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Bolivia

A referendum won by shots at the goal

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Description:

Evo Morales committed himself to what was seen, from the beginning, as the most difficult ballot for an administration marked by a succession of electoral triumphs over a decade. As if electoral "abstinence" proved unbearable for a leader who has need of the continuous approval of the masses, the Bolivian president launched a referendum to get the opportunity to exercise a fourth term even though four years remain to be completed of his third. And the very government that he had constructed decided, six years after it had been approved, to amend the constitution which founded the bases of the pluri-national state in 2009. The question was: "Do you approve the amendment of Article 168 of the Constitution of the state to ensure that the President and the vice-president of the state can be re-elected two consecutive times?" [1].

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The first, obvious, difficulty with a referendum of this nature is that it unifies all the opponents behind the option of No. From the racists who have never wanted a peasant indigenous government to those who make the opposite criticism: that it is not a genuine indigenous government, but rather a substitute of a "whiteish" matrix or more directly an anti-indigenous government. The No coalition thus enabled the unification behind a vote of forces which are not united and would never unite behind a common candidate. It is something natural, which does not disqualify their reasons, but nuances attempts to read the result in a one-dimensional way. Montesquieu has not been resurrected in the Andes, nor is this about the black hand of the Empire, nor have the Andean deities of the heights awoken to avenge Evo's "populist neodevelopmentalism".

Maybe it is something more simple: a combination of wear and tear after a decade in government - and the resulting difficulties in transforming utopias into mobilizers of existential realities - marked by political errors, such as convening a referendum so soon after the electoral triumph of 2014 with 61% of the votes, not to mention the poor election campaign. Thus, what was envisaged as a process of de-polarization in 2010-2014, helped by the economic success of Morales, became a re-polarization, dividing the country into almost equal parts. In summary, according to the results obtained until now, on 21 February 2016, Evo lost against Evo more than against the opposition.

A positive balance sheet and new weaknesses

In the course of this decade, the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) has successfully put in place a new economic model based on statism and a certain macroeconomic orthodoxy, in parallel to a new state more open to the diversity of the country. "Socialism is compatible with macroeconomic stability" said Luis Arce Catacora, who has been Economy Minister for the past decade (which in itself is a feat in a country known for its economic convulsions and which, in the 1980s, experienced hyperinflation). The *Chuquiago boys* - an ironic reference to the Aymara name for La Paz: Chuqi Yapu - have also shown an efficiency that the neoliberals had not attained, thanks, in part, to the high price of raw materials as well as to a policy of extension of the internal market, nationalization of fuels, the collection of taxes as well as a "prudent" management of the economy [2]. Today, the scenario has changed because of the fall in prices, but the economic armour still works and significant public investment is still planned.

The problem is that the referendum has awakened the anti-reelection instincts based on the old anti-state reflexes of Bolivians (although they are calling for "more state"). Hernando Siles, a supporter of a lukewarm social reformism, had to face a popular uprising in 1930 at the time where he attempted to "perpetuate himself" in power. The leader of the National Revolution, Víctor Paz Estenssoro, was the victim of a coup in 1964 after having acceded to his second consecutive term and had to go into exile in Peru. Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, during a second non-consecutive

term in 2003, fled by helicopter in the middle of the Gas War. Thus, an aversion to "perpetuation" is one of the marks of the political culture of Bolivia and its distrust of the regime. Also, we must not overlook the penetration of a certain "liberal" political culture produced by the democratic consolidation since 1982.

Morales has dulled these reflexes and, as president and a symbol of a new era, he won election after election for a decade. But today this magic is in large part dissipated. Be that as it may, after a decade in a country as politically unstable as Bolivia, the fact that he has maintained almost half of the votes is not insignificant. If the supporters of the No vote are very diverse, those in the Yes camp support the continuity of the *cocalero* mandate. For this reason, the opposition knows that the MAS is not yet defeated in 2019. In contrast, there is no doubt that the project of the governing party is weakened. The results of February 21 can be read as a loss of the electoral sectors that the MAS had won over - through its hegemonic expansion - but which were far from being won to an absolute electoral loyalty: the voters in the big cities and those in the autonomist East led by Santa Cruz. The peasants and the medium-sized towns saved the president from a major defeat. Nevertheless, local conflicts in Potosí and El Alto, poorly resolved, weakened Evo in these areas in these Andean bastions of the MAS.

