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COMMENTARY

Narratives of Authoritarianism in Times of Crisis: Democracy and Limitations of Progressive Politics in Plurinational Bolivia

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Abstract

In Bolivia, expectations for a decolonised society turned into a political crisis in the autumn of 2019. Discussing the limitations of progressive politics in cultivating democracy, this article identifies three narratives of authoritarianism – liberal democratic, developmentalist and colonial – which the opponents of Evo Morales use to frame their disillusionment with his rule. It argues that these multiple narratives lend meaning to contradictory experiences in a context in which hopes for a major decolonising state-transformation process have devolved into a deep polarisation of Bolivian society. The events in Bolivia are discussed in the context of rising authoritarianism throughout Latin America.

Keywords: Morales; coup; crisis; elections; authoritarianism; democracy; progressive politics; Bolivia; narrative

Introduction

In October–November 2019, Bolivia's state-transformation process – led by Aymara peasant union leader and the country's first Indigenous president Evo Morales (2006–19) and his political party, the Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement toward Socialism, MAS) – seemed to come to an end. Morales' anti-constitutional attempts to stay in power against the popular will in a referendum in 2016, accompanied by alleged electoral fraud in October 2019, infuriated a wide gamut of mainly – but not solely – urban youth and the middle classes. Protests quickly escalated, and Morales resigned after a police mutiny, with the military urging him to step down.[1] Drastic coup d'état discourses started to

[1]Less international attention has been drawn to the detail that some of MAS' closest allies, such as the Central Obrera Boliviana (Bolivian Workers' Confederation, COB) and three smaller peasant and labour unions, also asked Morales to step down in order to pacify the country. María Teresa Zegada *et al.*,

circulate when Morales went into exile in Mexico with his closest allies, and the right-wing interim government of Senator Jeanine Añez (2019–20) was set up.[2]

The protests surprised many because Morales had been, and probably still is, widely perceived as one of the most prominent progressive leaders in Latin America. Counteracting previous development agendas with Indigenous conceptualisations of harmonious and ecological *vivir bien* (living well), Morales' regime had aimed to build a decolonising government and a plurinational state that would include marginalised groups such as Indigenous peoples, peasant unions and popular movements, and contribute to sustainable climate solutions.[3] It also responded to citizens' deeply justified hopes and expectations of ending racism, reducing poverty and regaining sovereignty – appropriated by transnational banks and corporate power – over economic policies, resource control and wellbeing. Thus, the process which Morales seemed to embody had raised high hopes for the deepening of democracy and rethinking of development both inside and outside the Bolivian borders.

In this article, I propose that the October protests and the ousting of Morales from the presidency cannot be interpreted solely as a right-wing coup d'état or as the product of middle-class frustrations; the events also reflect a more nuanced disillusionment with the MAS rule over a longer period of time. According to my recent qualitative interview data,[4] most of my interlocutors shared concerns over the slow and piecemeal derogation of democracy – whether liberal, representative, radical or Indigenous – over the previous ten years or so. This applies not only to the era of Añez's interim government but also, more importantly, to the much longer era of MAS administration, which was expected to be one of inclusion

Disonancias en la representación política: Partidos aparentes y sociedad en acción (1982–2020) (La Paz: Plural; Ceres, 2021), pp. 278–9.

[2]Scholars of Bolivian politics, such as Jeffery R. Webber and Forrest Hylton, have suggested that it was neither a hard military coup nor a soft parliamentary coup, like that in Brazil when Dilma Rousseff was ousted due to corruption charges, rather that the uprising by diverse Bolivian people against Morales' misconduct had been co-opted by racist, far-right groups, similar to those in Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil. See Jeffery R. Webber and Forrest Hylton, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Macho Camacho', Verso blog post, 15 Nov. 2019, available at www.versobooks.com/blogs/4493-the-eighteenth-brumaire-of-macho-camacho-jeffery-r-webber-with-forrest-hylton-on-the-coup-in-bolivia, last access 7 Sept. 2023.

[3]On *buen vivir / vivir bien* in Bolivia and Ecuador, see Alberto Acosta, *El Buen Vivir: Sumak Kawsay, una oportunidad para imaginar otros mundos* (Barcelona: Icaria, 2013); Eduardo Gudynas, 'Buen Vivir: Today's Tomorrow', *Development*, 54: 4 (2011), pp. 441–7; Sarah A. Radcliffe, 'Development for a Postneoliberal Era? Sumak Kawsay, Living Well and the Limits of Decolonization in Ecuador', *Geoforum*, 43: 2 (2012), pp. 240–9; Eija Ranta, *Vivir Bien as an Alternative to Neoliberal Globalization: Can Indigenous Terminologies Decolonize the State?* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[4]The principal data were gathered in Aug.–Sept. 2018 and Feb.–March 2020. During both periods, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews (11 in 2018, 16 in 2020) with activists, scholars, popular movements and NGOs, as well as former state officials, ministers and parliamentarians. Those interviewed were from La Paz, El Alto, Oruro and a few rural locations in the La Paz region. Of the interviewees in 2018, three were women and eight were men; while in 2020, five were women and eleven were men. In 2018, four of the interviewed self-identified as Indigenous. In 2020, five self-identified as Indigenous, nine were non-Indigenous, and two were foreign development professionals. I had previously lived in Bolivia in 2001 to 2002, and conducted ethnographic fieldwork in 2008 to 2009 on the discourses and practices connected with the notion of *vivir bien* in state institutions during Morales' first regime. I have explained my ethnographic engagements in more detail in Eija Ranta, 'Vastavuoroisuuden ja hyväksikäytön rajapinnoilla: Etnografin positiot Bolivian poliittisen muutoksen kontekstissa', in Jeremy Gould and Katja Uusihakala (eds.), *Tutkija peilin edessä: Refleksiivisyys ja etnografinen tieto* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2016), pp. 38–61.

and emancipation. The preliminary data suggest that unmet expectations of decolonising transformation are most commonly explained by making reference to increasing authoritarianism, although, as I will describe, proffered definitions of the concept and causes of authoritarianism are multiple and at times contradictory. While acknowledging the interim government's human-rights violations and authoritarianism,[5] my article focuses first and foremost on identifying how people opposing Morales narrated the less well-known authoritarian trajectories of the MAS during its close to hegemonic 14-year rule, and what those narratives produced in the context of the 2019 political crisis.

I discuss the limitations of progressive politics for democracy in plurinational Bolivia within the wider regional rise and prevalence of authoritarianism in Latin American politics in the last decade or so – a period during which countries such as Honduras and Nicaragua have suffered a democratic breakdown, and Brazil's democracy has been significantly weakened under the religious right-wing command of Jair Bolsonaro.[6] Although Latin American experiences of democracy have been complex due to deep economic inequalities and the external dictation of political-economic conditionalities, scholars of Latin American politics have tended to celebrate the continent as the success story of democratic transition. In addition to liberal democracy, Latin America has also witnessed the vibrant rethinking of democracy in radical, post-liberal and Indigenous forms, to name but a few.[7] Yet, while liberal democracy expanded after the removal of military dictators and restoration of electoral politics in the 1980s, a trend that continued until approximately 2005, it has since stagnated and has shown a dip over the last decade.[8]

Recently we have seen a renewed interest in authoritarianism pertaining to globally diverse geographical contexts in many different scholarly forums.[9] My own

[5]Añez's interim government committed various human-rights violations and persecuted MAS politicians and supporters. In November 2019, Añez announced a presidential decree that gave impunity to the military in suppressing protests. This led to several massacres, in which dozens of people were killed and more than 100 were injured. Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes (Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts, GIEI) – Bolivia, 'Informe final sobre los hechos de violencia y vulneración de los derechos humanos ocurridos entre el 1 de septiembre y 31 de diciembre de 2019', 23 July 2021, available at https://gieibolivia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/informe_GIEI_BOLIVIA_final.pdf, last access 7 Sept. 2023. Furthermore, elections were postponed several times by invoking Covid-19 restrictions, which raised serious concerns about the future of electoral democracy (see 'Bolivia: Supreme Decree Threatens Freedom of Expression', Freedom House press release, 14 May 2020, available at https://freedomhouse.org/article/bolivia-supreme-decree-threatens-freedom-expression, last access 7 Sept. 2023).

[6]Anna Lührmann *et al.*, 'State of the World 2017: Autocratization and Exclusion?', *Democratization*, 25: 8 (2018), pp. 1321–40.

[7]Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, 'Liberal Democracy vs Ayllu Democracy in Bolivia: The Case of Northern Potosí', *Journal of Development Studies*, 26: 4 (1990), pp. 97–121; Donna Van Lee Cott, *Radical Democracy in the Andes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jonas Wolff, 'Towards Post-Liberal Democracy in Latin America? A Conceptual Framework Applied to Bolivia', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 45: 1 (2013), pp. 31–59.

[8]Lührmann *et al.*, 'State of the World 2017', pp. 1323–4.

