opposition leaders said the explanation lacked credibility.

As the controversy swirled Monday, Mr. Mesa began shoring up support for a possible runoff. He was endorsed by the third- and fourth-place finishers—evangelical pastor Chi Hyun Chung and Sen. Óscar Ortiz—who drew about 13% of the vote between them.

“What can I say, this election turned into a referendum on Evo Morales,” Mr. Ortiz said in his concession speech.

Mr. Mesa was vice president in 2003 when he stepped into the top spot upon the resignation of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada in the face of protests. Strikes and violent street demonstrations against Mr. Mesa forced him to resign in turn, after just 18 months. As a candidate he has pledged to keep operating the social programs that have made Mr. Morales popular while fighting corruption.

Mr. Morales is already the longest-serving president in Bolivian history and another term would give him 19 years in power. This campaign, though, was a challenge for the leader, who faced growing resistance over corruption concerns and what critics contended was his tightening grip on power.

Mr. Morales is among the last of the “pink tide,” a generation of Latin American leftists swept into power since the late 1990s on pledges to redistribute wealth and halt corruption. The movement’s de facto leader, Venezuelan populist Hugo Chávez, took office in 1999 and died in 2013, and his successor has led Venezuela into an economic tailspin. Former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is in jail after being convicted of corruption. Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega has been widely accused of brutalizing his people. And Ecuador’s former leader, Rafael Correa, is in exile in Belgium.

Mr. Morales can point to accomplishments that include delivering stability in a nation accustomed to military dictators and fragile, short-lived civilian administrations.

Mixing market-oriented policies with revolutionary, anti-U.S. rhetoric, he has overseen economic growth exceeding 4% a year on average since he took office in 2006, making Bolivia the envy of many of its neighbors. His government built roads and hospitals. Poverty fell by about half in a country that had long been the continent’s poorest.

But growing dissatisfaction with Mr. Morales’s rule helped propel Mr. Mesa and other opposition candidates. Mr. Morales’s Movement Toward Socialism party dominates all branches of government and controls much of the news media, according to press-freedom groups. Bolivians protested after judges ruled that a constitutional prohibition on running for a fourth term violated the president’s human rights.

“He should not even be a candidate, but that’s how dictatorships work,” said María Ángela Alvizuri, a 38-year-old homemaker in La Paz. “This is not democracy.”

—*Juan Forero contributed to this article.*

