

MARXIST

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ÁLVARO GARCÍA LINERA

‘In Moments of Crisis, Behind Every Moderate Liberal, There’s a Fascist’

**An interview with Álvaro García Linera by
Elodie Descamps and Tarik Bouafia³**

Álvaro García Linera was the Vice President of Bolivia who was ousted in the coup against President Evo Morales. He told *Jacobin* about the coup d’état and the murderous violence now being unleashed against Evo Morales’s supporters.

Since its first election triumph in late 2005, Evo Morales’s Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) has had unparalleled success in transforming one of Latin America’s poorest countries. In thirteen years of MAS government, a quarter of the population was lifted out of extreme poverty, the indigenous majority finally came to the heart of public life, and Bolivia enjoyed the region’s most consistently high GDP growth.

All this came to an end on November 10, as army chiefs forced President Morales to resign. After the weeks of intense right-wing mobilization following Morales’s October 20 election victory—with widespread but unevdenced claims that the vote was fraudulent—the far-right paramilitary leader Luis Fernando

³ First published in *Jacobin*, November 20, 2019. Translated by David Broder.

Camacho triumphantly marched into La Paz, promising to put 'God back in the presidential palace'. Morales was forced to flee the capital, expressing his hope that his resignation could stem the opposition violence.

Yet even after the coup, the new authorities have pursued a violent campaign of vengeance against the ousted MAS—and even the populations whom its rule most benefited. Under self-proclaimed president Jeanine Áñez, street violence by white supremacist gangs has spiralled along with police and army repression of anti-coup protesters. Around two dozen people have been killed in the last week and a half [since the coup], as the violence against indigenous people and representatives of MAS and social movements intensifies.

One key actor in the ousted MAS government is Álvaro García Linera, Bolivia's vice president since 2006 and a key architect of the social policies promoted by President Morales. After the coup, both men were forced into exile, taking refuge in Mexico City. On Saturday, November 16, García Linera granted us an interview in the Mexican capital, reflecting on the events of the last week, the deeper causes of the coup, and the role of both domestic reactionary forces and foreign interference in driving unrest.

* * *

Elodie Descamps and Tarik Bouafia (ED, TB): Let's begin with the latest news. In recent days, MAS activists, sympathizers, and generally all those opposed to the coup have suffered brutal repression by the police and armed forces. What is your reaction to this mounting tide of violence?

Álvaro García Linera (AGL): Sadness and indignation at the murder of seven humble peasants [killed the day before this interview]. Another person is in a coma. They were murdered with automatic weapons in the hands of soldiers and the national police, who opened fire on mobilizations by peasants demonstrating their

rejection of the coup. This was a massacre. It's clear that those responsible, be they police, soldiers, or civilians, will eventually have to answer to the justice system—whether that comes tomorrow, in a month, or in five years' time.

They are drowning the Bolivian people in blood—it's an atrocity. One hundred ten people have sustained gunshot wounds. More than six hundred have been arrested. It is a bloody coup that shrinks from nothing in order to impose its control through fire and blood.

ED, TB: The president and you resigned precisely in order to avoid more bloodshed and opposition violence . . .

AGL: That's right. We left because we didn't want more dead Bolivians. The police threatened us; the armed forces disregarded the constitutional order and threatened to use force against our comrades. We said, 'We'll resign,' because we were forced to by police and military pressure. We hoped that if we did this, then they wouldn't harm our comrades. But even though we gave up on governing, even though we gave up our election victory, even though we are not going to stand in the next elections, despite all this, these people and this impostor government have come out into the streets in order to continue killing Bolivians.

What we're seeing is a wave of racialized violence against *indios* [indigenous peoples]. It is a kind of 'score-settling' by the political elite. It's directed against the *indios* who dared to take over the government, to hold power, to have rights over the last few years.

ED, TB: On Sunday, November 10, just a few hours after you announced fresh elections, there came the decision to resign, to put an end to the violence unleashed by the opposition. The head of the army, Williams Kaliman Romero, 'suggested' that you should resign. But what exactly led to the decision to leave power? Why did the armed forces so quickly rally behind the coup?