[9]See, for example, Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Morna MacLeod and Marta Casaús Arzú, *América Latina entre el autoritarismo y la democratización 1930–2012* (Zaragoza: Marcial Pons, 2016); Ian Scoones *et al.*, 'Emancipatory Rural Politics: Confronting Authoritarian Populism', *Journal of*

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interdisciplinary take on authoritarianism, which draws on critical development studies, political anthropology and decolonial thinking, focuses on situated oppositional narratives as a means of understanding the 2019 crisis.[10] Narratives, as understood here, are 'fundamental ways in which humans organize their understanding of the world':[11] the means to make sense of past experiences and communicate them to others, especially after major events, such as crises. I used narrative analysis to conduct a systematic interpretation of others' readings of events, an approach in which 'every narrative is a version or view of what happened'.[12] While I do not consider such accounts factual evidence of the truth about events, I believe that narrative analysis gives access to 'the textual interpretative world of the teller, which presumably in some way mediates or manages reality'.[13] Subjects construct and appropriate narratives to produce meanings in life and to act accordingly.[14] This kind of political anthropological analysis insists on the specificity of such normative concepts as democracy in different contexts, querying their actual constitution in each locale.

To nuance the simplified and polarising official narrative according to which the 2019 protests were propagated solely by right-wing coup-mongers, I identify three heterogeneous and entangled narratives of authoritarianism – liberal democratic, developmentalist and colonial – which citizens opposed to Morales, and to an extent the MAS, deploy to address their disillusionments. While some of my interlocutors explained authoritarianism as Morales' innate obsession with power or Vice-President Álvaro García Linera's ideological quest for proletarian dictatorship, others perceived it as submission to a nationalist developmentalist agenda or as a colonial turn. Although the MAS revolution has emphasised decolonising and democratising content, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui proposed as far back as 2013 that Morales' rule through the MAS was undergoing what she called 'a colonial turn' – an attempt to create a hegemonic nationalist project, embodied by the MAS itself – which was undermining previously held pluralist goals.[15] In an

Peasant Studies, 45: 1 (2018), pp. 1–20. In Latin America, analyses of authoritarian corporatism and bureaucratic authoritarianism dominated the literature on politics during the 1970s and 1980s, seeking conceptual explanations for the empirical transformations brought about by the rise of the military dictatorships that were taking over liberal and popular democratic projects, starting with the Brazilian coup in 1964, moving on to Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru and Uruguay, and culminating in the violent military coup d'état against Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973. David Collier (ed.), *El nuevo autoritarismo en América Latina* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985); James M. Malloy, *Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Latin America* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977).

[10]I have also written about the complexities of the democracy–development nexus in Eija Ranta, ¿Es posible la democracia plurinacional en tiempos de desilusión?, in Fernando Iturralde *et al.* (eds.), *Ciencias sociales, imaginarios políticos y Estado Plurinacional: Aportes críticos* (La Paz: CIDES–UMSA, 2020), pp. 151–70.

[11]Martin Cortazzi, 'Narrative Analysis in Ethnography', in Paul Atkinson *et al.* (eds.), *Handbook of Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2001), p. 384.

[12]*Ibid.*

[13]*Ibid*., p. 385.

[14]George Komadina Rimassa, 'Narrativas de la democracia boliviana en el siglo XXI', in Alfredo Seoane and Luis Claros (eds.), *Bolivia en el siglo XXI: Transformaciones y desafíos* (La Paz: CIDES–UMSA, 2019), pp. 413–32.

[15]Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Mito y desarrollo en Bolivia: El giro colonial del gobierno del MAS* (La Paz: Piedra Rota; Plural, 2013). In Bolivia, the historical antecedent to the construction of the 'national-popular'

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attempt to nuance discussions about populism and democracy under the MAS' progressive rule, Nancy Postero has described these dynamics as foundational disagreements about 'who counts as the plural Bolivian people, and what rights they should have'.[16] While the polarising contemporary debate seems to be implying that only the official coup narrative is acceptable, my aim is to make alternative views visible and understandable. I argue that the three different but overlapping narratives mentioned above have lent meaning to citizens' contradictory experiences in a context in which enormous hopes and expectations of a major decolonising and democratising state-transformation process have devolved into a political crisis and the polarisation of Bolivian society. Thus, the article aims to contribute to the current debate about the limitations and achievements of progressive politics in contemporary Latin America.

It is crucial to remember that the three narratives present merely part of the story, because Morales remained very popular, and the MAS more so.[17] Furthermore, they do not represent the official viewpoint of the political opposition. With regard to my interlocutors' self-identification in the country's political field, four of those interviewed in 2020 either belonged to or said that they would vote for the centre or centre-right alliance Comunidad Ciudadana (Citizens' Community, CC), led by Carlos Mesa, Bolivia's former president (2003–5) and a presidential candidate in the 2019 and 2020 elections. Two of those interviewed in 2020 were former ministers of the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (Nationalist Revolutionary Movement, MNR), which was one of Bolivia's main political parties from the 1952 nationalist revolution until the 2005 elections which the MAS won. Most of the rest had previously voted for the MAS and a number had acted as minister, parliamentarian, public servant or social activist on its behalf, only becoming its critics during the 2010s; some had even gone on to take an active part in the post-2016 democracy movement whose activities culminated in the October 2019 protests. In 2018 three of my interlocutors continued to support the MAS but, by 2020, this had dropped to one, although it is likely that several swung back to voting for the MAS in the October 2020 elections for reasons explained below.[18]

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was the 1952 nationalist revolution, which aimed to combine middle-class and working-class interests under the banner of the Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario (Nationalist Revolutionary Movement, MNR) and its homogenising nationalist agenda. On the national-popular concept, see René Mercado Zavaleta, *Lo nacional-popular en Bolivia* (La Paz: Plural, 2008). On the 1952 revolution and its legacies, see Merilee S. Grindle and Pilar Domingo, *Proclaiming Revolution: Bolivia in Comparative Perspective* (London: Institute of Latin American Studies; David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 2003).

[16]Nancy Postero, '"El pueblo boliviano, de composición plural": A Look at Plurinationalism', in Carlos de la Torre (ed.), *The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspectives* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2015), p. 401.

[17]Morales and the MAS led the poll in the 2019 elections with approximately 45 per cent of the vote. In the 2020 elections, when Morales and García Linera were no longer candidates, the MAS succeeded in gaining 55 per cent of the votes, the former minister of finance Luis Arce becoming president and the former minister of foreign affairs David Choquehuanca vice-president. Unión Europea, Misión Reforzada de Expertos Electorales, 'Bolivia 2020. Informe Final: Elecciones Generales, 18 de octubre de 2020'.

[18]It is acknowledged here that data collection had some limitations. Fieldwork in 2020 took place just prior to the Covid-19 pandemic in politically tense times. Despite my best efforts, I could not gain access to Añez's ministers and public servants, or to those peasant unions that were Morales' and the MAS'

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Although critical of the MAS, the majority of my interlocutors had a self-proclaimed leftist, *indígenista* or *indianista* stance.[19] This is an important detail for it speaks of the diversity and fluidity of both the Left and indigeneity in Bolivia, even if the MAS pretends to monopolise progressive and Indigenous voices. The political field in Bolivia is in constant motion and the most interesting thing is not so much the weak and dispersed centre-right opposition, but the internal heterogeneity, divisions and battles within the progressive sectors (to which most of my interlocutors belong). Many of them were deeply disappointed with the political parties, including the MAS, and looking for new pluriversal alternatives. Consequently, I am not claiming that everyone has rejected the MAS project; rather, I want to highlight that opposition to Morales in 2019 was multidimensional.

Having contextualised the study, I move on to describing and analysing three key narrative framings in Bolivia. The first subsection outlines the liberal democratic narrative of authoritarianism, the second structures the developmentalist narrative, and the third examines the coloniality of authoritarianism. The article ends with an outline of the challenges it has raised vis-à-vis the progressive construction of decolonising politics and new forms of democracy.

Multiple Narratives of Authoritarianism in Bolivia

Towards the end of 2019, a wave of social protests and civic uprisings swept across Bolivia, Chile, Colombia and Ecuador. The year earlier, protests had also started in Haiti and Nicaragua. Although demands varied, democracy in its multiple forms was a shared concern among many protesters. In Bolivia, mistrust over the transparency of the presidential and parliamentary elections held on 20 October was the tipping point that brought masses of urban youth, students and the middle classes (although the protest was not limited to these groups) to the streets across Bolivia's major cities, such as La Paz and Cochabamba.[20] Some important regional features played into the protests. In Potosí, civic movements and mining unions had mobilised for years over mining issues and lithium extraction, and the MAS government's allegedly unfavourable lithium agreement with a German company and a Chinese consortium was a major concern for this poor highland mining region.[21]

principal supporters. In the latter case, one peasant representative told me that they were apprehensive about expressing their views and preferred to maintain a low profile during Añez's interim rule. Another potential drawback is that the sample size is relatively small, and it focuses on those who are actively engaged in societal and political affairs in the urban sphere. Utilising prior contacts from earlier fieldwork, I started interviewing a few key interlocutors and, after that, I used snowball sampling methods.

