

# COMPOUNDING CRISES: BOLIVIA IN 2020\*

*Crisis-Doble: Bolivia 2020*

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## ABSTRACT

Bolivia began 2020 in the midst of a political crisis, with an interim administration led by Jeanine Añez, who assumed power during the political crisis that ended the administration of Evo Morales in November 2019. On March 10th, the government identified Bolivia's first COVID-19 case. The administration's swift initial response was marred by corruption, a strained public health system, and resistance from citizens and politicians. This essay focuses on the unprecedented character of a double crisis in Bolivia: a health crisis preceded and aggravated by a political crisis. The crises put the Bolivian government under intense pressure. The thrice-re-scheduled presidential elections on October 18th returned the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) to power with a decisive victory under the leadership of former finance minister Luis Arce Catacora and former foreign minister David Choquehuanca. We review the consequences of the year's events on human and economic development and conclude by anticipating future challenges.

**Keywords:** crisis, polarization, legitimacy, COVID-19, elections.

## RESUMEN

*Bolivia inició el 2020 en medio de una crisis política, con una administración interina liderada por Jeanine Añez, quien asumió el poder durante la crisis política que terminó con la administración de Evo Morales en noviembre de 2019. El 10 de marzo, el gobierno identificó el primer caso de COVID-19 en Bolivia. La rápida respuesta inicial de la administración*

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*de Añez se vio empañada por casos de corrupción, un sistema de salud pública inadecuado y la resistencia de ciudadanos y políticos. Este ensayo se enfoca en el carácter sin precedentes de una doble-crisis en Bolivia: una crisis de salud, precedida y agravada por una crisis política. Las crisis presionaron intensamente al gobierno boliviano. Las elecciones presidenciales del 18 de octubre, tres veces reprogramadas, devolvieron el poder al Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) con una victoria decisiva bajo el liderazgo del exministro de Economía y Finanzas Públicas, Luis Arce Catacora, y del excanciller, David Choquehuanca. Revisamos las consecuencias de los acontecimientos del año en el desarrollo humano y económico y concluimos anticipando los desafíos futuros.*

**Palabras clave:** crisis, polarización, legitimidad, COVID-19, elecciones.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Bolivia began 2020 in the midst of a political crisis. Amid widespread protest and allegations of election fraud, President Evo Morales resigned in November 2019 after nearly 14 years in office (Wolff 2020). When Bolivia's vice president and the leaders of the senate and lower house resigned, Jeanine Añez, the second vice president of the senate, was sworn in as an interim president. The early months of her administration were characterized by heavy repression against anti-government protests. Over thirty people died when the police opened fire on protesters in the departments of La Paz and Cochabamba (Clandestina 2019; Diaz-Cuellar 2019). Bolivians entered 2020 questioning the integrity of Bolivian democracy, the legitimacy of the Añez government and the legacy of Morales (Derpic 2019; Mamani 2020).

By any measure, 2020 was on course to be a monumental year in Bolivia's political history as the country reckoned with the uncertain future of democracy and a divided population. The COVID-19 pandemic layered public health and economic crises onto the political crisis. On March 10th, 2020, the government identified Bolivia's first COVID-19 case in Oruro, closely followed by cases in Santa Cruz and Cochabamba (Hummel et al. 2020). The Añez administration reacted quickly by closing schools, cancelling events, shutting borders and imposing a national lockdown on March 22nd. The administration's swift response was marred by corruption, a strained public health system, and resistance from wary citizens and politicians (Velasco-Guachalla et al. 2021). Despite early action, the virus spread through under-supplied hospitals, crowded homes, and busy food markets.

This essay emphasizes the unprecedented nature of the year's overlapping and compounding crises. First and foremost, the pandemic was a human tragedy on an unprecedented scale. The deaths of more than 25,000 Bolivians (Karlin-sky and Kobak 2021) and the grief of their families cannot be minimized. The scale and severity of the public health crisis also served as a crucible for the interim government, putting all aspects of the Bolivian government under pressure and revealing a great deal about the current state of the political system.

Bolivians vented their frustrations with their leaders through protests across the country and at the ballot box. The thrice-rescheduled presidential elections on October 18th returned the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) to power with a decisive victory under the leadership of former finance minister Luis Arce Catacora and former foreign minister David Choquehuanca.

In order to make sense of this historic year, this essay focuses on the context of the political crisis that was underway when the pandemic hit and how it influenced the course the pandemic took. The essay is organized in four parts. First, we lay out a timeline of 2020, with attention to the unfolding political drama around the contested legitimacy of the Añez government and the public health crisis of the pandemic. Second, we discuss the ways that the political crisis shaped the pandemic response, health policy, and the spread of COVID-19 cases and deaths. Third, we consider how the timing and severity of the pandemic changed the political crisis, putting tremendous stress on the political system and reshaping the general election. Finally, we review the consequences of the year's events on human and economic development and conclude by anticipating the challenges ahead.

## II. WHAT HAPPENED IN 2020

### January-March: Ongoing Political Crisis

The year began amid profound questions about the legitimacy of the Añez administration and with heightened polarization between supporters of the interim government and its detractors.<sup>1</sup> Although Bolivia's polarization precedes the entry of Añez, it increased dramatically after the political crisis of 2019 and continued throughout 2020. The new administration rolled out a series of warrants, detained hundreds of MAS supporters (Achtenberg 2020) and announced that nearly 600 former administration officials were under investigation for corruption (Ariñez 2020).

