

The real story behind the Bolivia protests isn't the one you're hearing. | The Washington Post

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Here are three key oversimplifications — and why they're wrong

On Nov. 10, Evo Morales, the first indigenous president of Bolivia, resigned after almost 14 years in office. His resignation came after a disputed election on Oct. 20 and two weeks of protests and strikes that paralyzed the country.

These dramatic events have elicited a lot of discussion and analysis. Unfortunately, much of this discussion relies on oversimplifications of what happened. The real story is more complex.

The military wasn't the only force pushing Morales out

Much of the debate over Morales's exit has centered on whether it was a de facto military coup. Those who see it as a coup note that the head of the military announced, on television, that Morales should resign. They also note the police decided to refuse orders to quell the anti-Morales protesters.

But this interpretation misses something important: Many organizations and groups wanted Morales to step down. That includes major labor unions, even those that had traditionally supported him, as well as civic groups, student organizations and more.

That's not surprising. While Bolivia's recent protests have been particularly widespread, Bolivian civil society is one of the most organized and active in the world. People protest more often in Bolivia than in any other country. They also regularly attend meetings of neighborhood associations, civic groups and community organizations. Even street vendors, shoe shiners and fortunetellers join unions and organize collectively.

Nor is this the first time that protests have led to a Bolivian president's resignation. Protests in 2003 and 2004 toppled President Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada, leading to the election that

Morales won in 2005. Sanchez de Lozada's supporters also called his resignation a coup. Those supporters are now protesting against Morales. All this shows how effective protest can be in Bolivia.

Indigenous Bolivians were increasingly divided over Morales

Another portrayal of the protests relies on a similar oversimplification: that it's a battle between indigenous Bolivians and everyone else. In this telling, that indigenous supporters of Morales are blindly loyal, while his opponents are elites willing to bypass the democratic process to get rid of him.

A majority of Bolivians — fully 60 percent — belong to one of many indigenous groups. These groups had traditionally supported Morales. But they are culturally and linguistically diverse. Our research finds indigenous groups increasingly divided over Morales. According to data from the Latin American Public Opinion Project, support for Morales among indigenous groups had declined to 58 percent in 2018, down from 71 percent in 2010. Similarly, in a 2016 referendum on whether Morales should be allowed to run again for reelection beyond the constitutional limit of three terms, nearly 50 percent of indigenous people said no. That contributed to Morales losing in the referendum. He was allowed to run only because Bolivia's Supreme Court overturned the vote.

Clearly, some indigenous people still support Morales. Since his ousting, many indigenous groups have taken to the streets to demand his return to Bolivia from his exile in Mexico and reassume his role as president. Some reports suggest the police are arresting and jailing former Morales party members, fueling indigenous citizens' fear that Bolivia will return to a past in which they were marginalized in the political system.

Morales' legacy is complicated

Bolivians' feelings about Morales are mixed. Many see him as both the best and worst president in recent history. He has been extremely popular and has overseen a drop in poverty as well as economic growth, new infrastructure projects, and investment in health care and education.

Morales also gave voice to a majority indigenous population that had long been excluded from Bolivian politics.

At the same time, many indigenous groups grew frustrated with Morales for favoring natural gas extraction and expanded mining, and because he did not significantly expand indigenous land rights or honor those communities' constitutional rights to be consulted about infrastructure and extraction projects that affected them.

Credible accusations of election fraud against Morales, including irregularities in the vote count, precipitated this crisis — and these accusations are part of long-term concerns about corruption in his administration. Our research shows that, as early as 2010, indigenous people who endured corruption (like being asked to pay a bribe) were much less likely to support Morales. Other research finds corruption experiences can also drive protests.

The Morales government is not unusual

But even here, the Morales government is not unusual. Both corruption, and frustration with corruption, have spread across Latin America.

Dramatic events like the Bolivian protests often beget simple stories. In this case, the stories too often frame complex events as tugs of war between opposing forces, like “indigenous groups vs. the elite.” But such stories obscure more than they reveal.

Morales's departure creates a power vacuum that the fractured opposition will find difficult to fill. There's a real danger of escalating violence. Several supporters of Morales were killed by security forces over the weekend — part of a pattern of deadly retaliation carried out under interim president Jeanine Áñez. This violence only raises the stakes for the next government, which will have to create alliances with mobilized civil society groups from across the ideological spectrum and address voters' grievances about corruption.