[19]In the Bolivian context, *indígenista* refers to a person who promotes Indigenous rights, but who does not derive ethnically from any of the country's 36 Indigenous groups recognised in the 2009 Constitution. An *indianista* is a person for whom the term *indio* is a political identity. Rooted in a person's own experiences of marginalisation in a racialised society, an *indianista* creates knowledge about their own lived reality to generate societal change. Traditionally, the term has been associated with the Aymara political movements of the 1960s and 1970s. On *indianismo*, see, for example, Pedro Portugal Mollinedo and Carlos Macusaya Cruz, *El indianismo katarista: Un análisis crítico* (La Paz: Fundación Friedrich Ebert, 2016).

[20]Luis Claros and Vladimir Díaz Cuéllar (eds.), *Crisis política en Bolivia 2019–2020* (La Paz: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung; Plural, 2022).

[21]Franz Flores Castro, 'Estado débil, actores desafiantes y mediación política: Potosí y la crisis política de octubre de 2019', in Claros and Díaz Cuéllar (eds.), *Crisis política en Bolivia 2019–2020*, pp. 87–119.

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In Santa Cruz, which is Bolivia's financial hub and a region of large-scale agro-export industries, an influential pro-business and right-wing civic movement quickly gathered force, conglomerating several populist figures and groups that could be labelled xenophobic or even fascist.[22] Thus, beyond the overt suspicion of and outrage over the electoral fraud allegedly committed by the MAS, the protests involved diverse groups of people, whose demands varied geographically and politically.

Morales resigned on 10 November, together with García Linera. As the MAS president of the senate (Adriana Salvatierra) and the MAS vice-president of the senate (Rubén Medinaceli) also resigned their posts, the presidency was eventually assigned to the second vice-president of the senate, Añez, who declared herself president under ambiguous circumstances.[23] How did it all occur, and why was Morales so forcefully challenged that he resigned and went into exile? What follows is a discussion of three entangled and overlapping oppositional narratives of authoritarianism through which I aim to expand understandings of the complexities around the 2019 events. I contextualise these narratives by explaining how generally held they were and by whom, noting who did not share them and why. Each narrative includes three structural categories: an event, a description of the background, and an evaluation of why the narrative matters to its teller.[24]

In Defence of the Vote: A Liberal Democratic Narrative

What I call a liberal democratic narrative of authoritarianism contained two major elements: concerns about the unconstitutionality of the Morales–García Linera candidacy and allegations of electoral fraud. This narrative was shared at least partly by almost all those interviewed in 2020; however, for the CC and MNR supporters, this was the hegemonic reading. They did not mention any aspects related to the other

[22]Charismatic regional leader Fernando Camacho rose to national awareness. Journalist Amalia Pando has investigated how Camacho urged Morales to resign and proposed that a '*junta de notables*' be established, with Camacho himself assumingly leading it, that would take over control of the nation, displacing and dissolving the MAS-majority parliament. During Añez's term, she recruited several politicians close to Camacho as ministers and into other political positions, many of whom are now charged in major corruption cases. See 'Camacho, el Hotel Casa Grande y las ambiciones de poder', *Cabildeo Digital*, 11 Oct. 2020, available at www.cabildeodigital.com/2020/10/camachoelhotelcasagrandelas.html?fbclid=IwAR1HJDAley4N4RoP3MZkvdMmnZ1OX6hNdll6jvq_9a5Aba1sny8RS2i0Nc4, last access 7 Sept. 2023. In my interviews, many described Camacho as an intimidating character and, due to his far-right views, a severe danger to Bolivia's democracy. Some feared that people would start voting for him because, as an extremist candidate, he would be considered a 'strong enough' counter-candidate to Morales (although Morales was not running in the 2020 elections, most assumed he would, in fact, lead if the MAS were to win).

[23]According to the Catholic Church, several reconciliation meetings between different party members, including the MAS, and civic activists took place, facilitated by church delegates and embassy representatives (e.g. Spain, European Union), and the presidency was proposed to the president of the senate in accordance with the Bolivian Constitution. When Salvatierra and Medinaceli resigned, Añez was seen as a possible candidate even if the Constitution is not clear on procedure in such a circumstance. Conferencia Episcopal Boliviana, 'Memoria de los hechos del proceso de pacificación en Bolivia: Octubre 2020–Enero 2020', in 'Memoria del proceso de facilitación del diálogo 2019–2020: Conferencia Episcopal Boliviana', 2021.

[24]Cortazzi, 'Narrative Analysis', pp. 384–5.

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two narratives presented later in this article.[25] While my left-leaning and Indigenous interlocutors also deployed elements of the liberal democratic narrative, they complemented it with, or preferred, the other two narratives. The militant MAS supporters, on the other hand, rejected the narrative altogether; according to them, there had been only a coup, but no electoral fraud.[26] Among my 2020 interlocutors, only one representative of a popular movement aligned to the MAS defined Añez as '*golpista*' and her rule as a '*golpe de estado*';[27] the rest either negated the suggestion or were hesitant to take a stance on whether the 2019 events could be considered a coup. Some of them regarded references to a coup as a political discourse utilised by Morales to gain international support for his own cause.[28] For most of my interlocutors, the 2019 protests were a popular and civic uprising; some even referred to it as 'the revolution of *pititas*'.[29] They perceived it as a movement against political leaders that some of them had always opposed ideologically, but whom they saw as having crossed the line with their attempt to cement their positions of power through electoral fraud.

[25]In political practice, however, some CC politicians have shown an interest in the promotion of environmental justice and the defence of Indigenous peoples' rights.

[26]Since the MAS returned to executive power in 2020, the coup debate has intensified, leading to legal hearings and judiciary processes. According to the official MAS stance, the coup was orchestrated by right-wing politicians, including Añez, Camacho and Mesa, with the support of international actors, such as the Organization of American States (OAS) and the EU, and backed by Bolivian journalists, academic scholars and civil-society organisations. While the OAS and the EU have condemned these claims, the coup narrative remains strong. Zegada *et al.*, *Disonancias*, pp. 291–2.

[27]While this interlocutor was certain that the coup had been propagated by 'imperialists, Yankees', they were very disappointed that Morales had left the country as, according to the interlocutor, Morales had promised 'to die in command of the plurinational state, sitting in the presidential chair, [rather] than […] hand over [the executive] to the Right'. However, even this interlocutor considered the hegemonic position of the MAS a problem, and observed that their popular movement supports the MAS only because of the absence of other left-wing parties and progressive movements. According to the interlocutor, the MAS represents certain peasant strands, namely the coca growers and peasant migrants, while other interest groups have been refused positions of power. Author interview, La Paz, 2 March 2020. For the protection of my interlocutors, their names are not revealed. All interview excerpts are my own translations from Spanish.

[28]Many of my interlocutors suggested that Morales had asked MAS politicians to step down from succession, so that there would be a power vacuum. According to some interlocutors, Morales was planning a self-coup (*autogolpe*). See Gustavo A. Calle Laime, 'No fue golpe, fue autogolpe', in Carlos Macusaya (ed.), *Wiphala, crisis y memoria: Senkata, no te merecen* (El Alto: Jichha, 2020), pp. 97–9. Despite Morales' exile, the MAS-majority parliament reconvened under the leadership of Eva Copa, a young Aymara politician from El Alto, who successfully led the parliament during the interim government. Fernando L. García Yapur, 'Crisis, caída y fin de ciclo en Bolivia', in Claros and Díaz Cuéllar (eds.), *Crisis política en Bolivia 2019–2020*, p. 286.

[29]The word *pitita* refers to the thin strings that some protesters used to seal off streets from traffic. However, it was Morales who made the word famous. He held a speech in Cochabamba in which he contemptuously referred to protestors as 'two or three persons tying strings (*pititas*)'. Zegada *et al.*, *Disonancias*, p. 267. Responding to the notion of *pitita* revolution, Ricardo Calla, a former minister of Indigenous and Native peoples' affairs in Bolivia, has suggested that what happened in Bolivia was neither a coup nor a revolution. He suggests that Morales left his post under immense pressure from street protests (but not a revolution), which led into an improvised interim government that was extremely opportunistic and problematic, but not really a coup. Ricardo Calla Ortega, 'Tiempo de Iván Lima', *Brújula Digital*, 26 June 2021, available at www.brujuladigital.net/opinion/tiempo-de-ivan-lima-?fbclid=IwAR2tLFR_BSToicWuaB5IrahALz7txWqTR6zWDZk8ek5gjh0YDEY4Me6z4tY, last access 7 Sept. 2023.