Uncertainty proliferated about who would run and what coalitions could be forged or kept before the presidential elections, initially scheduled for May. High-profile debates swirled around potential names for the MAS ticket, with MAS factional politics inside and outside of the country regularly making headlines. Morales took refuge in the large Bolivian community around Buenos Aires and held forums in exile about potential candidates, which reflected how intertwined the party had become with the leadership of Evo Morales (Los Tiempos 2019). However, while Morales continued to enjoy widespread support from MAS militants, his departure revealed pronounced divisions within

<sup>1</sup> We refer to polarization around the legitimacy of the government and develop what that means and its implications for Bolivia in other work (Velasco-Guachalla et al 2021).

the party. The younger, newer, urban MAS faction revolved around La Paz, El Alto, and the emerging leadership of student activist and senate president Eva Copa. Meanwhile, the older, rural, coca grower MAS faction mobilized in the Chapare region of Cochabamba and united behind the emerging leadership of Andrés Rodríguez. High profile MAS officials, like former finance minister Luis Arce and former foreign minister David Choquehuanca, maneuvered for leadership. Party divisions materialized around the selection of the presidential ticket for the 2020 elections when competing MAS factions publicly announced different tickets. A faction announced its preference for the Choquehuanca-Andrés duo while others backed Arce-Choquehuanca (Mealla 2020). In January, an assembly in Buenos Aires led by Morales nominated the latter option, and former finance minister Luis Arce and former foreign minister David Choquehuanca became the presidential and vice presidential candidates for the party. The decision angered some party leaders who had pushed for alternative options (Los Tiempos 2020a).

Meanwhile, despite stating on several occasions that she would not run for president, Añez announced her candidacy on January 24th (Guarachi 2020). With this addition, there were nine preliminary opposition candidates. In the cancelled 2019 elections, former interim president Carlos Mesa had cobbled together a shaky coalition under the Comunidad Ciudadana (CC) ticket and emerged as the first viable challenger to Morales and the MAS since the 2005 elections, which Mesa's administration had overseen (Wolff 2020). Mesa continued to campaign in 2020 under the CC banner. However, he was easily upstaged by younger far-right figures who grabbed media attention during the 2019 political crisis, namely Luis Fernando Camacho and later his vice presidential candidate Marco Pumari. Camacho gained international attention in 2019 as the leader of the Santa Cruz Civic Committee by leading protests against Morales, often with a Bible in hand, and cultivating a track record of inflammatory statements. During the protests, he swore that he was uninterested in the presidency. But in early 2020, he launched a presidential bid with a newly-created Christian right party, Creemos, and Marco Pumari, the head of the Potosí Civic Committee, as his running mate. Despite calls from various civil society groups, including the National Committee for the Defense of Democracy (CONADE) among others, for the opposition to form a united front against the MAS (Montero 2020), the Bolivian opposition once again failed to create a united electoral coalition and instead returned to the fractured field that has characterized Bolivian opposition parties since the inception of the MAS (Valencia 2009; Madrid 2012).

Añez's candidacy in a crowded field of presidential hopefuls further convinced many Bolivians that her administration was not functioning as an interim caretaker government. The administration's retaliatory actions against former MAS officials were reminiscent of persecution under the Morales administration (Muñoz Acebes 2020). Her government was also quick to introduce symbolic policy changes, like tearing down statues of Morales (Flores 2020). The Añez administration was also criticized for attacks against free-

dom of expression. Two high profile cases illustrated a concerning pattern of antagonism towards the press and critics. First, barely a month after Añez assumed the presidency, journalists Orestes Sotomayor and Alejandra Salinas were arrested and charged with sedition against the state for running news stories critical of Bolivia's interim government (Chauvin and Faiola 2020). Second, as part of the response to COVID-19, the interim government adopted policies that threatened freedom of expression, including an overly broad provision of an emergency decree that authorities could use to prosecute critics of government policies (Human Rights Watch 2020). These actions, among others, deepened political divisions.

### **March-May: COVID-19 Lockdown**

After the confirmation of the first COVID-19 cases in March, the Añez administration issued an emergency order that closed schools, cancelled events, and restricted gatherings. In a series of emergency decrees, the administration cancelled flights, imposed curfews, and by March 22nd had sealed its borders and imposed one of the region's strictest national lockdowns (Hummel et al. 2020).

Bolivia was one of the countries that was least prepared for the pandemic (Escalera-Antezana et al. 2020). In March 2020, Bolivia had only 35 functioning ICU beds and the department of Pando did not have a third-level hospital, which under the Bolivian health care system is equipped to treat complex illnesses (Ministerio de Salud y Deportes de Bolivia 2019). Several other departments, including Beni and Tarija, had only one hospital of this kind. Public health spending per capita hovered around \$200 USD, far below the regional average of \$1320 USD per capita (Pan American Health Organization 2017; Hummel et al. 2020). Bolivia had no national or robust subnational contact tracing program and almost immediately faced shortages of diagnostic tests and personal protective equipment.

Despite early action from the national government, COVID-19 continued to spread through Bolivia. Bolivians returning from Europe seeded initial outbreaks in Oruro, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz. Other departments confirmed their first cases soon after: La Paz on March 19th, Potosi on March 26th, Chuquisaca on March 27th, Pando on March 28th, and Tarija on March 30th. Santa Cruz became the country's first epicenter with dozens and then hundreds of cases a day, despite strict lockdowns. Beni was the last department to confirm a case, on April 20th, but quickly became the country's second epicenter as the department's minimal health system collapsed in May under an overwhelming wave of infections. Beni's governor declared a health disaster and emergency in the department due to the rapid spread of the virus (Agencia Boliviana de Información 2020).

The Añez government's response stalled in scandal, implementation, and noncompliance. The government pledged to use the lockdown to bolster the

healthcare system. Instead the administration found itself embroiled in corruption scandals about health equipment as whistleblowers revealed that bureaucrats had pocketed millions while buying faulty ventilators (Kitroeff and Taj 2020). The scandal led to the removal of the then-health minister Marcelo Navajas and an investigation, which had not concluded at the time of this writing. In addition to the acts of corruption, the health ministry underwent three changes in leadership: the former health minister, Anibal Cruz, resigned from his position in April, and was replaced by Marcelo Navajas who in turn was replaced by Eidy Roca. The corruption cases and several ambitious hospital construction projects that fell behind schedule and budget damaged what little legitimacy the interim government had before the pandemic. An IPSOS poll showed that support for Añez dropped from 69 to 46 percent following the ventilators scandal (Brujula Digital 2020).