AGL: The coup had three stages. First was a civilian stage, which began the day after the election. We won with an over 10 percent advantage over the second-place candidate, which meant there would be no second round. The defeated Carlos Mesa did not recognize our victory and demanded a runoff vote. There immediately followed a type of insurgency by the traditional middle classes, raising a clamour about their own supposed racial supremacy. Cities like Santa Cruz, Cochabamba, and La Paz rose up against the government. They began to torch state institutions. Five of the nine electoral commission buildings—the place where votes were counted—were assaulted and set on fire. They also burned ballot boxes and papers.

Then they called for a shutdown of all the areas populated by these traditional middle classes. It was then that fascistic paramilitary bands first emerged, beginning their attacks on leading trade unionists. They burned several of the offices for both peasant and trade unions, attacking and hunting down their leaders. Peasant women marching were attacked by five-hundred, six-hundred-strong bands of motorcyclists, with people carrying baseball bats, clubs with nails in them, and tear-gas grenades.

They kidnapped the mayor of a peasant town, beat and manhandled her, dragged her along the ground, urinated on her, shaved her head, and threatened to lynch her. And they covered her face in red paint, in front of the TV cameras. When they came across peasants walking along, they beat them like animals. But this was all the first moment in the coup—the civilian moment. They sought to impose a kind of urban terrorism around the edges of the state and the legally constituted institutions.

The popular forces responded by calling for resistance against the coup. Miners from the Central Obrera Boliviana (COB, the main trade-union federation) reached La Paz. Peasants, indigenous people, and city residents arrived to defend the president. If this confrontation had continued as it was—setting the pro-coup civilian forces in opposition to the civilian forces who defend

democracy—we would probably have defeated them. But then came the second phase, with the police intervention—and this is what set everything off balance. The police rejected civilian command and failed to protect institutions and the sectors under attack, and at midnight, the chief of the armed forces repudiated civilian command and called on Evo to resign.

There was an escalation in the coup, from the civilian forces to the police and then the military. If these latter had not taken this stance, we could have stopped the coup in its civilian phase.

What changed things was when the police and the armed forces turned. The very people who had not intervened to keep order and protect persecuted trade-union leaders, who had not protected the women assaulted by these paramilitary gangs, the very next day repudiated the legitimate authorities. They showed an extraordinary capacity to deploy repressive force when it came to gassing demonstrators and locking up peasants and other leaders . . . Yesterday [November 15], they murdered seven people, and in the last five days, eighteen people have been killed [numbers have continued to rise since this interview on Saturday, November 16].

ED, TB: The pro-coup forces seem to have focused their attacks on popular sectors like miners, peasants, and workers, who historically made up the social base that brought Evo to power.

AGL: I think that here, too, we could have defeated them, despite these efforts. What tilted the balance was the role of the police and the military. Disregarding the constitution, they turned, armed, to the side of the pro-coup and rebel forces—and it was at this point that the coup entered its harshest phase. You'll have seen the self-proclaimed 'president' [Jeanine Áñez] alongside a general placing the presidential sash over her. But it's meant to be the assembly that appoints the new president, not some military official placing a sash over an impostor!

I hadn't seen a photo like this since the 1980s, when General [Luis] García Meza mounted a military coup. He killed the

socialist leader Marcelo Quiroga Santa Cruz, along with dozens of miners, in order to make himself president. For almost forty years, we hadn't seen this kind of image, where the police and military literally occupy the palace of government and effectively *are* the government. Jeanine Áñez is a puppet—the people with the real power are police and the army high command.

ED, TB: There was already a coup attempt in 2008, launched by conservative forces in the Media Luna [traditionally right-wing eastern provinces] and backed by US ambassador Philip Goldberg. Why did it succeed today, when it failed eleven years ago?

AGL: Two things have changed. The similarity was that then, too, there was a civilian coup driven by 'civic committees', corporatist structures that rally strongly conservative elements in Santa Cruz and the East. It began as an uprising, like the one we've suffered today. But in 2008, neither the police nor the military switched sides, whereas today they have.