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The key concern was that, in 2019, Morales and García Linera were running for the presidency for the fourth time even though Bolivia's Constitution only allows two consecutive presidential terms. This was reminiscent of a wider regional trend in which several Latin American presidents, including Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro, Colombia's Álvaro Uribe, Ecuador's Rafael Correa, Honduras' Manuel Zelaya and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega have sought to extend their terms in office, with varying outcomes. Initially, it was Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Peru's Alberto Fujimori who triggered the current of presidential re-elections at the turn of the millennium.[30] Morales' first, and highly popular, term started in January 2006.[31] Approaching 2009, the MAS started to demand new elections, claiming that, with the endorsement of the new Bolivian Constitution – highly praised both in Bolivia and internationally for its progressive tone and attention to environmental justice and Indigenous rights – everything had to be started afresh. When Morales won with an overwhelming majority (64 per cent), the MAS argued that, as the state had been re-founded as the Plurinational State of Bolivia, earlier rules were no longer valid. Thus, Morales' first term was no longer part of the calculations; on the contrary, the MAS declared that, rather than 2006, his first presidential term started in 2009. An ex-minister of the MNR told me in an interview that, for him, this was Morales' first attempt to 'seek perpetuation in power and to allow re-election'.[32] According to this politician, who had spent years in exile during the military dictatorships, it was the beginning of a battle between democracy and authoritarianism, the latter referring, in his ideologically framed interpretation, to the proletarian dictatorship that he claimed Morales and García Linera sought.[33]

Because the MAS argued that the 2009 elections marked the beginning of their first presidential period, Morales and García Linera also ran for the 2014 general elections, starting their third term with another clear victory (61 per cent): unconstitutionally, some argued. Not long after, appeals to modify the 2009 Constitution to allow their further candidacy in the 2019 elections emerged. For most of my interlocutors, that was the decisive moment in the turn toward authoritarianism. As one of the key CC politicians explained it to me:

> Evo Morales knew that he could not run in the elections because the political Constitution prohibits a consecutive run. He set up a referendum to gain people's authorisation for the modification of the Constitution so that he could run again. He was confident that people would support him […]

[30]John M. Carey, 'The Reelection Debate in Latin America', *Latin American Politics and Society*, 45: 1 (2003), pp. 119–33.

[31]In the 2005 national elections, Morales and the MAS received approximately 54 per cent of the vote.

[32]Author interview, La Paz, 3 March 2020.

[33]This responded to Western normative assumptions that associated democratic nations with freedom and communist nations with authoritarianism, especially during the Cold War. Yet authoritarianism can be considered a long-term characteristic of the post-colonial condition in the Global South which transcends ideological differences. See Eduardo Mendieta, 'Remapping Latin American Studies: Postcolonialism, Subaltern Studies, Post-Occidentalism, and Globalization Theory', in Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel and Carlos A. Jáuregui (eds.), *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 290.

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> Additionally, he controlled the Electoral Commission and most institutions of the state so he was convinced that he could achieve a result in his favour […] He said several times that if the 'no' vote won, he would respect that decision and that he would withdraw his case. Unfortunately, after the result came out, he and his party sought ways to eliminate the people's decision.[34]

A slight majority of Bolivians (51.3 per cent) voted against the constitutional change, the first time since Morales' election that his position was not endorsed. However, in 2017, the constitutional court authorised the candidacy of Morales and García Linera on the basis of their human rights to stand for re-election.[35] The same justification had been used by the Nicaraguan Supreme Court in 2009 to allow Ortega's re-election, and, in 2015, the Honduran Supreme Court had ruled similarly in regard to Juan Orlando Hernández.[36] The resolution opened up the possibility of Morales acting as president for as long as the majority of people voted for him. The CC politician recalled that this 'provoked a permanent mobilisation, and Evo Morales' popularity started to wither away because of his own authoritarian behaviour'.[37] According to a militant, anti-*masista* journalist, Morales' loss in the referendum of 2016 generated two interrelated processes that were a prelude to the events of October 2019: on the one hand, the repression and persecution of opposing voices intensified – whether these belonged to leaders inside or outside the MAS who could challenge Morales' popularity, journalists, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or Indigenous activists – along with the strengthening of the executive and personalising of political power; on the other hand, mobilisation started to gather force in support of democracy and against misuses of power, becoming known as the Movimiento 21F, which referenced the date of the 2016 referendum.[38]

Given the election's antecedents, suspicions of electoral fraud in October 2019 quickly escalated into mass-scale mobilisation. When nearly 84 per cent of the votes were calculated, Morales was in front of Mesa, but only with a margin of slightly over 7 per cent. To be directly elected in the first round, a candidate

[34]Author interview, La Paz, 5 March 2020.

[35]Komadina Rimassa, 'Narrativas de la democracia', pp. 424–5; Gonzalo Rojas Ortuste, 'El régimen presidencialista, caudillismo y rebelión ciudadana', in Gonzalo Rojas Ortuste (ed.), *La rebellion ciudadana: Bolivia enfrenta al régimen populista autoritario* (La Paz: CIDES–UMSA, 2021), pp. 16–9. There is little judicial independence in Bolivia. It has been a long-term characteristic of the Bolivian judicial system, but Morales has also demeaned the rule of law further by calling it a 'doctrine of North America' and of 'capitalism'. See, for example, Human Rights Watch, 'Bolivia: Dozens of Judges Arbitrarily Dismissed', 29 April 2019, available at www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/29/bolivia-dozens-judges-arbitrarily-dismissed, last access 11 Sept. 2023; Freedom House, 'Bolivia 2019', available at https://freedomhouse.org/country/bolivia/freedom-world/2019, last access 11 Sept. 2023.

[36]Daniel Cerqueira, 'Is there a Human Right to Indefinitely Run for Reelection?', *Verfassungsblog*, 22 Oct. 2020, available at https://verfassungsblog.de/is-there-a-human-right-to-indefinitely-run-for-reelection/, last access 11 Sept. 2023; Enrique Gómez Ramírez, 'Bolivia in the Run-Up to the 2020 Elections', European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) document, Oct. 2020, available at www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2020/659289/EPRS_ATA(2020)659289_EN.pdf, last access 11 Sept. 2023.

[37]Author interview, La Paz, 5 March 2020.

[38]Author interview, La Paz, 6 March 2020.

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would need either more than 50 per cent of the vote or at least 40 per cent with a margin of more than 10 per cent between leader and runner-up. It seemed that for the first time in 14 years, a second electoral round would be held. However, the Electoral Commission suspended the public counting of votes for almost 23 hours. When it continued a day later, the gap between Morales and Mesa had widened to 10.14 per cent. The Supreme Electoral Court ruled out the second round of elections, and Morales declared himself the winner.[39] A researcher in a think tank that the MAS executive had persecuted for years for its criticism of extractivist policies explained to me that even the slightest perceptions of electoral fraud made people snap and take to the streets: 'As Morales had already played with the Constitution during his second regime and completely denigrated the results of the referendum in 2016, we were already anticipating the fraud.'[40] In a similar vein, the above-mentioned journalist observed, 'We all feared that Morales would not accept the results […] He just would not let go of power.'[41]

Accounts of the MAS executive's increasing authoritarianism were narrated as being the antecedents to, and legitimisation of, the October 2019 protests. They were 'defending their vote', the CC politician said to me, adding that they were defending democracy: '[T]he different sectors of civil society came together to fight against the dictatorship of Evo Morales.'[42] Protests intensified when the Organization of American States (OAS), conducting an audit of the elections at the request of the MAS government, released results suggesting that there had been deliberate manipulations and serious irregularities in favour of the governing authorities.[43] Initially, amidst a national strike, the protesters merely called for a second round of elections, but accusations of electoral fraud quickly escalated into demands for new elections, supported by the OAS and the European Union.[44] Finally, calls for Morales' resignation began. Violence increased, including the burning of houses and threats to the lives of both MAS politicians and opposition activists.

The uprising in October and November 2019 represented a drastic change from the depoliticisation that my interlocutors had sensed a year before the elections, when a middle-class intellectual, an influential pro-MAS thinker in the early stages of Morales' regime, told me that many people, including themself, had lost hope in politics, preferring to focus on their families and personal safety. They felt that the

[39]Zegada *et al.*, *Disonancias*, pp. 258–61.

[40]Author interview, La Paz, 4 March 2020. In opinion polls conducted a month prior to the elections, 68 per cent of respondents anticipated that there might be electoral fraud, and 87 per cent had little or no trust in the electoral bodies. Zegada *et al.*, *Disonancias*, p. 257. Between 2018 and 2019, several leading electoral authorities had resigned or were suspended. Rojas Ortuste, 'El régimen presidencialista', pp. 17–18.

[41]Author interview, La Paz, 6 March 2020.

[42]Author interview, La Paz, 5 March 2020.

[43]OAS Secretariat for Strengthening Democracy (SSD), Department of Electoral Cooperation and Observation (DECO), *Electoral Integrity Analysis: General Elections in the Plurinational State of Bolivia*, 20 Oct. 2019, available at www.oas.org/fpdb/press/Audit-Report-EN-vFINAL.pdf, last access 11 Sept. 2023. Since then, many scholars and institutions have launched different kinds of reports that either confirm or condemn the OAS results.

[44]Unión Europea, Misión de Expertos Electorales, 'Bolivia 2019. Informe Final: Elecciones Generales, 20 de octubre de 2019'.

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MAS had practically become the only political option as it ruled the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, and had a major influence in media that, according to my interlocutor, openly promoted the MAS political campaign.[45] Political plurality was disappearing, and opposition activity was weakened by new electoral regulations and primaries, they suggested,[46] resulting in widespread dissatisfaction and increasing disinterest in the political system, particularly among the urban middle classes.[47] While this interlocutor predicted some form of civil disobedience, such as refusing to vote, surprisingly it was another ex-MAS politician who predicted to me in 2018 that the forthcoming elections would create 'another Bolivia'. Disappointed by their expulsion from the party (which they saw as a technique to get rid of popular left-wing politicians who could challenge Morales' leadership), they felt that an obsession with Morales' re-election had become the overriding concern of the MAS executive. They even proposed that 'those outside [the MAS] should organise politically to confront the situation'.[48] Sometime after our interview, however, they accepted a political position with the MAS, indicating how the co-option of opposing voices may occur through the logic of clientelism.[49]

This section has focused on identifying the liberal democratic narrative of the de facto centralisation of political power within the framework of a formally democratic political system. In the following section, I identify and discuss a second narrative of authoritarianism, one related to the complex articulations of indigeneity, state developmentalist agendas and the global political economy of extractivist capitalism.

