



Mario Faust-Scalisi

**Violence in Bolivia in October and November 2019  
– intersectional discriminations and a divided society**

**Institut für Sozialstrategie**

Laichingen – Jena – Berlin

Bleichwiese 3, 89150 Laichingen  
[www.institut-fuer-sozialstrategie.de](http://www.institut-fuer-sozialstrategie.de)  
[kontakt@institut-fuer-sozialstrategie.org](mailto:kontakt@institut-fuer-sozialstrategie.org)

Berlin, November 2019.

**Resumen [es]:**

Violentas protestas caracterizan Bolivia actualmente. Las razones parecen claras – todo esto es relacionado con la elección de octubre y la dimisión de Evo Morales. Pero esto solo describe la superficie, tenemos que mirar que estar detrás. Así podemos entender que la sociedad de Bolivia es dividida y que hay formas masivas de discriminaciones interseccionales. Esto es lo que lleva a la violencia masiva que actualmente es visible en Bolivia. Este punto de vista se usa en este texto para analizar y discutir los antecedentes sociales de la erupción de violencia actual de Bolivia.

**Abstract [de]:**

Gewalttätige Proteste prägen derzeit Bolivien. Und zunächst scheint das Bild eindeutig, dass diese mit der Wahl von Oktober und dann dem Rücktritt von Evo Morales zusammenhängen. Aber dies beschreibt nur die Oberfläche. Es gilt dahinter zu schauen, dann zeigt sich, dass eine gespaltene Gesellschaft und starke intersektionelle Diskriminierung zur massiven Gewalt führten, wie sie derzeit in Bolivien sichtbar wird. Genau dieser Blick soll hier gewagt werden, die gesellschaftlichen Hintergründe für den Ausbruch von Gewalt analysiert und diskutiert werden.

---

Since weeks protests and violence are reported from many parts of Bolivia that changed their character after Evo Morales stepped down as president and went into exile. Pictures show very different protesters, differing in gender, differing in ethnical background and differing in self-presentation. Here the aim is not to discuss, whether these protests were or are necessary, to discuss their different aims, but to look at what they are standing for. And it is not anyhow revolutionary to stress that they show how split society in Bolivia is. But Bolivian society isn't only split along one or two lines, many different lines divide the country and show at the same time how far intersectional discriminations coin Bolivian society still today. This background of the late 2019 protests and violence is topic of the paper.

A divided society in Bolivia is nothing new to the country. It may be argued about which tensions are worst or when they have been less important, but regional, ethnical, economical or gender divides are part of the picture of Bolivia in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, at least until Evo Morales became president (see Crabtree & Whitehead 2008). At the same time, an active civil society developed from these tensions and in response to them. Especially collective indigenous actors became active in the 1990s and 2000s and have been one major pillar allowing Evo Morales to become president. The society's divisions supported the election of Morales; he used and referred to existing inequality to mark him as the one person fighting for justice for the before suppressed, because of their ethnicity, language, regional descent or economic status. But the victory of Evo Morales wasn't a further step to strengthen civil society in Bolivia, more it was a kind of final blow for it – Morales started from beginning to establish a 'new' state. Conceptualized it was done to fight against discriminations, but it only led to new discriminations as others complained fast. While civil society developed in years of a weak state due to neoliberal reforms until the mid 2000s, the policies of Evo Morales claimed to make civil society not necessary anymore and, in the end, at least made it weaker and weaker. Under the rule of Morales, the centralized state decided about development again, not a regional or local civil society that took part before. And the centralized state decided which forms of discrimination to recognize and to tackle (see Shakow 2019).

Nevertheless, civil society never disappeared in these years, it only became less visible. Wherever state action was limited civil society organized itself. This can be seen as a strength of civil society in organizing itself. At the same time, it limited possible influence on state politics and policies – since civil society only existed where the state was weak, state policies remained to a high degree untouched by non-partisan civil interests. While under Morales civil society was pictured as more or less inactive, e.g. minority interests were all claimed to be represented by the state itself, truth was, it still existed, but more in a parallel structure. Some divisions of Bolivian society could be reduced in the Morales years, e.g. poverty rates have fallen, but at the same time other divisions remained or even got more profound, as between regions in Bolivia. And even though indigenous interests found a self-declared first representative in Evo Morales, ranging from indigenous symbol use to minority rights and language policies, the links and connections weakened over years. Plus, in this time those before leading in Bolivia found themselves now discriminated – at least from their perspective. All those who not felt represented tried to establish and use civil society structures. Civil society remained active but fragmented in these years. But at the same time, it was pictured as violent in its activities by the central state – a picture that has effects until today. While this is and was an exaggeration and generalization not fitting empiricism, what fitted empiricism was the perpetuation of injustice and divide by civil society groups. Their fragmentation made i.a. the realization

of minority rights difficult and e.g. hindered the development of gender equality (see e.g. CIVICUS 2008 63ff.).

