

A hero's welcome: Inside Evo Morales' triumphant return tour

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Former Bolivian President Evo Morales attends a rally to welcome him to Chimore, Bolivia, Nov. 11, 2020, from where he flew into exile one year ago.

Oliver Vargas traveled with Evo Morales as he made his triumphant return to Bolivia following his exile after last November's U.S.-backed coup.

The return of Evo Morales to Bolivia on Monday, November 9, one day after President Luis Arce's inauguration, marked the formal end of last year's U.S.-backed coup. What does his return mean for Bolivia, and for the world? Is he just a former president who the media will turn to periodically for comment? Is he yesterday's news to his party? The answers to those questions remain unclear, but what is clear is that his three-day return tour was a statement that he intends to provide strong leadership for social movements in Bolivia and abroad.

Corporate media, both national and international, have been promoting a narrative that Morales is somehow in conflict with the incoming government of Luis Arce. A recent piece in the *New York Times* [stated](#), "Mr. Morales return now risks undermining Mr. Arce's efforts to bring the nation together to overcome the crisis," and Reuters [classified](#) Arce as being "in Evo's Shadow."

Of course, Bolivia's coup government knew that Evo Morales would strengthen, not weaken, any future MAS government. They understood that he was, and is, the leader of Bolivia's powerful social movements. They knew they had to keep him out of the country, so they piled on more than 20 criminal charges and a warrant for his immediate arrest if he ever set foot on Bolivian soil. The charges included terrorism, sedition, genocide, and more.

Morales was forced to escape to Mexico after the coup, he then moved to Argentina where he was also given asylum. The absurdity of the charges was proven when the coup regime, through its own hubris, took them to Interpol in an effort to force Morales' adopted country to hand him over. Of course, Interpol rejected the two attempts to place a 'red alert' on Morales, as they considered the charges against him to be political and without any legal basis.

Thrown out by international bodies, the legal persecution against Morales also collapsed at home. Just after the October 18 election results handed a victory to MAS, the power of the regime to pressure Bolivia's courts immediately evaporated, and his arrest warrant was lifted just days after the election.

The stage was now set for his return to Bolivia. The 9th of November was a carnival fit for a king. He crossed the border on foot, from the Argentinian town of La Quiaca to the Bolivian town of Villazon with tens of thousands of supporters ready to receive him. As one of the many reporters there, I was naive enough to believe that the crowds would be kept at bay by the union activists from the Chapare region who were the designated security, but I quickly lost my good position as the masses of assembled supporters immediately overwhelmed the burly men who were supposed to form a protective ring around Evo.

Looking to the future

Our cameras jolted about as we were dangerously squashed by the sheer weight of those trying to touch him or at least take a photo. His victory parade went from the border to the town's central plaza, about five blocks from the bridge through which he entered.

When asking those at the rally what Morales meant to them, the answers were not describing a loved, but has-been figure, most spoke in the future tense. Juan, a miner from Potosi, said, "We have to receive him and make sure he gets here ok, because he's our leader, at both the national and international level. I want to salute [President] Arce and [VP] Choquehuanca, but our true indisputable leader is Evo Morales Ayma and he always will be."

BREAKING: Evo Morales has crossed over the Quiaca-Villazón international border, marking his return and the social movements' victory over the 12 month coup. pic.twitter.com/leIi8pPHrW

— *Kawsachun News (@KawsachunNews) November 9, 2020*

A union activist from Argentina crossed the border for the Villazon rally and told me that “Evo is a Latin American leader and he’ll be the key for building a unified continent that’s strong, sovereign and for the people, for workers. That’s why we’re here, this concerns us too.

Morales’ first speech in Bolivia, delivered at the plaza in Villazon, struck a similar tone, discussing the future rather than reminiscing about past glory. “We have to keep working, our task now is to protect President Arce and our process of change, because the right doesn’t sleep and the empire is always looking at our natural resources, but we use our experience to go forward even stronger.”

So how does he plan to go about doing that? Morales is not just another private citizen. He has now assumed his role as the President of the 6 Federations of the Tropico, the powerful Chapare region rural workers union that he led throughout the 1990s and from which he founded the MAS. He’s also still the president of the MAS, the Movement Towards Socialism. He’s not the leader of the state, but he is the political leader of the ruling party.