But the pro-coup forces learned the lessons of this experience. And without doubt, the way they resolved this problem was to buy off police and military commanders. There was a lot of money driving them to make this switch—it must have been millions of dollars, to get the security forces to abandon their loyalty to the constitution.

The second element to take into account is that eleven years ago, Latin America took a united stance. Back then, Lula was governing Brazil, there was Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Cristina Kirchner in Argentina . . . and so, too, Michelle Bachelet in Chile. During the 2008 coup attempt, Latin America immediately stood up as a bloc in defence of democracy. Indeed, the members of UNASUR [Union of South American Nations] held an emergency meeting in Santiago de Chile. The meeting was headed by the Chilean president, Bachelet, and its member states rejected the coup. Today, one week on from the coup, there are eighteen dead and no UNASUR. We no longer have

a structure bringing together sovereign governments—one not dependent on the United States—that can decide that democracy must be respected, that peace must be guaranteed. What we instead see are complacent attitudes like that of the Organization of American States (OAS), which is playing a harmful role in endorsing, ratifying, and sanctifying the decisions that led to the massacre of the Bolivian people.

ED, TB: A series of recordings of sixteen conversations from October have been released, revealing the links between Bolivian opposition leaders (the former Cochabamba prefect Manfred Reyes Villa, the former Cochabamba MP Mauricio Muñoz), and former soldiers and senators from the United States (Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, Bob Menendez). Their goal, it is claimed, was to launch a destabilization campaign if Evo was re-elected. This meant, among other things, fomenting a military-police uprising and attacking MAS MPs' homes so that they would back Evo's resignation . . . Are these revelations to be taken seriously?

AGL: Yes. We should take them very seriously, because they tell us what has been going on under the surface of politics during recent months. And I believe that these people got the signal they were waiting for when it became clear that we were going to win the elections.

In 2014, we won with 62 percent of the vote; today we won with 47 percent. We did win the elections, but evidently not with the same massive advantage as in years past. So, when we won with under 50 percent of the vote, they saw a moment of weakness in our democracy and constitutional order. The day after the vote, they said, 'This is our moment—it's time for the coup.' It was then that they unleashed their offensive against us.

ED, TB: As you mention, MAS's vote fell from 62 percent in 2014 to 47 percent in 2019. So, over the last five years, part of the middle class that had once supported the process of

transformation you were driving turned its back on you. How come such significant sections of the population—people coming out of poverty and getting access to university and public posts—stopped supporting you?

AGL: There are multiple lessons to draw, but we also need to think a bit deeper. Winning with 62 percent in one election and 47 percent the next time is normal enough—indeed, many governments around the world rule with 35 or 40 per cent support, and sometimes less. But for a progressive government, things are more complicated. If ruling with such a base of support is routine practice for a normal, merely administrative government, winning with under 50 per cent support poses different challenges to a government that is pushing transformations in society. One such challenge is how to neutralize and transform the state's legitimate power of coercion. In this sense, Venezuela was more advanced than all the rest of us.

Indeed, beyond any problems it may have, Venezuela had the virtue of creating a defence structure within its revolutionary process, parallel to the state. We didn't build that. Not because we did not see it as necessary—in fact, initiatives did exist—but perhaps this was not done quickly or deeply enough. This is a key consideration.

This debate goes back to Salvador Allende. Is it possible to reach socialism democratically? Yes. But there also have to be structures to defend democracy itself. For me, democracy isn't just elections—I'm talking about a deeper conception of democracy. Democracy is equality, the broadening of rights, the de-racialization of authority and the rights that people enjoy. For this reason, there can be no transformation process if it is not democratic. This transformation has to take over the institutions but also have organizational forms capable of defending its achievements when faced with disturbances triggered from the outside. It is clear, in this case, that the money coming into the hands of police and military command came from the outside—and it's a lot of money.