The Developmentalist Narrative

Early in March 2020, I sat down with two representatives of the Consejo Nacional de Ayllus y Markas del Qullasuyu (National Council of Ayllus and Markas of Qullasuyu, CONAMAQ) – an Andean high-plateau organisation of rural Aymara and Quechua, whose goals are the recovery of Indigenous territories and self-determination – to learn their views of the October 2019 elections and Morales' ousting. We met in La Paz at the premises of an environmentalist NGO because, due to police intervention in 2013, the original CONAMAQ (now known as the CONAMAQ Orgánica) was expelled from its premises and replaced by pro-MAS supporters. Although the CONAMAQ had been one of the five Indigenous and peasant organisations that formed the so-called Pacto de Unidad in support of Morales' presidency in 2005 and the constituent assembly in 2006,

[45]See also Moira Zuazo, 'Introducción', in Anja Dargatz and Moira Zuazo (eds.), *Democracias en transformación: ¿Qué hay de nuevo en los nuevos Estados andinos?* (La Paz: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2012), p. 14.

[46]See also Gonzalo Rojas Ortuste, 'Crisis del sistema de partidos: ¿Un partido único?', in Seoane and Claros (eds.), *Bolivia en el siglo XXI*, pp. 395–412.

[47]Author interview, La Paz, 23 Aug. 2018.

[48]Author interview, La Paz, 30 Aug. 2018.

[49]Eija Ranta, 'Ethnography of the State in Plurinational Bolivia: Indigenous Knowledge, Clientelism and Decolonizing Bureaucracy', in Miriam Fahimi, Elmar Flatschart and Wolfram Schaffar (eds.), *State and Statehood in the Global South: Theoretical Approaches and Empirical Studies* (Cham: Springer, 2022), pp. 221–7.

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its relationship with the MAS government had deteriorated significantly over the years.[50] Consequently, they told me, for a moment they had felt a sense of relief when Morales announced his resignation in November 2019.[51]

The CONAMAQ Orgánica shared the liberal democratic narrative according to which the candidacy of Morales and García Linera was unconstitutional. They had campaigned for a 'no' vote in the 2016 referendum and, as the 2019 elections approached, they had taken part in several marches opposing the Morales–García Linera candidacy. Yet it was not just about the defence of the liberal democratic narrative; the main concern in CONAMAQ's allegations of authoritarianism was that advancing Indigenous self-determination, as the MAS had promised to do, had become overshadowed by nationalist developmentalist agendas. The key political goals for both the CONAMAQ and the Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas de Bolivia (Confederation of Indigenous Peoples in Bolivia, CIDOB), a parallel organisation for lowland and Amazonian Indigenous people, were direct Indigenous representation in the plurinational parliament; the organisation of prior consultations on resource extraction directly with Indigenous communities and organisations; and the enhancement of Indigenous *usos y costumbres*, autonomies and self-determination in regard to collective lands, territories and the living earth.

According to the CONAMAQ representatives, they had succeeded in incorporating Indigenous direct representation into the 2009 Constitution; in practice, however, they felt that the MAS had sabotaged its implementation, rather strengthening its own role as a hegemonic political party at the cost of Indigenous communitarian forms of participation. Indigenous organisations were also severely disappointed by the Electoral Law (2010). Indigenous and peasant organisations had initially demanded one representative for each of the 36 Indigenous peoples recognised by the Constitution. Eventually the MAS and the political opposition agreed to

[50]In 2005, Bolivia's five major Indigenous and peasant organisations had formed a pact in support of the MAS-led process of change, but over the years conflicts grew between the government and the two Indigenous movements – CONAMAQ and the Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas de Bolivia (CIDOB). The three peasant unions – including Bolivia's main peasant union Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia (Unified Syndical Confederation of Rural Workers of Bolivia, CSUTCB); the peasant women's union Confederación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas Indígenas Originarias de Bolivia 'Bartolina Sisa' ('Bartolina Sisa' National Confederation of Campesino, Indigenous and Native Women of Bolivia, CNMCIOB–BS); and Confederación Sindical de Comunidades Interculturales de Bolivia (Syndicalist Confederation of Intercultural Communities of Bolivia, CSCIB), formerly known as *colonizadores*, a peasant union representing mainly coca-growing migrants – continue to be the MAS' key support basis. While some might perceive all these popular movements as Indigenous movements, there are political differences between Indigenous peoples and peasants, particularly in terms of land ownership and self-determination. Additionally, Morales' indigeneity has been challenged by many due to his inability to speak Indigenous languages and his identification with peasant unionism and its political goals (i.e. individual land ownership in contrast to collective lands). See, for example, Nancy Postero, *The Indigenous State: Race, Politics, and Performance in Plurinational Bolivia* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017). See also José Nuñez del Prado, *Utopía indígena truncada: Proyectos y praxis de poder indígena en Bolivia Plurinacional* (La Paz: CIDES–UMSA, 2015).

[51]This does not mean that they supported the interim government. Rather, they felt all political parties were taking advantage of them and compromising Indigenous self-determination. Eija Ranta, 'Nascent Activism in Times of Disillusionment: Struggles between Indigenous Self-Determination and State Co-Optation in Plurinational Bolivia', *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* (forthcoming, 2023).

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there being a mere seven Indigenous direct representatives, which comprised only 5 per cent of the total seats in parliament. Furthermore, the CONAMAQ and the CIDOB were demanding a guarantee that the Indigenous direct representatives would be elected through *usos y costumbres*, the practice of Indigenous communitarian democracy outside party politics and left–right ideological divisions. However, the MAS, which had a two-thirds majority in parliament, ruled that any party or grouping could propose an Indigenous candidate.[52]

A clear break between the government and the CONAMAQ and the CIDOB occurred after contestation over the Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Sécure (Isiboro Sécure Indigenous Territory and National Park, TIPNIS).[53] At the centre of the conflict lay the MAS executive's plans to construct a highway between Villa Tunari in the Andean department of Cochabamba and San Ignacio Moxos in the Amazonian department of Beni, which would cut through the protected TIPNIS ecological reserve and the collective lands – Tierras Comunitarias de Origen (Original Community Lands, TCOs) – of the Yuracaré, Moxeño and Chimane. According to the government, the highway would boost the region's economy and bring infrastructure and basic services to poor Indigenous communities. Critics, on the other hand, feared deforestation, environmental destruction and the colonisation of forests and Indigenous lands by coca-growing peasants, whose main union base was Villa Tunari, where Morales built his political career as the coca growers' union leader.[54] Additionally, the government granted concessions for oil exploration and exploitation in the national park to Brazilian, Venezuelan and French companies that collaborate with the Bolivian state-owned Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Bolivianos (Bolivian Fiscal Oilfields, YPFB).[55] A number of protests and marches had been organised over the years to halt the project but the most violent confrontation between diverse Amazonian Indigenous groups and the MAS executive-sponsored peasant groups and coca growers, accompanied by repression by police forces and the military, occurred in 2011 during a massive Indigenous march from the TIPNIS to La Paz.[56]

The CONAMAQ and the CIDOB withdrew their support for the Pacto de Unidad, which led to the persecution and harassment of their leaders, eventually resulting in police intervention in their offices and the forced replacement of their leaders with pro-MAS representatives.[57] The MAS executive thus turned

[52]Mala Htun, *Inclusion without Representation in Latin America: Gender Quotas and Ethnic Reservations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 87–9.

[53]On the TIPNIS conflict, see Andrew Canessa, 'Conflict, Claim and Contradiction in the New "Indigenous" State of Bolivia', *Critique of Anthropology*, 34: 2 (2014), pp. 153–73; John McNeish, 'Extraction, Protest and Indigeneity in Bolivia: The TIPNIS Effect, *Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 8: 2 (2013), pp. 221–43; Eija Maria Ranta, 'Toward a Decolonial Alternative to Development? The Emergence and Shortcomings of Vivir Bien as State Policy in Bolivia in the Era of Globalization', *Globalizations*, 13: 4 (2016), pp. 425–39.

[54]Emily Achtenberg, 'Why is Evo Morales Reviving Bolivia's Controversial TIPNIS Road?', *NACLA*, 21 Aug. 2017, available at https://nacla.org/blog/2017/08/22/why-evo-morales-reviving-bolivia%E2%80%99s-controversial-tipnis-road, last access 11 Sept. 2023.

[55]Gaya Makaran and Pabel López, *Recolonización en Bolivia: Neonacionalismo extractivista y resistencia comunitaria* (La Paz: CIALC; Plural, 2019), p. 242.

[56]*Ibid.*, pp. 253–60.