Evo has always been convinced that he has a "covenant of blood" with the peasants, that they would never abandon him, while urban support was always suspicious, volatile. It is there that the strength and the weakness of Evo's project has always been located, this reliance on a peasant matrix (and this paradoxically while the country is increasingly urbanized). We should add to these elements a campaign whose effectiveness was more present on the No side, in particular on the social networks (in fact, the president called, after the referendum, to "discuss their use" because dirty wars are organized there, which "bring down governments"). A series of figures - such as the Amalia Pando journalists or the more polemical Carlos Valverde of Santa Cruz - joined a large number of regional authorities in the opposition and boosted a campaign sometimes without resources (another difficulty for the MAS has been winning municipalities in the big towns and governorships: the prestige of Evo's government has always been inversely proportional to its low level of local governments).

Since 2009, pragmatism has allowed Evo to broaden his base in Santa Cruz, while his government became ever more "normal" and lost its revolutionary character. It is not a coincidence that discourse on stability has replaced that on change. And, for the first time since 2005, Morales' campaign for February 21 lacked images of the future and took refuge in the conquests of the past. It was no coincidence that, faced with results that went against him, in the midst of the official count, Morales recalled the attacks launched against him in 2005, while he was a peasant candidate for the presidency, accusing him of being a "Taliban" or a "drug dealer". It was a kind of refuge in the peasant Evo that the management of the power had cleared from his profile; a return to the origins and to the surroundings in which he feels most secure, that of the ethnic-cultural "covenant of blood".

In the context of an increasing loss of initiative, the bullets of the opposition - certainly very dispersed - have begun to hit the shield erected over months and years. Thus, the accusation that a former spouse of Evo ran a Chinese company which had received public contracts without tender has had an impact on his moral capital, the source of his political legitimacy. To this was added the scandal of the Indigenous Fund: phantom projects funded by the state putting in question the indigenous capacity to renew politics. On top of that, the revelation that Álvaro García Linera, the vice-president, had not completed his degree in mathematics in Mexico has had a disproportionate impact and forced him to revalidate, on the defensive, his status as an intellectual - despite the fact that he is a regular guest of various prestigious universities because of his theoretical-political work.

But, in addition, the No camp found an argument which was transformed into a powerful weapon because it was the echo of a generalized feeling, especially among the urban sectors: Evo's government was indeed a good government in many respects, but it was not right that he should "perpetuate" himself in power. The writer Edmundo Paz Soldán, for example, has stated that he observes the Bolivia of the last decade "with an economy which has not ceased to grow, which has allowed the reduction of extreme poverty, the expansion of the middle class and a significant improvement in our health and education indicators". He adds that "Morales has been able to handle the economy,

he has promoted the policies necessary for the inclusion of the excluded groups, and he has consolidated a consistent maritime policy; he has also projected the country at the international level".

He argues that "On the negative side, there is institutionalized corruption, the lack of independence of the judiciary, the lack of policies in the area of gender equality as well as the absence of a genuine plan of industrialization meaning that Bolivia ceases to be an economy dependent on its raw materials". And he concludes: "I only hope that Bolivia is up to it and shows the continent that, while it admires Evo and approves his management, it has still more confidence in its institutions and in a democracy which limits the impulses of its leaders to remain forever in power" [3]. This reasoning contains many points which have strengthened the No vote: those who the government finds most difficult to neutralize with its economic data.

The loss of magic has however also conjured up other ghosts. The burning of the town hall in El Alto, controlled by the young opposition mayor Soledad Chapetón, by "family fathers" who were protesting, has highlighted the fact that the repertory of collective action that, in 2003, paved the road to the epic Gas War, in another context may become the survival of forms of excessive protest, which hinder the normal functioning of institutions and cause deaths. All this generates a strong rejection by the "silent majorities" of social movements, based on corporate bodies and even with mafia overtones, as happened with the trade union leader in El Alto, Braulio Rocha, who had warned Chapetón that he would be "his nightmare" and who is today in detention for the fire.

Continue without Evo?

One aspect of national-popular governments lies in their difficulty in accepting a new order, formalized for example in the constitutions approved under their management as well as their tendency to think of these Charters as the result of transitional relationships of forces that must be changed as soon as it is possible to "advance". This causes paradoxical situations, as also seen in Venezuela. Because of the attempts to change these new Magna Cartas, the defence of these constitutions falls into the hands of the right which had attempted to prevent their approval. Another challenge is to practice politics in an effective manner after having weakened one's opponents.