Various local governments faced their own crises of authority. Because the 2019 elections were repealed, the government passed a law extending the constitutional mandate of several public officials including the president, the assembly members and local elected officials until new authorities could take office following new elections (Constitutional Declaration 001 2020). The outset of the pandemic further prolonged the mandate of authorities when the electoral calendar was cancelled in March 2020 (Erbol 2020). While legally allowed to remain in power, the authority of several local officials was challenged in the middle of the health crisis. Demonstrations across several departments and municipalities demanding the resignation of the interim president and several mayors and governors continued throughout the year.

Bolivians chafed under one of the most restrictive lockdowns in the world. Under National Decree N4199 only one person per family could make minimum and essential trips in the morning from 07:00 am to 12:00 noon once a week, and only to stock up on necessary products and supplies in the vicinity of their home or residence (Ministerio de la Presidencia 2020a). Misinformation spread through WhatsApp and other social media platforms (Jimenez Pereyra 2020) and people in several departments broke quarantine to protest the lockdowns, corruption, health supply shortages, as well as the administration indefinitely postponing local and national elections. Demonstrations around the underprovision of health equipment were a constant through 2020 whereas election-related protests were at their highest frequency and duration in early August (Velasco-Guachalla et al. 2021).

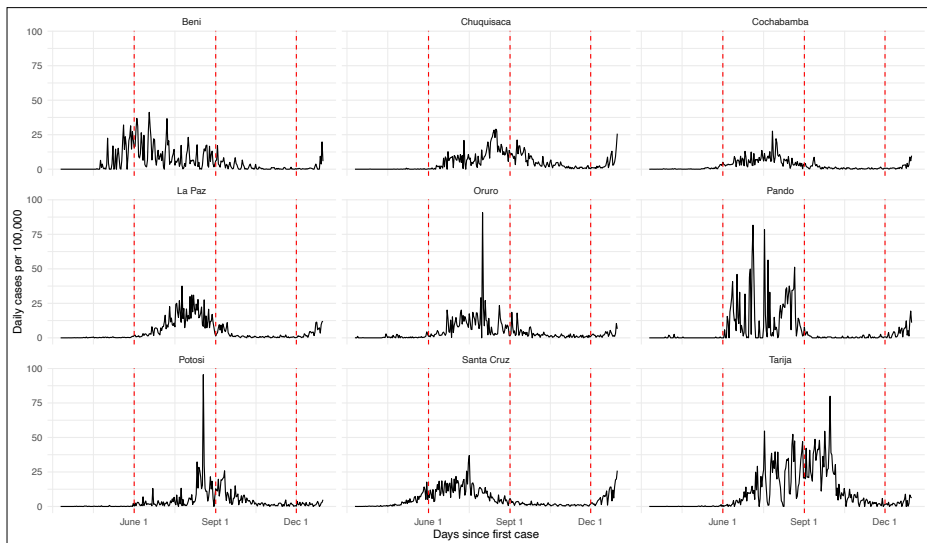
### **June-August: The first peak**

In the face of widespread discontent and growing noncompliance, the Añez administration passed National Decree N4245, which imposed a “conditional and dynamic” quarantine. Unlike the initial national lockdown, the 4245 decree gave authority over COVID-19 policy to subnational governments (Min-

isterio de la Presidencia 2020b). From this point forward, a large part of the responsibility in the fight against COVID-19 fell on departmental and municipal authorities as they were tasked with determining contingency plans and setting their own regulations. Some departments decided to keep strict lockdown rules (Santa Cruz and Tarija) while others loosened restrictions by imposing fixed working hours and allowing citizens to go out according to the last digit of their identity card (La Paz, Cochabamba, Oruro). The national government continued to mandate the closure of schools and borders, a national information campaign, the prohibition of events and crowds of people, and the mandatory use of face masks across the country (Ministerio de la Presidencia 2020b).

As restrictions loosened, cases started to increase, leading to Bolivia's first peak in June and July. Figure 1 tracks cases per 100,000 people in each department from March 10th to December 31st, 2020. People died en masse during the first peak. Between July 15th and 20th, the country's Special Force against Crime carried out the legal removal of at least 420 corpses in five departments of the country (Peñaranda A. 2020). Hospitals closed down in the middle of outbreaks in nearly every department because staff were too sick to come to work. By September, the Ministry of Health reported that 80% of hospital workers had tested positive for COVID-19 and hundreds had died (Agencia Boliviana de Información 2020). As hospitals shut down, cemeteries and funeral services could not bury bodies fast enough. In a uniquely Bolivian solution, informal and unlicensed mobile crematoriums filled in, cremating bodies in neighborhoods.

Figure 1. Daily confirmed COVID-19 cases per 100,000 residents by department, March 10th to December 31st, 2020.



\*The black line charts daily confirmed COVID-19 cases in Bolivia's nine departments. Dashed lines mark the date of important changes to national health policies. Source: Daily case reports from the Bolivian Ministry of Health, collected and analyzed by authors.

In the midst of the first peak, national elections initially scheduled for May 3rd were postponed on three different occasions (Cusicanqui 2020). While the first delays were agreed upon by a consensus of all political parties, the postponement to October 18th was rejected by the MAS and its supporting organizations in civil society. The disagreement led to massive demonstrations that paralyzed the country for two weeks in late July and early August (Huarachi 2020). Hundreds of MAS supporters, community groups, and others blocked roads and highways throughout the country. With the protests came roadblocks, political violence, food and fuel shortages, the deaths of COVID-19 patients and panic in hospitals due to the lack of oxygen tanks that did not get through major highway blockades (Carrillo 2020). After almost two weeks of mass demonstrations, top MAS party members acknowledged the October 18th date change. Despite this concession, protests continued as factions within the MAS, predominantly workers and peasant unions, rejected the agreement. After days of protests, and left without the support of top party leaders, these factions eventually recognized October 18th as election day (Molina 2020a).

### **September-October: Campaigns and elections**

On September 1st, the administration further relaxed restrictions. Every Bolivian was required to wear a mask, distance, and disinfect, but work resumed in nearly all sectors. The Ministry of Education decided to cancel the 2020 school year and pass all students, which parents and students criticized. Local transportation and internal travel picked up, and limited international travel began. Many local governments retained curfews and other restrictions. The September 1st policies did not lead to an increase in cases and cases trended down to less than 100 per day by November.