[57]For more on the case of the CIDOB, see Postero, *The Indigenous State*, p. 126.

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against such autonomous Indigenous organisations that were trying to defend their territories and ancient ways of life, condemning them in hostile terms as agents of the right-wing opposition or foreign imperialism.[58] According to Luis Tapia, Indigenous peoples who defended their collective lands became the internal enemy of the government, while unionised peasants prospered by expanding their capitalist activities into Indigenous territories in response to an agreement between the MAS and the wealthier land-owning class, which stipulated that the MAS would not undertake major agrarian reforms.[59]

Due to international demand and high prices for hydrocarbons and minerals, Bolivia's economy boomed during Morales' first terms.[60] This led to a decrease in poverty, partly as a result of the popular state welfare benefits (*bonos*) maintained through royalties from hydrocarbon taxes. As MAS political success was profoundly dependent on the maintenance of these welfare services, pressure increased to find new sources for hydrocarbon exploration and extraction, even in protected areas. This was exacerbated as global commodity prices started to fall in 2017.[61] In the early days, Chávez in Venezuela, Morales in Bolivia and Correa in Ecuador imposed changes on privatised extractive sectors, increasing state control and state royalties.[62] However, according to Eduardo Gudynas, there is a link between the developmentalist agendas of Latin American governments, based on the intensification of extractivism, and the increasing deterioration of conditions for democracy. Gudynas suggests that Latin American democracies in which the president and the executive have almost unlimited power between elections support extractivism, while extractivism further enforces the authoritarian characteristics of those regimes.[63] The rights of those who resist extractivism are often violated, and, indeed, Indigenous peoples' rights are in danger in all Latin American countries that practise extractivism.[64] In the case of progressive politics in Brazil, Markus Kröger has observed that the centralisation of economic decision-making power related to the extractivist boom weakened conditions for democracy during the

[58]In 2011, Morales accused the CIDOB and the CONAMAQ of conspiring with foreign NGOs and the United States. See, for example, 'Los indígenas conspiran con EE.UU. y defienden al capitalismo, denuncia Evo', *Bolpress*, 22 Aug. 2011. In addition to the TIPNIS conflict, the following year saw multiple protests over salaries and conditions of work by diverse actors, such as the COB, health-sector workers and police forces. During 2012, MAS politicians started to announce that the CIDOB, the COB, health workers, police officers and political parties from the opposition were organising a coup d'état against the government, reported Cuban and Russian news channels. See 'Denuncian intentonas golpistas contra de Evo Morales', *Cubadebate*, 12 May 2012, available at www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2012/05/12/denuncian-intentonas-golpistas-contra-gobierno-de-evo-morales, last access 11 Sept. 2023; 'Bolivia en guardia: ¿Golpe de estado a la vista?', *RT Actualidad*, 24 June 2012, available at http://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/view/47762-Bolivia-en-guardia-golpe-de-estado-a-la-vista, last access 11 Sept. 2023.

[59]Luis Tapia, 'Análisis de Bolivia', in Maristella Svampa *et al.* (eds.), *América Latina, entre movilización y derechización: Cuatro análisis de país* (Quito: Fundación Rosa Luxemburg, 2017), pp. 29–40.

[60]Jeffery R. Webber, 'Evo Morales and the Political Economy of the Passive Revolution in Bolivia, 2006–2015', *Third World Quarterly*, 37: 10 (2016), pp. 1855–76.

[61]Huascar Salazar, 'Las condiciones para la crisis política de 2019 en Bolivia: Una mirada crítica más allá de la estéril polarización', in Claros and Díaz Cuéllar (eds.), *Crisis política en Bolivia 2019–2020*, p. 142.

[62]Eduardo Gudynas, *Extractivismos: Ecología, economía y política de un modo de entender el desarrollo y la Naturaleza* (La Paz: CEDIB, 2015), p. 350.

[63]*Ibid.*, pp. 347–8.

[64]*Ibid.*, p. 139.

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presidencies of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff, making way for the rise of large-scale landowners and other business sectors that eventually replaced progressive politics with Bolsonaro's authoritarianism.[65]

Contrary to their discourses, Latin American progressive states have thus adopted a state-led model of development, which 'advance[s] the destruction of lands-beings-knowledges, what many understand as Mother Earth'.[66] Portrayed as the crystallisation of diverse Andean and Amazonian Indigenous epistemologies, worldviews and means of livelihood, the politics of the MAS had raised many expectations for socially and ecologically sustainable alternatives to unsustainable development solutions.[67] Yet the TIPNIS case clearly demonstrated that the MAS regime's priorities had changed, thereby unveiling the falsity of its environmental and pro-Indigenous proposals, according to Rivera Cusicanqui.[68] One of the CONAMAQ *tatas* narrated his disappointment about the discrepancies between high expectations for societal change and actual authoritarian state developmentalist practices in the following way:

> We all believed in the process of change, but it became a tyranny. Our Indigenous rights were constantly violated. The MAS appropriated our Indigenous flag, the *wiphala*, and it appropriated our *suma qamaña* [*vivir bien*], our way of living in harmony with our surroundings, the lands and rivers of our ancestors […] Although it came to power by talking about *pachamama*, it did not respect our natural resources, but rather stole them.[69]

The MAS executive's commitment to unsustainable extractivism and what one of my interlocutors called 'savage capitalism',[70] also disappointed many urban White and Mestizo academics, NGO personnel and students who identified with environmental agendas, climate activism and the protection of Indigenous rights. Meanwhile, García Linera accused defenders of the TIPNIS of 'Western environmental colonialism', which, according to him, hindered Bolivia's national development. New legislation was put in place to control NGO activities, and constant inspections and surprise audits became common, as described by the director of a La Paz-based environmental NGO: 'We were persecuted every day. We were on the blacklist. We were constantly inspected and threatened: rent inspections, tax inspections, surprise audits; control, control, control. I started to feel very fearful; my family and my workplace were repressed; I stopped saying things aloud and giving interviews for the media because of the fear. It was no longer a democracy.'[71]

[65]Markus Kröger, 'Neo-Mercantilist Capitalism and Post-2008 Cleavages in Economic Decision-Making Power in Brazil', *Third World Quarterly*, 33: 5 (2012), pp. 887–901.

[66]Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), p. 6.

[67]On the difficulties of translating *vivir bien* ideas into state bureaucratic practices, see Eija Ranta, 'State Governance and Micropractices of Power in the Process of Decolonizing the State in Bolivia', *Forum for Development Studies*, 45: 3 (2018), pp. 363–86.

[68]Rivera Cusicanqui, *Mito y desarrollo*, p. 45.

[69]Author interview, La Paz, 4 March 2020.

[70]Author interview, La Paz, 2 March 2020.

[71]Author interview, La Paz, 2 March 2020.

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While this interlocutor was also seriously alarmed by the actions and policies of the right-wing interim government, they also described their feelings after the ousting of Morales as relief:

> We have been freed of the dictatorship into which we were heading. We were not there yet, but it was an authoritarianism in which the MAS had total power. With two-thirds of the legislature, Morales started to do what he wanted and became authoritarian. He completely changed. He was a charismatic, authoritarian caudillo, who already thought of himself as a pharaoh.

The developmentalist narrative of Morales' authoritarianism gained purchase among the most vulnerable rural Indigenous groups who resisted extractivist practices and their urban supporters in environmental and human-rights NGOs, activist groups and academia, whose opinions of the Indigenous president changed drastically. Clearing the forests for coca cultivation, export agriculture and extractivism can also be seen as background factors in the massive 2019 forest fires in the Chiquitania, which seriously disappointed urban climate activists and youth and turned them against the MAS executive just prior to the 2019 elections.[72] However, Anders Burman has suggested that for some urban environmentalists, environmental issues became instrumental in creating 'a non-indigenous middle-class oppositional politics as distinction', which had some colonialist and racist undertones towards Morales and his extractivist policies.[73]

I study this dimension further in the following section, in which I present the decolonial Indigenous critique, this time by Aymara *indianista* scholars. Their narrative of authoritarianism, while condemning the deterioration of multiple forms of democracy during Morales' regime, explains why many still find comfort in supporting the MAS. It also entails a critique of the liberal democratic narrative by addressing the questions of coloniality and racism.

Narrative of Coloniality

The third strand which narrated Morales' regime through the prism of authoritarianism sought explanations for his conduct in the continuity of coloniality. This narrative was particularly prevalent among my Aymara *indianista* interlocutors from El Alto and other areas surrounding La Paz, who attributed authoritarianism to the conditions of colonialism. While there may not be explicit discussion of authoritarianism, per se, in decoloniality thinking, it implicitly transcends all analysis. According to Aníbal Quijano, the state's exercise of political authority comprises one of the four foundational dimensions of the coloniality of power: the political administration of the Americas – the vehicle of domination – was established for the exploitation of the territories, resources and racialised labour of Indigenous populations for the benefit of the European coloniser, who controlled

[72]Zegada *et al.*, *Disonancias*, pp. 253–4.

[73]Anders Burman, 'A Taste for Ecology: Class, Coloniality, and the Rise of a Bolivian Urban Environmental Movement', *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, 17: 2 (2022), pp. 193–218, quotation p. 213.

