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LATIN AMERICA

## Count Turns Controversial in Bolivian Presidential Race

Supreme Electoral Tribunal stops publicly updating tally after preliminary results show incumbent Evo Morales will face a runoff



Bolivian presidential candidate Carlos Mesa in La Paz on Sunday, with preliminary results showing him in a runoff. PHOTO: DAVID MERCADO/REUTERS

*By Juan Forero*

Updated Oct. 21, 2019 1:34 am ET

Bolivian's leftist president, Evo Morales, took the most ballots in Sunday's election—but apparently not enough to avoid a runoff that could push him from power after nearly 14 years.

Outright victory requires either more than 50% of the total or a 10-point margin over the second-place finisher, and with 83% of the votes counted, Mr. Morales was at 45% and runner-up Carlos Mesa at 38%.

Many Bolivian media outlets and Mr. Mesa said that the president had fallen short, which could give the opposition a viable shot at power in the remote, Andean country in the heart of South America. But votes from rural areas were still coming in late Sunday night, and Mr. Morales told supporters at the presidential palace in La Paz that he was confident a “historic” victory and another five-year term were at hand.

“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 that a Dec. 15 runoff is was assured and that his campaign had “achieved an unquestionable triumph.” The next challenge would have been to bring seven other opposition candidates under a single banner to oust Mr. Morales.

But by late Sunday, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, which like other institutions is dominated by the ruling party, had stopped publicly announcing voting results. That prompted Mr. Mesa to call for the resumption of the tally, traditionally made public on the tribunal’s website.



President Evo Morales in La Paz on Sunday; he told supporters not-yet-counted rural votes would put him over the top. PHOTO: UESLEI MARCELINO/REUTERS

“Its commitment is to give us 100% of the results,” he said. “But there was just one report, and their work was interrupted.”

The government did not immediately explain why the voting tally was taking longer. But on the tribunal’s YouTube site early Monday, officials could be seen counting votes that had been cast by Bolivians outside of the country.

Fourth-place finisher Sen. Oscar Ortiz said he would back Mr. Mesa: “What can I say, this election turned into a referendum on Evo Morales. We’ll support that decision without any condition.”

Mr. Mesa was vice president in 2003 when he stepped into the top spot upon the resignation of the president in the face of protests. But strikes and violent street demonstrations against his

government forced him to resign in turn, after just 18 months. As candidate he has pledged to keep operating the social programs that have made Mr. Morales popular, while fighting corruption and strengthening democratic institutions.

Mr. Morales, the longest-serving president in Bolivian history, won re-election easily in 2009 and 2014. This campaign, though, was a challenge for the 59-year-old 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 who were swept into power since the late 1990s on pledges to redistribute wealth and halt corruption. The de facto leader, bombastic Venezuelan populist Hugo Chávez, who took office in 1999, died in 2013, and his successor has led Venezuela into an economic tailspin. Former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is in jail. Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega is accused of brutalizing his people. And Ecuador’s former leader, Rafael Correa, is in exile in Belgium.

Mr. Morales can point to a 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.

A llama herder from the high Andes and member of the Aymara indigenous community, Mr. Morales grew up to become a grower of coca, whose leaves are traditionally chewed here to alleviate hunger and fatigue but are also used by drug traffickers to make cocaine. His became a household name when, as head of the coca grower’s union, he led strikes and pitched battles against U.S.-supported antinarcotics police.

Mr. Morales’s up-by-the-bootstraps story spoke to the hopes of many in a nation where more than 40% of the population is indigenous.

“The majority of Bolivians have always felt excluded from politics. But in Evo, they see a response to their needs,” said Mario Cañipa, news director of the pro-government Red ATB television station in La Paz.

But growing dissatisfaction with Mr. Morales’s rule helped propel Mr. Mesa and other opposition candidates. The economy, fueled by natural gas and mineral production, has slowed, and Mr. Morales was hit by a corruption scandal involving his former girlfriend.

Mr. Morales's Movement Towards 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."

When a September poll showed that the president and Mr. Mesa were likely headed toward a runoff, the government warned Bolivian news organizations against publishing its results and, fearing stiff fines, few did.

The displeasure of some Bolivians with the government led voters at polling stations to boo Vice President Alvaro Garcia and the economy minister, Luis Arce, when they cast their ballots on Sunday.

*—Kejal Vyas and John Otis contributed to this article.*

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