Salvador Romero, a widely respected expert on election administration, revamped the Electoral Tribunal (TSE) after the 2019 political crisis and electoral fraud allegations and organized the 2020 election process. The government approved a short six week campaign window for the national elections, and on September 6th, political organizations were allowed to start campaigning. However, due to COVID-19, several departments banned mass gatherings and rallies, which encouraged the use of virtual platforms (Los Tiempos 2020b; Melendres Galvis 2020). Social media sites became important dissemination tools for political parties (Ortiz 2020). Furthering this trend, opposing political supporters and party militants clashed at in-person events (Amurrio Montes 2020b; Paredes Tamayo 2020; Zuazo 2020).

When electoral campaigns launched in early September, four political parties dominated the electoral landscape: MAS, Comunidad Ciudadana, Juntos, and Creemos. The MAS presidential ticket was filled with high profile MAS officials, with former finance minister Luis Arce as the presidential candidate and former foreign minister David Choquehuanca as his running mate. Arce,



widely known as “Lucho,” is a technocrat who is credited with Bolivia’s economic success during Morales’s early administrations. Choquehuanca came up through indigenous social and political movements and then forged an international reputation as Foreign Minister. Following the MAS divisions of 2019, Choquehuanca emerged as a conciliatory leader within the party.

Carlos Mesa Gisbert and Gustavo Pedraza led Comunidad Ciudadana as presidential and vice presidential, respectively. Mesa Gisbert, a widely known historian, journalist, and politician, served as president from 2003 to 2005 following the resignation of then-president Gonzalo “Goni” Sanchez de Lozada during the political crisis of 2003. Pedraza is a lawyer, university professor, and politician who served as Minister of Sustainable Development and Planning during Mesa’s government. The Comunidad Ciudadana ticket was the most competitive bid against the MAS in the 2019 and 2020 elections.

The presidential ticket for Juntos was the interim president, Jeanine Añez. Her vice president was Samuel Doria Medina, a businessman and politician who had previously ran for the presidency in 2004, 2009, and 2014. While the Añez administration and candidacy had initial support, the mismanagement of the pandemic, together with corruption scandals, undermined this initial backing (Brujula Digital 2020). A July voter intention poll put the Juntos duo in third place with 13.3% of the vote, and on September 17th, Añez withdrew from the presidential race in order to strengthen opposition to the MAS and avoid dividing the vote (Alanoca Paco 2020a).

The last competitive campaign came from Luis Fernando Camacho and Mario Pumari on the newly created Creemos ticket. Camacho is a right-wing opposition leader and former president of the Santa Cruz Civic Committee. He gained international recognition as one of the main opposition figures leading the protest against Morales during the 2019 political crisis. Pumari, the former president of the Potosí Civic Committee, similarly led opposition to Morales in 2019 in the department of Potosí. While Creemos led the polls in Camacho’s home department of Santa Cruz, national forecasts in July and October gave the pair only 9.1% and 12.5% of the vote respectively (Brito et al. 2020).

On October 18th, Bolivia held a nationwide in-person election with compulsory voting. Despite the health crisis, the elections were orderly, transparent, and did not become a superspreader event. The MAS ticket decisively won the presidential elections with 55.11% of the vote, higher than forecasted, followed by Comunidad Ciudadana with 28.82% and Creemos with 14% (Órgano Electoral Plurinacional 2020). Although some protests took place denouncing electoral fraud and demanding recounts, the demonstrations were small and did not parallel those that took place in 2019. Moreover, international organizations and observers endorsed the elections and losing candidates conceded defeat in the days following the results (Correo del Sur 2020b; Los Tiempos 2020c; Mas-sud Lozada 2020; Peredo 2020).

Arce-Choquehuanca won and returned the MAS to power for many reasons. Chief among these were the interim administration's mismanagement of the pandemic, the extant recession and Arce's successful record of economic management, and a disorganized and divided opposition. We briefly address each of these in turn. First, the handling of the pandemic by the Añez administration was strongly criticized as inadequate given the country's informal workforce and economic situation. Moreover, the early efforts of the administration were soon tarnished by corruption cases around the provision of medical equipment for the pandemic (Kitroeff and Taj 2020). Second, Arce's record as the chief economist during Bolivia's economic boom from 2006 to 2019 provided a point of reference for voters in a country where the pandemic had a profound negative impact on the national economy and people's livelihoods (Molina 2020b).

A final key factor for understanding the MAS victory lies with the opposition, which could not provide a realistic alternative to Arce's party. Añez joined a small opposition party, had not previously belonged to or led a large coalition, and lacked ties with large civil society organizations. Meanwhile, although Mesa was the strongest competitor against the MAS, he was unable to reach voters beyond the middle-class and present a convincing alternative to indecisive voters (Molina 2020b; Peñaranda R. 2020; Stefanoni 2020). Camacho was a controversial figure who was unable to reach many voters outside his native Santa Cruz.

### **November-December: The MAS Returns to Power**

While the MAS ticket won the executive, the party lost its imposing two-thirds majority in the senate, which had allowed the party to govern for more than a decade without building a multiparty governing coalition or compromising with the opposition (Amurrio Montes 2020a; Correo del Sur 2020a).

Luis Arce and David Choquehuanca assumed the presidency and vice presidency on November 8th, 2020. Arce's inauguration was marked by protests over changes made by the previously MAS-controlled senate to lower the majority needed to pass certain legislation, arguably to continue its dominion over legislation despite having just lost its two-thirds majority (Corz 2020a; Opinion 2020; Ramos 2020). A looming question was the new administration's relationship with Morales, as both Arce and Choquehuanca had publicly announced they would distance the administration from the former president. Choquehuanca had been critical of Morales on several occasions, particularly after the 2016 constitutional referendum, and had made calls for renovation within the party before and after taking the vice presidency (Chuquimia Huallpa 2020; Infobae 2020; Pagina Siete 2020). While the administration's first couple of months pointed to a healthy distance from Morales, whether or not this prevails in the months to come remains an open question (Ferreya Peñarrieta 2020).