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the system of authority and excluded the racialised local populations.[74] As Walter Mignolo observes, coloniality was, and is, the 'darker side of Western modernity'.[75] Typical of coloniality is its fixation on racial categorisations and resource exploitation. Indeed, European wealth and welfare derived from colonial conquest, expropriation and dispossession of resources, and the ethnic and gendered enslavement and subordination of Black and Indigenous populations. Amongst the Aymara in Bolivia, as Burman has demonstrated, the distinction between historical colonialism and contemporary coloniality has never been straightforward. For the Aymara, coloniality is 'a process that is intimately interlaced with modernity and the national Bolivian project'.[76]

While many *indianistas* self-identified as vocal critics of Morales' regime, they did not necessarily perceive the problems to be inherent to the conduct of the MAS, or the content of their politics. Instead, they claimed that the failings they criticised in the MAS executive – the prevalence of White middle- and upper-class professionals in the MAS executive, caudillismo, clientelism and corruption – were all long-term features of the Bolivian state caused by the legacy of colonialism and the continuity of coloniality in today's racialised societies. Morales' authoritarianism demonstrated, I was told, that he was not able to resist the coloniality of the state, but was, rather, engulfed by its authoritarian and racialising practices.[77] *Indianista* scholar Pablo Mamani Ramírez, for example, has called the Bolivian Plurinational State under Morales a neocolonial state. Questioning the state discourse of decolonisation, he noted that 'it does not seem ethical or moral to decolonise through the descendants of the colonisers themselves, that is, through a colonial state'.[78]

According to an Aymara *indianista* youth activist with whom I shared a conversation over a cup of coffee in March 2020, the October 2019 protests against the MAS executive were justified, 'because someone had to make Evo Morales understand that he cannot play with power'.[79] This view seemed to parallel the liberal democratic narrative, as the activist told me enthusiastically: 'During October, the civic movement for democracy […] was legitimate and truly democratic. Those popular sectors that were marginalised by the former government aligned with the middle classes and youth. This movement was very important, because [it] criticised authoritarianism and lack of transparency.'[80]

The activist then emphasised that many *indianistas* and *kataristas* had been critical of Morales and the MAS executive. Their key concern was that they felt that the MAS had instrumentalised indigeneity. Despite decolonising discourses, ministerial

[74]Aníbal Quijano, 'The Challenge of the "Indigenous Movement" in Latin America', *Socialism and Democracy*, 19: 3 (2005), pp. 55–78.

[75]Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[76]Anders Burman, '*Chachawarmi*: Silence and Rival Voices on Decolonisation and Gender Politics in Andean Bolivia', *Journal of Latin America Studies*, 43: 1 (2011), p. 87.

[77]Author interview, La Paz, 24 Aug. 2018.

[78]Pablo Mamani Ramírez, *El estado neo-colonial: Una mirada al proceso de la lucha por el poder y sus contradicciones en Bolivia* (La Paz: Rincón Ediciones, 2017), p. 163.

[79]Author interview, La Paz, 6 March 2020.

[80]*Ibid.*

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positions, for example, were occupied primarily by '*blancos, mestizos y criollos*', as the youth activist exclaimed in annoyance, a tradition familiar from former neoliberal governments.[81] This contradictory situation was described to me in 2018 by an elderly Aymara *indianista* activist and former member of the *katarista* Indigenous party with whom I had interacted several times over the years: 'Morales created lots of hope, but essentially continued with the same old ways', he said, arguing that 'no changes were made in the power structure'.[82] He continued to explain these discrepancies by referring to the performativity of the MAS' Indigenous politics: 'Coloniality creates a situation in which [White] intellectuals produce artificial interpretations of what indigeneity is and should be, while Indigenous people themselves do not participate in politics.'[83] This continuation of coloniality not only excluded Indigenous peoples from state decision-making processes, but also became increasingly repressive, as the *indianista* youth activist observed: 'Some Indigenous groups were repressed by authoritarian means. Evo Morales said that he co-governed with Indigenous people, but those he oppressed most severely were Indigenous.'[84]

According to both of my *indianista* interlocutors, an important tool in the continuation of coloniality by the MAS was its appropriation of clientelistic networks. In weakly institutionalised states like Bolivia, citizens seek individual and collective benefits, such as jobs and public investments (*obras*), from patrons. Clientelism enables them to create at least some kind of direct engagement, albeit brief, with the state. Through her long-term ethnographic engagement with the citizens of El Alto, Sian Lazar has argued that 'clientelism is used by clients to assert a greater representativity in politics, which they do by developing personalised relationships with politicians'.[85] The MAS demonstrated a deep mistrust of traditional state institutions; consequently, instead of strengthening institutional mechanisms of redistribution (i.e. taxation),[86] it took advantage of clientelistic networks for the redistribution of state resources to MAS supporters and previously marginalised groups.

Because of major improvements in material wellbeing, issues such as the deterioration of liberal democracy or the centralising of power in the hands of the MAS executive appeared secondary for many in such places as El Alto, according to the Aymara youth activist. They explained to me that, although Morales was increasingly perceived as an authoritarian caudillo and the MAS faced numerous corruption scandals – an issue closely linked to clientelism, as Lazar has demonstrated[87] –

[81]*Mestizo* refers to a person of mixed Spanish and Indigenous origin. *Criollo* refers to a person born in Latin America to a family of European origin.

[82]Author interview, La Paz, 24 Aug. 2018.

[83]*Ibid.* Nancy Postero has examined the performative politics of indigeneity in detail in *The Indigenous State*.

[84]Author interview, La Paz, 24 Aug. 2018.

[85]Sian Lazar, 'Personalist Politics, Clientelism and Citizenship: Local Elections in El Alto, Bolivia', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 23: 2 (2004), pp. 231–2.

[86]According to Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky, the main source of tax revenue in Bolivia is value-added tax (VAT), which lays disproportionate burdens on poorer households; there is no wealth or personal income tax, making the tax system the 'least redistributive in the region'. See Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky, 'Development and Human Rights in Bolivia: Advances, Contradictions, and Challenges', *Latin American Policy*, 11: 1 (2020), pp. 126–47.

[87]Lazar, 'Personalist Politics'.

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'many things about Evo were tolerated because at least there was some redistribution'.[88] The elderly *katarista* had already referenced this same issue in September 2018, when they called this behaviour 'colonial fatality'. According to them, an aspect of coloniality is that 'a person always sings the songs of the one who has the money, no matter the agenda'.[89] It was also pertinent that people from popular sectors were able to identify with Morales. They saw themselves in the political leader's features and in his way of talking and acting, and felt that, through him, they had a more intimate connection with state affairs. However, the youth activist recalled that, prior to the 2019 elections, many started to feel that Morales had become too arrogant about his own indispensability, intimidating the electorate in El Alto, for example, with the threat of terminating their *obras* if they failed to vote for him. Nonetheless, the *katarista* told me that after Morales' surprising ousting, 'many felt orphaned':[90] as if their father had left them to cope with the rapidly emerging racism and violence all alone.

It is here that the youth activist showed their greatest concern and disappointment with the liberal democratic narrative. While many (not all) who utilised what I call the liberal democratic narrative of authoritarianism were convinced that Morales' ousting had restored democracy to Bolivia, the *indianista* youth activist disagreed. In their view, Añez, representing an evangelical religious sect, right-wing landowners and lowland agribusiness, was a true marker of the return of racist authoritarianism and the colonial exploitation of Indigenous peoples. They explained to me in disgust that '[Añez] acted in a very authoritarian manner from the start. She started to accuse almost anyone of sedition.'[91] While they seemed proud to have struggled side by side with others in the October protests, they told me that in the aftermath of the protests they became disillusioned with the middle-class insensitivity to Indigenous politics. The youth activist felt that many urban middle-class people 'were only interested in their own vote, but they did not ask why some Aymaras still continued to vote for Evo'.[92] With the burning of the *wiphala* – the emblem used as a flag to represent Indigenous Andean peoples[93] – and the meticulous highlighting of the importance of the Bolivian flag, Bible and nation-state (in place of plurinationalism), it was as if the interim government – comprising neoliberal political figures and economic elites who were making a comeback – and parts of the democracy movement were saying that Indigenous people were no longer welcome in national arenas.[94]

The massacre at Senkata petrol plant in El Alto, where the military brutally supressed protesters, was a turning point, the *indianista* youth activist observed, because many in El Alto felt that the liberal democracy movement did not condemn

[88]Author interview, La Paz, 6 March 2020.
[89]Author interview, La Paz, 24 Aug. 2018.
[90]*Ibid.*
[91]Author interview, La Paz, 6 March 2020.
[92]*Ibid.*
[93]Franco Limber, *Wiphala: Historia real de un símbolo de lucha* (El Alto: Jichha, 2020).
[94]Author interview, La Paz, 6 March 2020. For a description of how the Ultra-Right took advantage of the popular uprising, see Raúl Zibechi, 'Bolivia: Un levantamiento popular aprovechado por la ultraderecha', *Desinformémonos: Periodismo de abajo*, 11 Nov. 2019, available at https://desinformemonos.org/bolivia-un-levantamiento-popular-aprovechado-por-la-ultraderecha/, last access 11 Sept. 2023.