The presidency of Morales led to many developments and changes, especially for the indigenous parts of Bolivian society. But they never established a stable society or a rule of law that was more than a label. Since the administration was not supportive of civil society actors, as those defending human rights, most criticism was rejected. However, many reforms needed time to work properly or never were realized as claimed. Symbol for the division between claims and pictures painted and reality were the efforts of Morales to allow for his third and then fourth reelection despite this being against the constitution. He even lost a referendum about a change of constitution to allow for a fourth term; but this did not stop him, with the help of the Constitutional Court, to have another election day with him as candidate in October 2019. At the same time all these years crimes of the past were not prosecuted, of special importance not those of the years of authoritarian rule from 1964 to 1982. First, the still strong army stood against such action, second, the lacking willingness to focus on reconciliation has to be and was seen as a signal to the various sides of past and ongoing conflicts Bolivia: The conservative parts of Bolivian society, linked to the army, generally not-indigenous and from the lowlands, had no need to question the past. And those who have been victims, the Andean and poor-indigenous parts of society, saw no real fight for their rights. Even though a commission for reconciliation and truth was established in 2017, its work remained slow and fragmented. The feeling of impunity and of power allowing for violence and crimes fostered ongoing insecurity along society divides (see Human Rights Watch 2019).

Taking this, it is reasonable to write of ongoing intersectional discriminations in Bolivia under Morales and difficulties to overcome them by rule or law. Especially being female\* – always understood in binary terms in reports about it – and indigenous proved to make discriminations much more probable. And here economic circumstances were the area where most discrimination was perceived. If a women\*<sup>1</sup> was from a rural region, too, her general situation and chances were even worse, she had in general statistically less education, less resources and faced more and graver discriminations. Even though the rural situation improved in Bolivia in the Morales years, being a rural indigenous women\* in the Bolivian Andeans remained a health risk under Morales (see Grown & Lundwall 2016). And this ongoing intersectional discrimination did not remain unnoticed, but was a topic struggled about. For some asking about gender equality and women\* empowerment was the same as questioning Morales policies altogether, for others it was a way to lead and change them or parts of them. Either way – Morales could not or has not overcome the divides of Bolivian society. Some major ones he tackled, as the question of indigenous rights, many other were not (or could not be, as others claim) addressed in the same manner, most significantly gender equality but also rural-urban divides and the divide between the Andean and lowland regions. And since civil society was not welcomed to question developments you only could – from governmental perspective – question the administration as such or accept limits of what was achieved so far. Many international actors played the role of taking weaknesses observed to question larger parts of Morales policies (see World Bank 2015).

---

<sup>1</sup> Women\*stands here for persons identifying themselves as women or being identified by media as women, independently if the gender system is thought binary or not. Here the term women\* (as female\*) is used marking the construction behind and the construction of binarism at the same time in a heteronormative system.

And then came the October of 2019. On October the 20<sup>th</sup> 2019 elections were held – Morales fought for a fourth reelection that not few marked as illegal or at least illegitimate. These elections soon were met with suspicion about their regularity. However, after a one day halt to public announcements of results, Morales claimed to be victor with more than 10 percent ahead of the following candidate, making him victor without a need for another electoral round. Immediately violent protest began and not only questioned the result, but often demanded Morales to step down altogether. International actors played their role, too, in this time, as the Organization of American States that declared the elections to have been irregular and claimed a need to hold them again. Soon many protesters in Bolivia demanded new elections, but without Morales taking part. When finally the army “asked” Morales to step down he fled La Paz, resigned and went into exile – to Mexico. With him other high officials of his party resigned, too. And soon after the right-wing Jeanie Áñez swore herself in as new president. All this was overshadowed by major violence against Morales party and high representatives of his administration with the police and army not preventing attacks. Only after Morales resigned major protest in favor of Morales broke out, too (see Alem 2019; Londoño 2019 & Youkee 2019).

All these events showed clashes of groups along still strong dividing lines of Bolivian society. Young against old, urban against rural, poor against those coming up, educated against less educated and all this along ethnical lines, too. Many who had supported Morales for years stood up against him in 2019 – angry about him ignoring the referendum against a fourth term – but not all of them welcomed the changes that followed. It can be written “the right” took advantage of the events or the power vacuum, but it was more a chain of events coined by long lasting divides of Bolivian society that properly describes what happened. It was and is more a moment of “us against them”, stressing again the economic power of the lowlands or ethnical differences that are made synonymous with cultural differences. The protests against Morales saw the Wiphala flag burning, equalizing Morales with indigeneity and his end as president with an end of indigenous “rule” or even rights (see Alem 2019). Evo Morales spoke even before he resigned of a coup d’état by the right and saw actors like the Organization of American States as working in this sense (see Youkee 2019). This position is at least to be questioned. Less to be questioned is that his ultimate resign followed a coup, since the army “asked” for him to step down (see Alem 2019). But these are not the questions discussed here, not the point of this paper.

