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## ‘I believe in democracy. That’s why Bolivian strongman Evo Morales put me in prison’

*In 2016, Bolivians rejected the referendum to allow President Evo Morales to run for a third term.*

By José María Leyes

**COCHABAMBA, Bolivia** — In recent years, the world has finally taken measures to counter growing authoritarianism in Latin America. For example, democracies around the world have withdrawn their recognition of the illegitimate regime in Venezuela — where strongman Nicolás Maduro has held onto power through electoral fraud and violent repression — and condemned Daniel Ortega’s regime in Nicaragua for massacring nearly 500 protestors in the last year alone.

Yet as these crises have captured the world’s attention, this same brand of brutal authoritarianism has silently taken root in my country, Bolivia, too. And as with Venezuela and Nicaragua, the situation in Bolivia should elicit serious concern.

President Evo Morales is following the classic dictator’s playbook. First, he removed term limits for office. Bolivia’s constitution limits the president to two terms in office, but determined to circumvent this, Morales held a legally binding referendum in 2016 to allow him to run for a third term. In a major upset, Bolivians rejected the referendum. Undeterred, Morales’ Movement for Socialism (MAS) party then challenged the term limits in court, and the Constitutional Tribunal — whose judges Morales personally appointed — struck them down under the preposterous argument that term limits violate human rights.

Morales has now launched his presidential campaign for the elections this October, and if he wins, he will be on track to become president for life. He already has started taking the necessary steps — following Maduro and Ortega’s example, Morales has imprisoned many of his leading political opponents and critics. I should know — I am one of Bolivia’s estimated 80 political prisoners.

As mayor of the city of Cochabamba and a leading opposition leader, I had planned to challenge Morales for the presidency. Because of this — and my outspoken criticism — I now sit in jail. Last year, while meeting with European Union and United Nations officials in Europe, I spoke out against Morales’ autocratic attempts to stay in power. Soon after, Morales’ government falsely accused me of rigging two municipal bidding processes so that specific individuals would win the contracts. However, I have never met nor had any contact whatsoever with these individuals and did not receive a penny from anyone for these alleged crimes; the government does not claim otherwise. Furthermore, the government has suspended three judges who ruled in my favor, and even charged one of them criminally. And even though I have not been convicted of any crime, I have been detained and suspended as mayor for more than a year.

The government has similarly targeted dozens of other opposition leaders with the help of the judiciary, which Morales has stacked with political allies. Showing a brazen disregard for the rule of law, the Morales regime has repeatedly used an anti-corruption law to prosecute opposition leaders, even when the alleged crimes happened before the law was adopted. Few members of Morales’ party have been prosecuted.

Morales has also cracked down on independent media, proposing a “law against lies” targeting unfavorable news about his government. As Bolivians have turned out to protest Morales’ bid for reelection, student massacres, and his government’s entrenched corruption and ties to drug trafficking, he has at times responded with violent repression. He even spent \$7 million of government funds to build a museum to glorify his life story in his home village of Orinoco, where 90 percent of the population lives in poverty.

The Morales regime clearly hopes to silence its critics — but the people will not let this happen. And I will continue to bring the government’s abuses to light, including in my own case. Recently, my international lawyer filed a complaint against Bolivia with the

U.N. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, asking it to find that the Bolivian government is detaining me in violation of its obligations under international law.

My case, however, is only one small example that shows Morales is not the democratic leader he claims to be. In fact, he has begun to take Bolivia down the same path that led Venezuela and Nicaragua into dictatorship and disintegration — and unless the world acts quickly, he will succeed.

The international community must support democracy and human rights in Bolivia. The U.S. Senate recently took an important step in this regard by unanimously approving a resolution criticizing Morales' undemocratic bid for reelection. Other legislatures should follow suit. The Organization of American States must treat the illegal Supreme Court decision that purported to authorize Morales eligible to run for a third term in the same way it treats similar judgments from Venezuela. And all democratic countries should warn Morales that if he stays in power for another term, he will not be recognized as a legitimate leader.

The world must stand in solidarity with the Bolivian people and their democratic aspirations before it is too late.

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