Faced with the possibility of constitutional breakdown, there need to be popular defence structures. Venezuela built these; we didn't. This is the first lesson. The second is that if progressive processes are, indeed, progressive, they have to generate mechanisms of social mobility. If you were very poor, you now join the somewhat poor. If you were somewhat poor, you now come to have a middle income. If this does not happen, then clearly collective resources are not really being democratized.

But at the same time, it's only normal that those who came from the popular layers and now have middle incomes have developed a different type of expectations. We cannot blame them for this. But what happened in Bolivia is not the same as in Brazil or certain other countries in Latin America. There, the regressive process began when the popular middle classes' gradual rise ground to a halt and they felt the risk that they would fall back into the abyss once more. There, there was a moment of conservatism. But when we in Bolivia saw this in other countries, we did everything to make sure this social mobility did not fall—the curve did slow a little, but it continued rising. So what happened?

What happened is that the traditional middle classes saw themselves as being 'invaded' by popular and indigenous layers who now had university education and savings, and now had greater capital of various kinds to take on public posts. This traditional middle class was paralysed precisely because new middle classes from popular backgrounds were emerging. And it crystallized around ever more conservative positions.

What were we missing? We did not widen our discourse to embrace this traditional middle class as well as some fragments of the new middle class. Perhaps, as we governed, our discourse remained out of step with the realities that were developing. Materially, the classes had changed, but the core of our discourse remained anchored in the old reality.

ED, TB: Mainstream media present Carlos Mesa as a 'centre-right' politician, while Luis Fernando Camacho is portrayed as the

‘leader of a popular protest’. What is to be said about the political-ideological trajectory of these two figures?

AGL: Carlos Mesa was vice president for Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, and more recently a presidential candidate. He presents himself as a man of the centre-right, but in recent events, he has radicalized, just as this traditional middle class has. It was he who refused to recognize our victory. He called for mobilization on the day the results were announced, October 21, and that same night, the election commission offices were torched.

When last weekend’s dramatic events—the events of the coup—were developing, Mesa refused all negotiations. He was the first person to recognize Ms. Áñez. He maintained total silence about her dictatorial attitudes, the violation of the constitution, the massacre against the people. He passed from being a moderate liberal to becoming a supporter of the coup. This is why I say that in moments of crisis, behind every moderate liberal, you find a fascist.

For his part, Luis Fernandez Camacho comes from a very conservative family. His father was a member of Acción Democrática Nacionalista, the party of former dictator [Hugo] Banzer Suárez. A businessman, he was able to capitalize on the anti-government sensibility of a certain part of society in the Santa Cruz region. He was also able to use a religious, racialized discourse to rally and mobilize his people. He is the man who publicly made people pray and also said that his hero is Pablo Escobar—for, like him, he has a blacklist of people to hunt down.

ED, TB: The region has been shaken by massive protests against neoliberal governments (from Haiti to Chile and Ecuador), and progressive candidates have won elections in key countries like Mexico and Argentina. How would you place this coup in the context of conflict and geopolitical reconfiguration that Latin America is going through?

AGL: There’s been a lot of talk about the end of the progressive

cycle. But I don't think the idea of a cycle is much use. I prefer the concept of a tide, which helps us make sense of the progressive governments in Mexico and Argentina. There are both high and low tides. I think the metaphor of revolution as a tide, used by Karl Marx to explain the revolutions of 1848, helps capture the present, chaotic moment. The tide is advancing in Mexico and Argentina; it's retreating in Bolivia; there are protests against the neoliberal model in Ecuador and Chile . . .

ED, TB: Bolivia has been a pillar of Latin American progressivism. Do you see the coup against Evo as a means of holding back a new progressive wave?

AGL: Yes, because it was a successful project. We had an economy that worked, a distribution of wealth that worked, an industrialization process that worked, macroeconomic management that worked. So, what could stop this? It could be stopped by politics—by violence.

* * *

'HATRED TOWARDS INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'

Álvaro García Linera, vice president of Bolivia in exile, reflects on the role of racial hatred in motivating the coup which forced him and President Evo Morales out of office and into exile. First published in La Jornada, Mexico, 17 November 2019.