The MAS must consider a change of candidate for 2019, which could have as a positive result compelling the party to abandon the inertia of automatic electoral triumphs and updating its transformative offer. It is still too early to anticipate future candidates. The chancellor David Choquehuanca, the vice-president Alvaro García Linera, the president of the Senate and former journalist Alberto Gringo González? During a recent interview published in the newspaper *El Deber*, the president seemed uncomfortable when asked if the vice-president (who has accompanied him these past ten years) would be the plan B if he should lose the referendum. Although he has praised him as a kind of co-pilot, he has compared him to a "secretary" rather than a potential president [4].

Perhaps it was only a sentence stemming from the discomfort of answering on the subject of a possible defeat. But perhaps it also marked the terrain. On the other hand, the referendum could also be a No to García Linera because the consultation focused on the empowerment of the pair in their search for a new mandate. Will Evo seek to be a kind of Putin in search of his Medvedev or a Lula in search of a candidate who is not a simple dauphin? At a certain point in time, they spoke of a woman "to complete the cultural revolution", but for the moment, Gabriela Montañó, former president of the Senate and current president of the Chamber of Deputies, will have to overcome the polls which are very unfavourable to her. This said, with Evo, we can never rule out a surprise as to names in the future. The changes in the region, without any doubt, do not help for the moment the MAS.

But, beyond the nominations, the doubts relate to the fact of whether the government will be able to capture the affection of Bolivians with new transformative proposals. The ideas on Bolivia as an energy power contain an excess

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of enthusiasm (and a tone recalling the 1950s), which have obscured some current progress in the area of fuels while themes such as health and education remain pending. The same goes for the purchase of a Chinese satellite, which has generated an enormous media fever, effective at the beginning, but which has then proved to be counter-productive. As we pointed out in a recent article: "the possibility of making the industrial "Great Leap Forward" without the technical-scientific apparatus which accompanies it has become illusory and linear. The 2015 Development Plan is too general [...]. The importance assigned by the president of Bolivia to the Dakar rally passing via Bolivia - in spite of its colonialist character and its effects on the environment - is one of the elements of tension in the official discourse, which has transited towards too many centrist drifts. At the same time, the insistence on macroeconomics and on its data obscures some more general debates on the future horizon of the country" [5].

On the No side, a "new right" in opposition, with territorial bases in different regions, will seek to capitalize on the results in the face of more minority-based efforts aimed at building a progressive option which is not linked to the party in government. The No camp will experience its own battles, in order to overcome a strong lack of consensus, the discrediting of old figures (associated with past governments) as well as the need for a generational renovation (there are mayors and governors under 50 who already eye their political future). For the moment, the No is a juxtaposition of multiple voices (against "abuse", "new elites", "dictatorship" - and those who are go very much further, against the Indians - and many in favour of "democracy" or the "constitution"), who articulate authentic claims, reject unnecessary grievances and question the use of a constitution which has been presented as a refoundation. But as we already know, politics depends very much on those who embrace the "fleeting moments" of history [6]. And these moments will occur at the end of the electoral game, at least as regards the candidacy of Morales and the opening of a scenario which is completely new in relation to 2006. In the meantime, the figure of the "two Bolivias" - so much noted between 2006 and 2008 - is back on the scene. However, against the temptations about the circularity of history, Bolivia is no longer the same; there is no doubt that progress has been made in multiple ways. Although many of these ghosts refuse to be exorcised.

* Pablo Stefanoni is a journalist.

[1] The final results of the referendum of February 21, 2016 were 51.3% for No and 48.7% for Yes

[2] 2Óscar Granados, "Un decenio con los Chuquiago "boys" de Evo Morales", *El País*, February 20, 2016

[3] "Evo Morales tiene muchas características de caudillos de siglos pasados", *La Tercera*, Santiago de Chile, February 20, 2016

[4] Pablo Ortiz, "Evo Morales: "Álvaro es mi mejor Secretario, jamás se ha presidenciable creído"", *El Deber*, Santa Cruz de la Sierra, January 20, 2016

[5] Pablo Stefanoni, "¿puede perder Evo el 21F?", Panamá: [Http://panamarevista.com/puede-perder-evo-el-21f/](http://panamarevista.com/puede-perder-evo-el-21f/)

[6] The expression, from Mussolini, is cited by Emilio Gentile, "El fascismo y la marcha sobre Roma. El Nacimiento de un regimen", Edhasa, Buenos Aires, 2014