Here, the question asked is, what lies and lied behind the violence in October and November 2019 in Bolivia. For sure, the obvious reasons were and are the elections and the events that followed. This was even the official reason why Evo Morales stepped down: to stop the bloodshed and the violence, to put an end to the events following the October elections. And yes, the protests were against Morales claiming victory in the first place and days. But they did not stop there. Morales opponents celebrated his end as president as an end of “tyranny” – now all is and can be questioned that developed in the last years in Bolivia (see e.g. Londoño 2019). Since Morales failed morally in the last month as judged by large parts of Bolivian society, now his policies are all under suspicion. Divides and internal struggles that had been held down in the Morales years with attempts to build a strong central state and attempts to at least lessen some divides in their reach, now came and come back to the surface. Interestingly this brought a women\* to power, which could question all written here about the ongoing strong intersectional discriminations in Bolivia. But this would only be a sign of not understanding the intersectional form of discriminations as worked out in studies (see e.g. Ewig 2018). In Bolivia gender inequality is strong, but at least as strong are regional, ethnical or economical inequalities. All those facets of the

ongoing division of Bolivian society have to be seen as background of the outbreaking violence of October and November 2019. Looking only at Morales, the elections of October or major acts or speeches does not cover the picture. What happened and happens is, that hidden, limited or even silenced divides became visible and a mode of acting again – those who opposed the strengthening of indigenous Bolivians or feared a loss of own power or position took a chance seen, while those who gained under Morales reforms lost touch with him. All this led to violence as a form of political expression of civil society groups that lost their ability to act politically. This also means, that the attempts of Morales to weaken civil society backfired in multiple ways in the last weeks. These attempts only covered ongoing divides, and they made civil society groups act violently since no other forms of expression, at least on a widely visible level, were easily reachable anymore. The last months showed the bloody results of not truly working on reconciliation and overcoming the multiple divides of Bolivian society. Intersectional discriminations have been and are still strong in Bolivia – fighting them and fighting the last elections came together, with unclear results so far, but not many signs of hope, that these underlying reasons for clashes of violence will be tackled in the near future. Right now, it is too easy to blame all Morales policies, it is too easy to draw simple lines of “us” and “them”, without offering any way to talk about them, which leaves only violence, but in different forms, for many to express themselves. What lies beneath it and is the reason for challenges Bolivian society faces is not in the focus of many at the moment. But if these topics are not tackled, no lasting solution is in sight. Intersectional discriminations hindered Bolivian development and still hinder it, they lead and led to various forms of violence. Only if modes of not “us” and “them” are established, but dialogues and a true interest to overcome divides, instead of using them politically, reasons for violence and clashes in Bolivia can be overcome in the future.

### Literature and Sources:

Alem, Zeeshan (2019): Bolivia’s Coup Is Still Happening. Everything you wanted to know about Bolivian politics, but were afraid to ask. (The Nation, 19<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2019). URL: <https://www.thenation.com/article/bolivia-coup-morales/> (last visit: 20<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2019).

CIVICUS (2008): Civil Society Index Report. Civil Society in Bolivia: From mobilization to impact. Bolivia. Country Report. URL: [http://www.civicus.org/media/CSI\\_Bolivia\\_Report.pdf](http://www.civicus.org/media/CSI_Bolivia_Report.pdf) (last visit: 20<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2019).

Crabtree, John & Whitehead, Laurence (2008): Unresolved Tensions. Bolivia past and present. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Ewig, Christina (2018): Forging Women’s Substantive Representation: Intersectional Interests, Political Parity, and Pensions in Bolivia. In: Politics & Gender, 14-3 (2018), p. 433-459.

Grown, Caren & Lundwall, Jonna (2016): In Bolivia, being female and indigenous conveys multiple disadvantages (World Bank Blog, 22<sup>nd</sup> Feb. 2016). URL: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/bolivia-being-female-and-indigenous-conveys-multiple-disadvantages> (last visit: 20<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2019).



Human Rights Watch (2019): World Report. Bolivia. Events of 2018. URL:  
[http://www.civicus.org/media/CSI\\_Bolivia\\_Report.pdf](http://www.civicus.org/media/CSI_Bolivia_Report.pdf) (last visit: 20<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2019).

Londoño, Ernesto (2019): Bolivian Leader Evo Morales Steps Down (The New York Times, 10<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2019). URL:  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/10/world/americas/evo-morales-bolivia.html> (last visit: 20<sup>th</sup> Nov 2019).

Shakow, Miriam (2019): The Rise and Fall of “Civil Society” in Bolivia. In: American Anthropologist, 121-3, p. 568-582.

World Bank (2015): Bolivia: Challenges and Constraints to Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Youkee, Mat (2019): Evo Morales alleges coup attempt as Bolivia opposition claims ‘giant fraud’ (The Guardian, 23<sup>rd</sup> Oct. 2019). URL:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/23/bolivia-evo-morales-coup-accusation-opposition-foreign-powers> (last visit: 20<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2019).

**Alle Rechte vorbehalten.**

Abdruck oder vergleichbare Verwendung von Arbeiten des Instituts für Sozialstrategie ist auch in Auszügen nur mit vorheriger schriftlicher Genehmigung gestattet.



Publikationen des IfS unterliegen einem Begutachtungsverfahren durch Fachkolleginnen- und kollegen und durch die Institutsleitung. Sie geben ausschließlich die persönliche Auffassung der Autorinnen und Autoren wieder.