Almost as a nighttime fog, hatred rapidly traverses the neighbourhoods of the traditional urban middle class of Bolivia. Their eyes fill with anger. They do not yell, they spit. They do not raise demands, they impose. Their chants are not of hope, of brotherhood. They are of disdain and discrimination against the Indians. They hop on their motorcycles, get into their trucks,

gather in their fraternities of private universities, and they go out to hunt the rebellious Indians that dared to take power from them.

In the case of Santa Cruz, they organize motorized hordes with sticks in hand to punish the Indians, those that they call ‘*collas*’, who live in peripheral neighbourhoods and in the markets. They chant ‘the *collas* must be killed’, and if on the way, they come across a woman wearing a *pollera* [traditional skirt worn by Indigenous and mestizo women] they hit her, threaten her and demand that she leave their territory.

In Cochabamba, they organize convoys to impose their racial supremacy in the southern zone, where the underprivileged classes live, and charge—as if it were a cavalry contingent—at thousands of defenceless peasant women that march asking for peace. They carry baseball bats, chains, gas grenades. Some carry firearms. The woman is their preferred victim. They grab a female mayor of a peasant population, humiliate her, drag her through the street. They hit her, urinate on her when she falls to the ground, cut her hair, threaten to lynch her, and when they realize that they are being filmed, they decide to throw red paint on her symbolizing what they will do with her blood.

In La Paz, they are suspicious of their employees and do not speak when they bring food to the table. Deep down, they fear them, but they also look down on them. Later, when they are on the streets shouting, they insult Evo and with him, all of these Indians that dared to build intercultural democracy with equality.

When they are many, they tear down the Wiphala, the Indigenous symbol, they spit on it, they step on it, they cut it, they burn it. It is a visceral hatred that they unload on this symbol of the Indians that they wish they could extinguish from the earth along with all those that are represented by it.

Racial hatred is the political language of this traditional middle class. Academic titles, trips and faith serve for nothing because in the end, what is important is purity of ancestry. Deep down, the

imagined lineage is stronger and seems to stick to the spontaneous language of the skin that hates, of the visceral gestures and of their corrupt morals.

Everything exploded on Sunday [October 20], when Evo Morales won the election with 10 per cent more than the runner-up, but no longer with the immense advantage of before nor with 51 per cent of the votes. It was the sign that the regressive, huddled forces were waiting for—the timid liberal opposition candidate, the ultra-conservative political forces, the OAS [Organization of American States], and the indescribable traditional middle class. Evo had won again but he no longer had 60 per cent of the electorate. He was weaker and they had to go after him. The loser did not recognize his defeat.

The OAS spoke of ‘clean elections’ but of a weak victory and asked for a second round, counselling to go against the constitution that states that if a candidate wins more than 40 per cent of the votes and has more than 10 per cent over the runner-up, they are elected.

And then the middle class launched its hunt of the Indians. On the night of Monday, October 21, they burned 5 of the 9 electoral offices, including the ballots. In Santa Cruz, a civic strike brought together the inhabitants of the central zones of the city, following which the strike branched out to the residential zones of La Paz and Cochabamba. And this unleashed terror.

Paramilitary groups began to besiege institutions, burn trade-union offices, set fire to the residences of candidates and political leaders of the governing party [Movement Toward Socialism]. Even the private home of the President was looted. In other places, families, including children, were kidnapped and threatened with being whipped and burned if their parent, who was a minister or union leader, did not resign. An endless night of the long knives had been unleashed, and fascism peeked out.

The people’s forces comprising workers, miners, peasants, Indigenous people and urban dwellers resisted the civic coup

and began to retake territorial control of the cities. But just as the balance of the correlation of forces was shifting in their favour, the police mutiny occurred.

The police had for weeks shown great indolence and ineptitude in protecting the common people while they were being attacked and persecuted by fascist groups. But from Friday [November 8], many of them displayed an extraordinary ability to attack, detain, torture and kill working-class protesters. When it came to dealing with the children of the middle class, they apparently did not have the capacity. But when it came to repressing rebellious Indians, the deployment, violence and the arrogance was monumental.