A year after having fled the country, first to Mexico and then to Argentina, Evo Morales returned to Bolivia on November 9th. He was accompanied by

the president of Argentina, Alberto Fernandez, and was received by hundreds of MAS supporters at the border (Alanoca Paco 2020b; Los Tiempos 2020d). Soon after his return, on November 17th, Morales assumed the presidency of the MAS and began making preparations for the March subnational elections, including the selection of candidates (Corz 2020b). Meanwhile, the new administration embarked on undoing the Añez administration's policies. While subnational governments retained authority over COVID-19 policy, Arce repealed past emergency decrees regarding COVID-19 on December 1st. On that date, National Decree N4404 came into effect, lifting almost all existing restrictions at the national-level and emphasizing instead the use of biosecurity measures including the mandatory use of masks and frequent handwashing. The decree also incentivized the use of traditional medicine for preventing and treating COVID-19, gave greater responsibility to various ministries, and required PCR tests for all international arrivals (Ministerio de la Presidencia 2020c). Several municipal and department governments retained or imposed stricter policies and all departments imposed restrictions for Christmas and New Year celebrations. The year concluded with the beginning of a second spike, which by the start of February 2021 far exceeded the July 2020 peak of cases.

### III. HOW THE POLITICAL CRISIS SHAPED THE HEALTH CRISIS

It is unsurprising that an interim government in the midst of a major national political crisis struggled to respond to an unprecedented public health crisis. Unfortunately, the particulars of the Bolivian political crisis of 2019-2020 made an effective public health response even more difficult than one might have expected based on state capacity alone. Low government legitimacy and extreme partisan polarization led to uneven compliance with public health orders, contributing to unequal case and death patterns across the country (see Figures 1 and 2). The interim government also lacked deep connections to many of the groups in civil society that were important allies to the previous government, making consensus-building around policy more difficult, especially for poorer communities and people working in the informal sector.

#### Low Legitimacy and Political Polarization

The political crisis put severe stress on Bolivia's already weak social assistance and public health infrastructure. During the thirteen years of Morales's administration, the government ramped up state support for citizens through direct cash transfers, broad redistributive policies, and state spending but only marginally improved Bolivia's roads and hospitals (Hunter and Brill 2016; Farthing 2019; Niedzwiecki and Anria 2019). The Añez administration attempted a strong response using the central government power and infrastructure that the MAS helped develop but faltered in its delivery due to internal fractures as well as widespread noncompliance, misinformation, and resistance from MAS supporters (CIDES-UMSA 2019;

Blofield and Filgueira 2020; Velasco-Guachalla et al 2021). In contrast, countries that had pre-existing public health and social assistance infrastructure seem to have had advantage in imposing lockdowns, tracing outbreaks, and treating cases (Blofield et al. 2020). As a result, the pandemic spread unevenly and unequally across the Americas (Filgueira et al. 2020; Hummel et al. 2021).

The Añez administration attempted to govern in a country that was extremely divided over whether the government was legitimate at all, with one side seeing a government that came to power through a coup, bent on violently undoing the legacy of Evo Morales and the MAS. On the other side, supporters saw a government that had narrowly managed to avoid a full scale constitutional crisis or, worse, a violent civil conflict with uncertain ends (Velasco-Guachalla et al. 2021). It is difficult to exaggerate the depth and intensity of these competing views. The population consolidated around two political orientations: MAS supporters and those against the MAS (Arequipa Azurduy 2020). These vying perspectives materialized in pro- and anti-government protests that turned violent on several occasions after the inauguration of the interim government in 2019 (Derpic 2019). As the pandemic unfolded, these competing views also became evident in debates around national COVID-19 policy between the Añez interim administration and the MAS-dominated legislature. The relationship between the interim executive and the legislature was characterized by an evident lack of consensus on public health policies. Two illustrative cases include the approval of IMF credits for health stimulus checks and the use of chlorine dioxide. On the later, the MAS-dominated legislature enacted a law promoting chlorine dioxide as a treatment for COVID-19, rejecting recommendations from the Añez-appointed Minister of Health and against the advice of the Bolivian and international scientific community (Velasco-Guachalla et al 2021).

Subnational authorities faced a legitimacy crisis of their own in various departments and municipalities when part of the population refused to recognize their mandates in the absence of elections. Political polarization between the national and subnational governments resulted in the politicization of the health crisis. This in turn weakened incentives for compliance, cooperation, and coordination in public policy implementation. Politicized compliance and coordination then led to worse outcomes in terms of cases and deaths, and exacerbated pre-existing inequalities (Velasco-Guachalla et al 2021).

## **Devastating and Unequal Loss of Life**

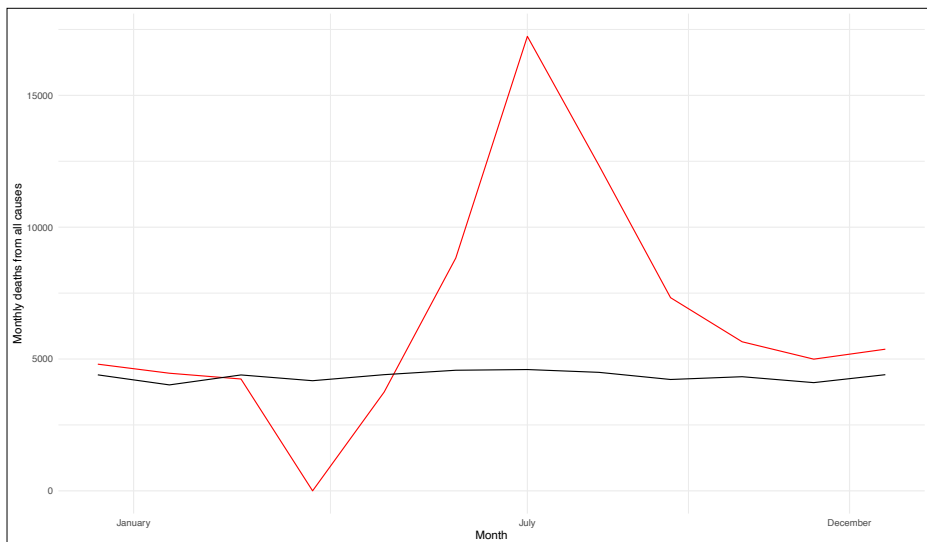
Polarization around the government's legitimacy politicized reactions to COVID-19, contributing to the pandemic's uneven impact across Bolivia's departments and municipalities. We and other researchers suggest that partisanship — along with pre-existing health infrastructure and wealth — largely explain the uneven spread of infections (Acuña et al 2020; Escalera-Antezana et al. 2020; Hummel et al. 2020; Velasco-Guachalla et al 2021). Wealthier departments generally had lower case counts and deaths per 100,000 than poorer

departments. We find that governors and groups of citizens aligned with the Añez administration followed strict national decrees more closely and for longer periods of time than governors and citizens that were opposed to the Añez administration (Velasco-Guachalla et al 2021).

