

Bolivia - a free and fair election

Written by GWYNNE DYER

The quotation is usually given as 'Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely', but Lord Acton's original remark went on to say: 'Great men are almost always bad men.' And so they are.

This is not to say that all bad men in power are also great men. President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, in power for 26 years but currently fighting eviction after another rigged election, is clearly a bad man, but he is also a petty man of no discernible merit.

Evo Morales, president of Bolivia for 14 years, is certainly a great man: the first person of indigenous descent ever elected to lead a country where only 5% of the population is of European origin. But he was ousted from power late last year, and he deserved to be. (He is sitting out next Sunday's election in exile in Argentina.)

This has been taken by most people elsewhere (and not just people on the left) to mean that there was a 'coup' in Bolivia last year, and that democracy there is in danger, or even at an end. That impression was reinforced by the fact that the caretaker president for the past eleven months has been an extreme right-wing politician.

But it wasn't really a coup; more of a car-crash. The presidential election last year was followed by weeks of popular protests claiming that it had been rigged to give Morales a narrow victory in the first round of voting.

Morales resigned when an investigation by the Organisation of American States reported that there had been 'serious irregularities' in the vote and 'clear manipulations' of the voting system?. That was the right thing to do, but then his party, the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), made an incredible blunder.

It boycotted an ad hoc meeting held by the opposition parties, the Catholic Church and representatives of the European Union to choose an interim president. All the senior MAS officials having resigned together with Morales, the choice fell on the second vice-president of the senate, an obscure politician called Jeanine Añez - who turned out to be a monster.

Within a week journalists were digging up racist tweets in which she called Morales a 'poor Indian' and declared an indigenous new year celebration 'satanic?'. In the same week, she fired all the military top brass, replacing them with her own appointees, and gave the police and soldiers blanket authority to use lethal force against protesters. At least 28 were killed.

Añez seemed well on the way to enshrining the rule of the extreme right. Morales was banned from seeking the presidency again, and in May she declared that she would run for the presidency herself when the election was re-run. But now that election, much postponed because of Covid-19, has come round at last - and she has just withdrawn her candidacy.

It turns out that mourning for the death of Bolivian democracy has been a bit premature. The leading candidate in this election is still from the MAS: Luis Arce, a former economy minister who oversaw the nationalisation program under Morales.

Arce's main opponent is the same man Morales faced last year: ex-president Carlos Mesa, a former journalist and professor who is centre-left politically. Añez withdrew to give the other hard-right candidate, Luis Fernando Camacho, a better chance of getting through to the second round, but he still probably won't make it.

The second round remains the key issue. The rules say that the leading candidate wins in the first round if he or she gets 40% of the vote, and is at least ten points ahead of the nearest rival. If not, the two leading candidates go through to the second round - but then the supporters of all the losing candidates will probably unite behind the challenger to defeat the socialist (who is invariably the leader in the first round).

Morales did not have a ten-point lead over Mesa last year when 85% of the votes had been counted ? but then the 'quick count' stopped for no clear reason for a full day, and when it resumed Morales ended up with a 10.1% lead. So no second round: Morales wins. That's when the mass protests started, and rightly so.

An unexplained halt of that duration in the vote-counting always means they are fixing the outcome. Given Morales's past record ? he held a referendum to end the two-term limit on the presidency, lost it, then got an MAS-dominated court to set the referendum result aside and end term limits ? not too many people were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

His time is up, but the MAS under Arce's leadership could still win this election, and if it doesn't then Mesa will probably become president, which would not be a disaster either. Democracy is not dead in Bolivia.