The same happened with the armed forces. During all of our time in government, we never allowed them to repress civil mobilizations, not even during the first civic coup d'état in 2008. And now, in the midst of the convulsion and without us having asked them anything, they told us that they did not have anti-riot capacities, that they only had 8 bullets per member and that a presidential decree was necessary for them to be on the streets in even a protective capacity. However, they had no hesitation in seeking the resignation of President Evo, in violation of the constitution. They did whatever was possible to attempt to kidnap him while he was travelling to and was in Chapare.

And then, when the coup was consolidated, they went to the streets to shoot thousands of bullets, to militarize the cities and assassinate peasants. And all of this without any presidential decree. In order to protect the Indian, they needed a decree. To repress and kill Indians, it was enough to obey what the racial and class hatred decreed. And now, in only five days, there are more than 18 dead and 120 injured with live bullets. Of course, nearly all of them are Indigenous.

The question we must respond to is, how did the traditional middle class incubate so much hatred and resentment towards the people, leading them to embrace racialized fascism centred on the Indian as the enemy? What did they do to irradiate their class

frustrations to the police and armed forces and become the social base of this process of becoming fascist, of this state regression and moral degeneration?

The answer is the rejection of equality, which is to say, the rejection of the fundamentals of a substantive democracy.

The last 14 years of the government, of the social movements were characterized by the process of levelling of the social classes, the sharp reduction in extreme poverty (from 35 per cent to 15 per cent), the broadening of rights for all (universal access to healthcare, to education and to social protection), the Indianization of the state (more than 50 per cent of functionaries in public administration must be Indigenous, new national narrative around the Indigenous sector) and the reduction of economic inequality (the difference of income between the richest and the poorest fell from 130 to 45). All this meant the systematic democratization of wealth, access to public goods, opportunities and state power. The economy has grown from \$9 billion to \$42 billion, widening the market and internal savings, which has allowed many people to have their own homes and improve their work activity.

Thus, in a decade, the percentage of people of the so-called 'middle class' in terms of income, went from 35 per cent to 60 per cent. The largest part of them came from the working-class and Indigenous sectors. It was essentially a process of democratization of the social goods through the construction of material equality. But this inevitably has caused a rapid devaluation of the economic, educational and political capital held by the traditional middle class. In the past, a notable last name, the monopoly over 'legitimate' knowledge, and their family relationships allowed the traditional middle class to access posts in public administration, obtain loans and bids for projects or scholarships.

Today, the number of people that fight for the same post or opportunity has not only doubled—reducing the possibilities to access these goods by half—but, additionally, the 'up-and-coming', the new middle class with Indigenous, working-class origins,

has a combination of new capital (Indigenous language, trade union links) of greater value and state recognition to fight for the available public goods.

As such, it is about a collapse of what was a characteristic of a colonial society: ethnicity as capital, basically, the imagined foundation of the historical superiority of the middle class above the subaltern classes because in Bolivia, social class is only comprehensible and is visualized under the form of racial hierarchies. That the sons of this class have been the shock force of the reactionary insurgency is the violent cry of a new generation that sees how the inheritance of the last name and skin fades in the face of the democratization of goods. Although they raise the flag of democracy that is understood as a vote, in reality, they have risen up against democracy that is understood as the levelling of social classes and distribution of wealth. This is why we see the overflowing of hatred, the outpouring of violence—because racial supremacy is something that is not rationalized. It lives as a primary impulse of the body, as a tattoo of the colonial history in the skin. As such, fascism is not only the expression of a failed radical transformation of values, but paradoxically in post-colonial societies, the success of a material democratization.

With this in mind, it is not surprising that while nearly 20 Indigenous people have been shot dead, those that murder them and order their murder narrate how they are acting to safeguard democracy. But in reality, they know what they have done is to protect the privilege of caste and last name.

Racial hatred can only destroy. It is not a horizon for the future. It is nothing more than a primitive vengeance of a class historically and morally declining that shows that a coup-supporter is crouched behind every mediocre liberal.