Departments and municipalities that opposed the Añez administration protested more and returned to work and public transportation faster than areas that were aligned with the administration (Velasco-Guachalla et al 2021). News media reported that some officials who opposed Añez denied the existence of the virus and spread misinformation, while citizens in their jurisdictions were more likely to medicate with ineffective or dangerous substances (Trigo, Kurmanaev, and Cabrera 2020). Thus while there was a strong national response to the COVID-19 pandemic, subnational political fault lines precluded a unified response.

Clearly, the loss of life in Bolivia is the most devastating consequence of the pandemic hitting the country during a complex political crisis. We are still struggling to fully comprehend the scale of the loss, as official statistics likely undercount the true number of deaths. The toll of the pandemic in Bolivia was enormous by all measures available. Overall mortality data show that 79,018 people died in Bolivia in 2020, a 50% increase compared to an average of 52,130 annual deaths between 2016 and 2019 (Trigo, Kurmanaev, and McCann 2020; Karlinsky and Kobak 2021). Figure 2 tracks the number of people who died each month on average between 2016 and 2019 (black line) and the number of people who died in 2020 (red line).

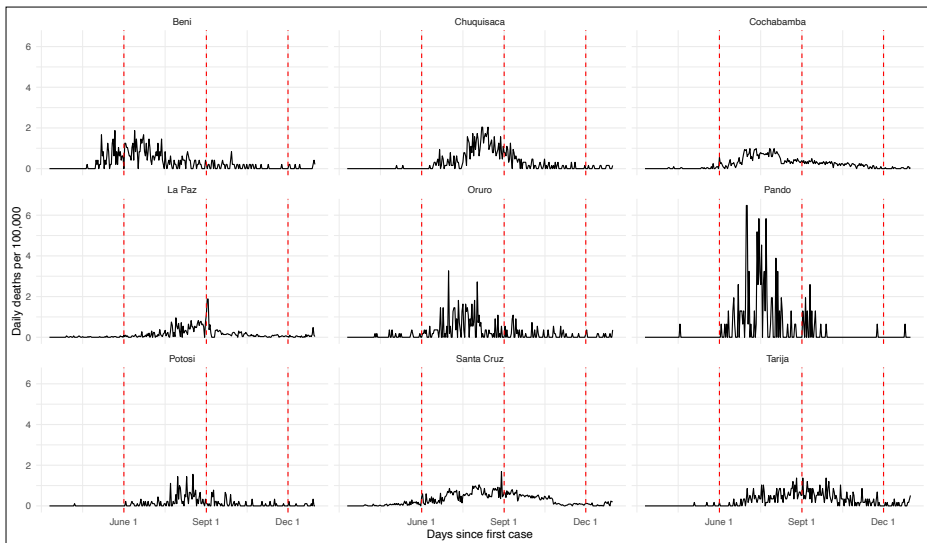
Figure 2. Monthly excess mortality in Bolivia in 2020



\*The black line charts average monthly deaths between 2016 and 2019. The red line charts reported monthly deaths from all causes during 2020. Note that the offices that record deaths closed for several weeks in March and April 2020, accounting for the red line's brief dip. Source: Mortality reports from the Bolivian Civic Registry Service (SERECI), collected by the New York Times.

The Bolivian government officially attributed 9,162 deaths in 2020 to COVID-19, roughly a third of the 26,888 excess deaths over the year. These deaths hit departments unevenly, with Pando, Beni, Chuquisaca, and Oruro experiencing more deaths per 100,000 residents than larger and better resourced departments. Most of these are also the departments that were not supportive of the interim government and lacked trust in government policies (Hummel et al. 2020). Figure 3 tracks confirmed COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 people in each department from March 10th to December 31st, 2020.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 3. Daily confirmed COVID-19 deaths per 100,000 residents by department, March 10th to December 31st, 2020.



\*The black line charts daily confirmed COVID-19 deaths in Bolivia’s nine departments. The dashed lines mark the date of important changes to national health policies. Source: Daily mortality reports from the Bolivian Ministry of Health, collected and corroborated by the authors.

At a minimum, the political crisis precluded a more unified and effective pandemic response, resulting in a devastating death toll. The interim government led by Jeanine Añez lacked the popular legitimacy necessary to lead a country through such a health crisis. Unfortunately, the uneven distribution of cases and deaths overlapped with poverty and weak state capacity, further dividing the country and worsening the health crisis.

<sup>2</sup> During this time, Bolivia faced an extreme shortage of COVID-19 tests and positivity rates hovered around 50%, far above the 5% level that the WHO recommended. Additionally, the state recorded a death as due to COVID-19 only if a person received a positive test before they died. It is likely that Bolivia experienced one of the highest death rates per capita in the world during June and July (Trigo, Kurmanaev, and McCann 2020).

## IV. HOW THE PANDEMIC AFFECTED BOLIVIAN POLITICS

The health crisis put an unprecedented amount of stress on the political system at an already difficult moment. It may be years before we truly understand the impact of the decisions, losses, and political turns that occurred during the pandemic. The pandemic affected the course of political mobilization at a time when it is likely that, without a strict lockdown, political tensions would have played out in the streets. The pandemic also changed what was possible for the Añez government and the prospects for the MAS to regain power. Finally, it is likely that the pandemic will have lasting consequences for democracy in Bolivia, particularly in terms of polarization and trust in institutions.

