

Economic Crisis and Political Infighting Loom Large as Bolivia Votes

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By GENEVIEVE GLATSKY

LA PAZ, Bolivia — Bolivia held a presidential election on Sunday that many analysts expect will end the 20-year dominance of the ruling socialist party, possibly returning the country to the right.

The election comes amid an economic crisis, with many voters frustrated with the socialist project that once drew broad support.

For two decades, Bolivian politics have been defined by the Movement for Socialism party, known by its Spanish acronym, MAS, led by Evo Morales, a former union leader. Mr. Morales was elected in 2005 as Bolivia's first Indigenous president in a nation long dominated by a wealthy, white elite.

But this year, two right-wing politicians — a center-right businessman, Samuel Doria Medina, and a conservative former president, Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga — were leading the polls. In a crowded field of eight, neither was expected to win a majority of votes, most likely forcing a runoff in October.

Why is this election important?

This is the first time since 2002 that Mr. Morales or a Morales stand-in will not be on the ballot.

"It is a referendum of over two decades of MAS government," said Gustavo Flores-Macias, a Cornell University professor who focuses on Latin American politics.

During Mr. Morales's three terms, Bo-

livia lifted hundreds of thousands of people out of poverty and invested heavily in infrastructure, education and health.

But his contested 2019 bid for a fourth term set off mass protests, deadly crackdowns, accusations of electoral fraud and a democratic crisis that forced him to briefly leave the country. In 2020, his ally, Luis Arce, won the presidency, but the two later split in a bitter power struggle that fractured the party.

Mr. Morales is barred from running again by Bolivia's courts, which cited term limits, and Mr. Arce is not seeking re-election amid low approval ratings.

Mr. Morales has called on supporters to cast null votes in protest of the court's decision and has declined to endorse a candidate, a decision that experts say is likely to enable a right-wing victory.

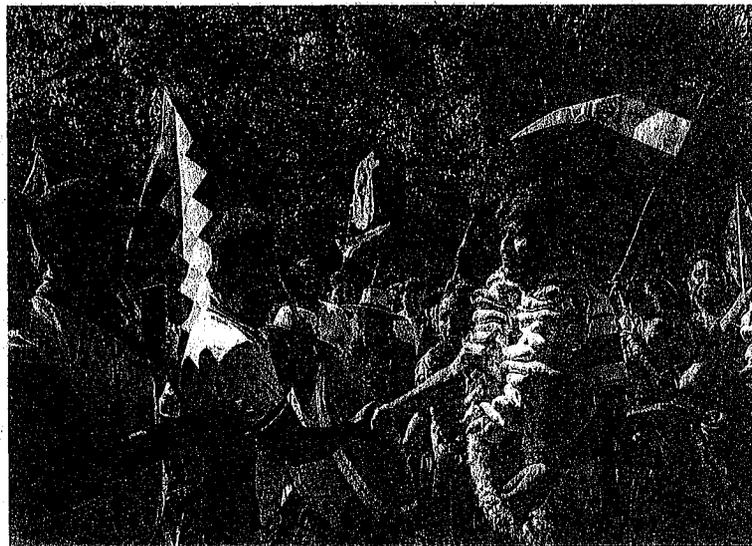
Nearly all candidates have called for slashing government spending, including fuel subsidies — a hallmark of the MAS party's socialist economic model. The move would increase gas prices.

Who are the top candidates?

Mr. Doria Medina was leading the polls, followed closely by Mr. Quiroga and trailed by the leftist Senate president, Adrónico Rodríguez.

This is Mr. Doria Medina's fourth presidential bid. Mr. Quiroga served as president from 2001 to 2002, and ran for president two other times.

Mr. Rodríguez is a former Morales protégé and longtime MAS member. However, he is running under another party's banner. His support has been dropping in the polls, though it could prove to be



The courts barred Mr. Morales, right, from running for a fourth term, citing term limits. He urged his supporters to cast null ballots, to protest his absence.

higher in rural areas where surveys do not reach. There was a MAS candidate on the ballot, but he was at the bottom of the polls.

What are the main issues?

The economy tops voter concerns. Fuel shortages, rising prices and a lack of access to U.S. dollars and imported goods have provoked fury and protests over the past few years.

"Everything has basically doubled in price," said Leni Serrano, 31, a produc-

tion engineer in Cochabamba, who said she planned to vote for whichever right-wing candidate was polling highest before the election. "Products that we used to see every day are no longer available." "There is no work," she added, "which makes things more complicated."

Mr. Arce, who had been Mr. Morales's finance minister, was credited with steering Bolivia's commodities-fueled economic boom. But with gas revenues now dwindling, his government struggles even to import fuel, and it is blamed

by many voters for the country's economic woes.

In an interview this past week, Mr. Arce rejected that characterization, saying his administration's efforts to right the economy were being sabotaged by the legislature, which he said had blocked his attempts to access international funds.

"External financing is being strangled so that we don't do well in government," he said.

The country has also endured years of political and legal turmoil: Mr. Morales frequently calls for protests that block the movement of goods and exacerbate fuel shortages. Delayed judicial elections have deepened concerns about court politicization. In addition, Mr. Morales currently faces accusations of statutory rape, which he says are politically motivated.

Mr. Flores-Macias, the Cornell professor, said, "All of these things are just creating this constant background sense that the government is malfunctioning."

The country needs change, said Alejandro Molina, 22, a mechanical engineering student who planned to vote for Mr. Doria Medina or Mr. Quiroga.

"This economic model can't continue at all," he said.

When will the results be known?

Results were expected to start coming in Sunday night.

If no candidate secures a majority, or at least 40 percent of the vote with a 10-point lead over the runner-up, a runoff election will be scheduled for Oct. 19.

María Silvia Trigo contributed reporting from Santa Cruz, Bolivia.