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Añez's commands sufficiently; it was as if the lives of poor Aymara did not matter, or worse, their killing was considered justified because they were perceived as *masistas*.[95] These views also targeted many academic scholars and journalists, who, according to my *indianista* interlocutor, were surprisingly silent about Añez's conduct. Consequently, although continuing to criticise the MAS strongly, some *indianistas* decided to vote for it again in the October 2020 elections, because the other options were considered even worse.[96] The Aymara youth activist explained this as due to resentment against White superiority: 'Although the *indianistas* have been the most critical towards Evo, the *pititas* had a very paternalistic attitude towards people in El Alto and they were saying that we cannot think independently, that Evo is using us.'[97] Despite being suspicious of Morales and García Linera, MAS figures such as the new vice-president, David Choquehuanca – an Aymara – raised hopes for new kinds of politics within the MAS.

Conclusions

My goal with this article has been to nuance the simplistic and polarised coup discourse in Bolivia by highlighting multiple oppositional actors' heterogeneous and complex interpretations of authoritarianism under the MAS. My overarching argument has been that the birth and circulation of what I call 'narratives of authoritarianism' help citizens to lend meaning to their contradictory experiences in a context in which enormous hopes and expectations for a major decolonising and democratising state-transformation process have largely been dashed. People articulated their disagreements with the MAS government through the discourse of authoritarianism. By narrating – each in their own diverse way – the milestones along the route taken by the MAS regime led by Morales as it seemed to gradually centralise power and weaken pluralism, my interlocutors were able to make sense of their disillusion with what José Nuñez del Prado calls a 'truncated Indigenous utopia'.[98] Furthermore, narratives were integral to legitimising protest actions. By emphasising how authoritarian Morales had become, my interlocutors seemed to be reassuring themselves that their opposition activism was justified, even if it had resulted in an uncertain future.

The Bolivian case demonstrates that the decolonising era of plurinationalism failed to fulfil its promises, ultimately being more about performance and discourse than an enactment of structural change for the inclusion and emancipation of its plural proponents.[99] Morales' state-co-opted decolonisation project did not

[95]There were mixed views on this issue among my interlocutors. Some agreed with the views of the Aymara youth activist, lamenting that Añez and other politicians had appropriated the movement for democracy by perpetrating abuse and violence. The representative of the environmentalist NGO, for example, agreed with the *indianista* critique that 'the [interim] government is very similar to the previous authoritarianism'. An influential ex-minister of the MNR also told me that 'even I am afraid of the current [interim] government', while another former MNR minister hoped to see Añez as president in the future.

[96]It has been suggested that many voted for the MAS in the 2020 elections because Añez's administration had been so bad (massacres, corruption, the Covid-19 pandemic, among other issues), and there were no alternative left-wing or Indigenous options.

[97]Author interview, La Paz, 6 March 2020.

[98]Nuñez del Prado, *Utopía indígena truncada*.

[99]Postero, *The Indigenous State*.

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'engender liberations with respect to thinking, being, knowing, understanding, and living'[100] – quite the contrary. By framing my data within the broader conversation about the unmet expectations of decolonisation and democratic transformation under the Plurinational State, I have located the article in the ongoing discussion about the shortcomings and successes of progressive administrations in contemporary Latin America. I suggest that learning from citizens' own narratives and experiences of authoritarianism is vital to enhancing the self-understanding – and self-criticism – of progressive projects in Latin America.

This article has raised at least three challenges to the progressive construction of decolonising politics and new forms of democracy. The first is the personalisation of power and subsequent attempts by the ruling elite to stretch the boundaries of democracy in order to remain in power. While today democracy is the rule in Latin America, it is not a matter of course. It is fragile in countries like Bolivia where economic and ethnic inequalities are stark and where the history of military dictatorships is still a vivid memory for many. Furthermore, the country's colonial legacy has assigned it the uncomfortable honour of holding world records in the number of coups, revolutions and other revolts.[101]

The second relates to the recurrent violations of Indigenous rights and environmental justice through extractivist politics and state developmentalism, exacerbated by the vulnerable position of the Global South countries, such as Bolivia, within the global capitalist system. The latter is a historically unequal relationship which is far from finding a solution, even though the dynamics of world politics have been rapidly changing over the past decade. While both the twenty-first-century socialists and more reformist social democrats of the Latin American Pink Tide portrayed themselves as major allies of Indigenous peoples, in practice disputes and conflicts over extractivism, development and growth, as well as decoloniality and democracy, have challenged these alliances.

The third is the continued challenge of the prevalence of exclusionary practices and structural racism, as well as the appropriation of indigeneity by totalising state projects. Consequently, it appears as if Indigenous movements throughout Latin America have started to rethink and redefine their relationships with the progressive political parties. Even if progressive politics has opened various opportunities and initiated several notable reforms, including constitutional assemblies, recuperation of the role of the state in the economy and the redistribution of resources through social policies,[102] many transformations still remain inadequate and have had contradictory effects, which is why there is still more to do to achieve a decolonised world beyond both neoliberal globalisation and state-led developmentalism.

In Bolivia, oppositional narratives helped people to organise their understanding of the world, interpret the events of 2019, and manage and mediate complex and difficult realities in times of crisis. Yet, while the multiple narratives came together

[100]Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, p. 4.

[101]James Dunkerley, 'Evo Morales, the "Two Bolivias" and the Third Bolivian Revolution', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 39: 1 (2007), p. 137.

[102]Jean Grugel and Pía Riggirozzi, 'Post-Neoliberalism in Latin America: Rebuilding and Reclaiming the State after Crisis', *Development and Change*, 43: 1 (2012), pp. 1–21; María Teresa Zegada, 'Crisis y elecciones: ¿Fin de ciclo o renovación de la política?', in Claros and Díaz Cuéllar (eds.), *Crisis política en Bolivia 2019–2020*, p. 215.

under the label of authoritarianism, their power to convince people was not equal. Concerns with the defence of liberal democracy have gained clear prominence over struggles involving Indigenous self-determination, environmental justice and decoloniality. Right-wing political leaders, including authoritarian and xenophobic far-right candidates, have intensified this through the appropriation of democracy narratives for their own undemocratic purposes. When totalising progressive political projects crumble, there are few obstacles preventing the conservative Right, or even the Far Right, from taking over these avenues for their own purposes and taking them to extremes of authoritarianism, as we are starting to see throughout Latin America.[103]

By identifying three nuanced and situated storylines and timespans connected with the definitions and causes of authoritarianism, I have highlighted the *multiple* views and heterogeneity that exist within and between oppositional Indigenous and popular movements, as well as the urban middle classes in Bolivia. While political leaders tend to polarise contemporary Bolivian politics into a battle between Left and Right, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and *masistas* and non-*masistas*, these polarisations do not resonate with the huge complexities on the ground, as demonstrated by my qualitative data. My aim here has been to support a plurality of views, which, I believe, is necessary and crucial for decolonisation and democracy.

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Narrativas de autoritarismo en tiempos de crisis: Democracia y limitantes de las políticas progresistas en la Bolivia plurinacional

En Bolivia, las expectativas para una sociedad descolonizada dieron paso a una crisis política en el otoño de 2019. Al discutir las limitantes de las políticas progresistas para abonar la democracia, este artículo identifica tres narrativas de autoritarismo – la liberal democrática, la desarrollista y la colonial – con las que los opositores a Evo Morales enmarcan su desilusión con su gobierno. Se sostiene que estas múltiples narrativas dieron sentido a experiencias contradictorias en un contexto en el que esperanzas por un proceso de transformación hacia un Estado más descolonizante involucionaron en una profunda polarización de la sociedad boliviana. Los eventos en Bolivia se discuten en el contexto de un creciente autoritarismo a lo largo de América Latina.

[103]Sonia E. Alvarez, 'Maneuvering the "U-Turn": Comparative Lessons from the Pink Tide and Forward-Looking Strategies for Feminist and Queer Activisms in Latin America', in Elisabeth Jay Friedman (ed.), *Seeking Rights from the Left: Gender, Sexuality, and the Latin American Pink Tide* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), pp. 305–6.

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Palabras clave: Morales; golpe de estado; crisis; elecciones; autoritarismo; democracia; políticas progresistas; Bolivia; narrativa

Narrativas de autoritarismo em tempos de crise: Democracia e limitações da política progressista na Bolívia plurinacional

Na Bolívia, as expectativas de uma sociedade descolonizada transformaram-se em uma crise política no outono de 2019. Discutindo as limitações da política progressista no cultivo da democracia, este artigo identifica três narrativas de autoritarismo – democrático liberal, desenvolvimentista e colonial – que os oponentes de Evo Morales costumavam usar para enquadrar sua desilusão com o governo. Argumenta que estas narrativas múltiplas dão sentido a experiências contraditórias em um contexto em que as esperanças de um grande processo de descolonização do Estado se transformaram em uma profunda polarização da sociedade boliviana. Os acontecimentos na Bolívia são discutidos no contexto do crescente autoritarismo em toda a América Latina.

Palavras-chave: Morales; golpe de estado; crise; eleições; autoritarismo; democracia; política progressista; Bolívia; narrativa

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