### Protest and Mobilization

Bolivians organize more than people in most other societies and Bolivians' responses to the crises of 2020 reflected this: Bolivians continued to protest throughout lockdown, defying national quarantine laws and in some cases local pandemic orders that explicitly prohibited protest (Boulding 2014, Velasco-Guachalla et al. 2021). According to our own tally from news and social media, between March and September of 2020, Bolivia witnessed 1138 protest events. The demonstrations clearly illustrated the compounding health and political crises as the two dominant protest demands centered around elections and the provision of health supplies and working conditions for health workers. Beyond these top two issues, protest demands included the loosening of COVID-19 restrictions, economic concerns, education, and the resignation of public officials.

Recall that in the absence of the global pandemic Bolivians would have gone to the ballot box to elect a new president on May 3rd. Faced with the health emergency and a growing number of confirmed cases, the Supreme Electoral Court in concert with political organizations decided to postpone general elections until September 6th. The further delay of the electoral process to October 18th was met with strong opposition from MAS supporters, who organized massive demonstrations that paralyzed the country for two weeks. These anti-government demonstrations were countered by pro-government groups, or civilian groups that claimed to be acting in the country's best interest (Aguilar 2020). Protesters of all political affiliations broke lockdown restrictions.

While demonstrators used common mobilization and protest tactics, such as road blockades and marches, the pandemic provided grounds for innovation. Several civil society groups organized stay-at-home protests where demonstrators banged on pots and pans from windows and balconies — organizers had used these protest tactics before but they became much more popular during Bolivia's nationwide lockdown. Many groups used social media platforms to hold virtual town meetings and protests to voice a wide range of demands.

## Legacies of the MAS

In the absence of the pandemic, 2020 likely would have been a year defined by contention over the legacy of the MAS, the role of the interim government, and the new presidential elections. The MAS, under the leadership of Evo Morales, had governed Bolivia since 2005, the longest administration in Bolivia's democratic history. During this time, the Bolivian government changed in form, function, and scope (Anria 2018). Voters approved a new constitution, which changed electoral laws, the administration renamed and reorganized most government agencies, and state spending on social programs, infrastructure, and education increased (Niedzwiecki and Anria 2019). The Añez government was the first new administration to take control of a government that had been rebuilt by the MAS.

The pandemic served as a high-intensity stress test of the MAS's legacy and Bolivian government capacity: could the government function without the MAS in power? Our assessment is mixed. The investments in social assistance and infrastructure during the MAS years put the government in a better position than it might have otherwise been in, but it is also clear that those investments were insufficient bulwarks against a pandemic. It is likely that the crisis of the pandemic, and the associated policies have also made it more difficult to assess how well the government was functioning. Offices were closed, communication between civil society organizations and government was more difficult, and people's attention was focused on survival.

## Consequences for democracy

Bolivians and observers have voiced concerns over the health of the country's democratic institutions for years (Anria 2016; Centellas 2018; Farthing 2019). Many of these criticisms were aimed at the ways in which the MAS had limited competition and consolidated power. The contested transition to an interim government, followed by the pandemic, raised worries that the public health crisis might be used as an excuse for Añez to delay elections and stay in power undemocratically. The initial delay of the elections that had been scheduled for May 2020 fueled these fears. As the crisis unfolded, however, and her government continued to lose popularity, it became clear that she was not going to stay in power indefinitely. The counterfactual is unclear: under easier circumstances would an interim government have been able to consolidate more support? By the time new elections were held, the interim government had little support from the public or from other political parties aligned against the MAS, paving the way for the MAS to win the presidential elections in the fall.

More broadly, the pandemic further weakened citizens' trust in state institutions. Pre-existing weak capacity in the health and education sectors gave way to the collapse of health systems across the country and the cancelling of the ac-



ademic year as the pandemic worsened. Under these conditions, citizens found their own means to fight the disease and self-medicate. This in turn damaged even further the little trust that citizens had in the country's health system. Survey data from the Instituto de Investigaciones Socio-económicas de la Universidad Católica Boliviana (IISEC-UCB) showed that individuals who reported no trust in the health system in Bolivia increased from 32.4% to 36.7% and those who reported trust in the health system decreased from 6.2% to 0.5% between the third and ninth week of quarantine (Wanderley et al. 2020). The pandemic also put corruption center stage, with a major scandal involving top government officials and the provision of much needed health supplies.

## V. IMPACT ON HUMAN AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The year resulted in a number of setbacks for the economy and social welfare. As the global economy ground to halt during the first months of the pandemic, an economic crisis compounded problems for Bolivian families. The year marked the end to an era of growth that began in 2004, culminating in a 8% loss in GDP. The country's total debt reached \$19.38 billion USD in June 2020, having nearly quadrupled since 2007 (Fundacion Jubileo 2020). Moreover, as a consequence of COVID-19, net international reserves at the Central Bank of Bolivia decreased by 25% in the first four months of 2020 (Churata Tola 2020). The impact of lockdown restrictions on work was severe: unemployment almost doubled in less than six months from 4.8% at the end of 2019 to 8.1% in May 2020 and 11.8% by the end of July (INE 2021). Poverty increased by 10% in the first three months of lockdown (INE 2021).

As poor Bolivians and informal workers suffered more than wealthier Bolivians, the pandemic undermined years of progress against inequality. People lost income as a result of the economic crisis, and more joined the informal workforce, a sector already exceptionally large relative to other countries (Hummel 2017; Hummel et al. 2021). Many departmental and municipal pandemic laws classified informal agricultural, transportation, and market workers as essential and permitted them to continue working during lockdown. However, workers did not have adequate access to personal protective equipment or training and initial reports suggest that markets and transportation routes spread the virus (IIES-JOM 2020). Market and transportation workers reported much higher rates of COVID-19 infections than the general population. The pandemic hit poorer and more informal neighborhoods and departments, like Beni and Pando, harder than wealthier ones.

In addition to the staggering loss of life and likely continuing burden for Bolivians of long-haul COVID-19 complications, the pandemic deeply impacted other indicators of human development, especially in education. The transition to virtual education in March laid bare the absence of educational infrastructure necessary for online learning, including limited internet connectivity, in-

adequate access to digital devices and a deficit of skills for the digital age in both teachers and students (UNICEF 2020; Agetic 2021;). Finally, on August 2nd, the interim government proceeded to cancel the academic year, a measure that sparked controversy and criticism from various sectors of society and even international organizations (Luna 2020).

While the interim government distributed cash transfers as a way to alleviate the economic burden imposed on households by the pandemic, the approval of the cash programs was characterized by lack of consensus, its distribution faced difficulties, and its benefits, while important, remained limited. As mentioned earlier, the clash between the interim executive and the legislature resulted in a lack of consensus on public health policies. This included the disagreement over the approval of IMF credits for the health stimulus checks. While the Añez administration advertized the cash bonus as aid for Bolivians, the MAS-led legislature as well as other political parties, including Comunidad Ciudadana and Creemos, claimed the interim president had politicized the monetary aid and was using the programs to campaign (Corz and Aguirre 2020). The government extended cash assistance to those who were already beneficiaries of cash transfer programs in late March and expanded transfers to more households of unprotected workers (Ministerio de la Presidencia 2020d). However, aid distribution drew crowds of people and long lines outside of banks, which increased the risk of COVID-19 exposure (Hinojosa 2020; Los Tiempos 2020e). Finally, the program created to mitigate the pandemic-related economic crisis, the “Bono Universal” for people over 18 who are not working, provided limited and temporary help, since over 70% of working Bolivians do not have contracts or employer-based social security (Baker et al 2020).

## VI. CHALLENGES AHEAD

While political and health crises characterized 2020 for many countries across the Americas, the conflict and suffering was particularly acute in Bolivia. However, 2020 included some encouraging developments. Salvador Romero revamped the Electoral Tribunal and the October 2020 national elections were orderly, transparent, free, and fair. Looking ahead, we identify three core challenges for Bolivians and Bolivia’s political leaders in the coming years: polarization, power sharing within the MAS and across political parties, and trust in institutions.

Polarization has been on the rise in the country since 2016, but it became particularly acute following the political crisis of 2019 and persisted throughout 2020. In contrast to the pro-democracy movements in the past, the alignment of diverse civil society groups along the MAS/anti-MAS divide in 2020 subsumed many pro-democracy groups. Groups protesting on different sides believed themselves to be champions of democracy, interpreting events in the country through a lens of motivated reasoning and acting with strikingly different vi-

sions of what matters most for democracy. At the same time, discontent and fatigue increased with the political confrontation between opposing sides (El Potosi 2021). Even though civil society groups continue to support the ideals of the democratic political system (Boulding and Nelson-Nuñez 2014), there is a marked distrust of political actors from all political parties, as both Morales and Ñez initially declared that they were not going to run for office only to break their word shortly after. While the recent conflicts between opposing views paint a gloomy picture for the country, there is reason for optimism. A recent study found that the country is not as severely polarized as currently believed, but it is more than desired (Laserna 2020). The authors suggest that current polarization in the country is closely related to elections, which have been viewed as a method to resolve conflicts.

Challenges remain for the MAS. Both the political crisis of 2019 and the party's re-election to the executive in 2020 opened old cracks and created new rifts within the party. A key challenge is the process of determining the MAS leadership. The inability of the party to incubate and support emerging leaders could yield a viable left-wing alternative to the MAS. These divisions and power struggles were on display throughout 2020 and in the March 2021 subnational elections, where MAS lost in major cities and former strongholds like El Alto, La Paz, and Cochabamba. Party members attribute the loss to top-down appointment of candidates, which disregarded input from the bases (Claros 2021; Los Tiempos 2021; Mamani Cayo 2021; Quisbert 2021). Divisions have been so vitriolic that key political figures split from the party and formed their own, garnering considerable support in former MAS strongholds. The recent election of Eva Copa as mayor of El Alto despite her split with Evo Morales and the MAS is the latest iteration of this dynamic (Farthing 2021).

Declining trust in institutions preceded the pandemic and has continued to wane while dissatisfaction with political parties has grown. Data from the 2019 LAPOP household survey show that 81.26% of respondents do not identify with a political party and nearly 40% of respondents said they would submit a null ballot in the next election (LAPOP 2019). Low trust in political parties, a key nexus between citizens and governments, rose from roughly 40% in 2010 to over 50% in 2019. More recently, a survey by IPSOS for the Unión Nacional de Instituciones para el Trabajo de Acción Social shows the disaffection of the population with all political parties: when asked "How do you rate the participation of each of the following actors during the conflict in October and November?" on a scale from 1 to 7 (1-appalling and 7-excellent), 53% and 51% of respondents gave a score between 1-3 to the Morales administration and opposition political parties respectively (Unión Nacional de Instituciones para el Trabajo de Acción Social 2020). Additionally, when asked "How would you rate the current political role of each of the following actors?" 67% and 68% of respondents gave a score between 1-3 to the MAS and other political parties respectively. This evidence suggests that rebuilding trust in the political system will be a central challenge in the years ahead.

Reforming the justice system is key to rebuilding trust in institutions. Between 2014 and 2019, individuals reporting “no trust at all” in the judicial system increased from 14 to 20 percent respectively (LAPOP 2019). Citizens’ lack of trust is rooted in the country’s persistently dysfunctional justice system, which is characterized by a lack of resources, extensive corruption, and judicial misconduct. Moreover, the judiciary has become a political weapon: administrations across the political spectrum strategically deploy the law against their political opponents (Weyland 2013). The recent charges leveled against former members of the interim government, including the incarceration of Añez, are reminiscent of the politicized use of the law under both the Morales and Añez administrations. While Arce announced reforms to the justice system soon after his inauguration, the process is now stalled (Ministerio de Justicia 2020; Segales 2020; Erbol 2021). Like other polarized contexts or democracies in crisis, the rule of law should be a focal point in the coming years. Countries will not be able to adjudicate the entrenched views that fuel conflict — who is corrupt, what is democratic — without a truly independent and respected judicial system.

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