A hero’s welcome

Following the Villazon rally, Morales and his comrades, and those of us covering the tour, jumped into our vehicles and sped away for what was the beginning of a long and physically taxing three-day road trip. Gone were the days of Evo being shipped around in a helicopter. After more than eight hours of driving through the freezing Potosi highlands, we got to the rally in the mining town of Atocha, making only a brief stop before getting back in the car for another hour to the town of Uyuni, arriving at 11:30 pm. Considering the rally was supposed to take place at 6 pm, and that temperatures had now dropped to 7 degrees celsius, I assumed that the event

had been called off or that everyone would have gone home. I was wrong. Thousands were densely packed, filling the entire square.

Huge crowd for Evo Morales in the town of Uyuni at 11.30pm, 7 degrees celsius. This is where Bolivia's lithium reserves are, the people here have been fighting off the coup regimes attempts to privatize their natural resources.
pic.twitter.com/cuzivibu9y

— Ollie Vargas (@OVargas52) [November 10, 2020](https://twitter.com/OVargas52/status/1325000000000000000)

We got to know the grueling schedule that has long been the norm for Evo. Throughout his time as president and before, he's been famous for working from 4 am to midnight, without taking weekends off. That night, we all got to bed at 3 am and had to be up and ready before 7 am for his morning press conference, during which he addressed the issue of the country's lithium reserves, referencing Elon Musk's [Twitter outburst](https://twitter.com/ElonMusk/status/1324999999999999999) regarding his participation in the coup. Morales stated clearly:

The coup was for lithium, imperialism doesn't want us to develop value-added products within Bolivia, they want the transnational corporations to take it all."

He then explained that just last week he had meetings with Argentina's Science Minister to draw up a binational plan to process the natural resource. Of course, he isn't a government official so he cannot sign off on any agreement, but his participation in such meetings is evidence of his relationship to the new MAS government, assisting where possible, but with the newly elected executive firmly in control. That approach is in accordance with what Luis Arce laid out in an interview with the BBC when he stated that "Evo Morales is very welcome to help us, but it doesn't mean he'll be in government."

Those in the media desperately searching for an example of Morales overshadowing the new government, or of Morales being left out in the cold, are still seeking evidence of it. Meanwhile, Evo continues his work on what was always his stated goal, to help Luis Arce, and to strengthen the MAS from his position as a social movement leader and president of the party.

The rest of the caravan was equally taxing, driving the whole day through Potosi to Evo's home village of Orinoca in Oruro, where he visited his childhood home constructed of dried mud and a straw roof. Orinoca, though, is not his only home.

Evo Morales went to his hometown in Oruro yesterday and danced with his people. Due to poverty, his family then migrated to the Trópico of Cochabamba where he became a union leader. He's now back in the Trópico for a huge rally later today in his political home. pic.twitter.com/tgo4e4jVOP

— Ollie Vargas (@OVargas52) [November 11, 2020](https://twitter.com/OVargas52/status/1325000000000000000)

As a child, his family left the village, driven out by the extreme poverty that most rural Bolivians faced during the twentieth century. They finally settled in the Chapare region, where Morales became the leader of the coca-growers union during the struggle against the presence of USAID and the DEA in the region.

After a very short rally in the nearby city of Oruro, we drove overnight without stopping to his Evo's political home, the Chapare, also known as the Tropico of Cochabamba. Arriving at 5 am the next day, Morales rested for just two hours before heading out at 7 am for meetings with local senators and mayors.

Giant rally in the Trópico of Cochabamba to welcome home Evo Morales. One year in exile, but now back as leader of Bolivia's social movements. pic.twitter.com/1uKqOm2rR6

— *Kawsachun News (@KawsachunNews) November 11, 2020*

What came after was the giant closing rally in Chimore Airport, the airbase in the Chapare region where Morales left for Mexico last year. More than half a million people filled the landing strip where he delivered a blistering speech laying out his politics:

We are anti-imperialist, that's not up for debate. But sisters and brothers, listen to me closely, it's not about being 'populist' or 'progressive' or 'in solidarity.' If you're not anti-imperialist then you're not revolutionary. Get that in your head brothers and sisters.'

What does Evo's future hold?

The dust has now settled, with no more huge rallies nor travel by car. Evo has set up base in the town of Lauca Ñ in the offices of the 6 Federations of the Tropico and home to their union's media outlet, Radio Kawsachun Coca.

The large crowds are no longer gathering, but the real political work has begun. Every hour has been filled with private meetings with every local leader of the MAS from each region of the country. Though, just as important, has been the international work.

Morales has been receiving delegations from the indigenous movement in Ecuador, as well as the principal worker's unions of Argentina, where they put the call out for a Latin America wide congress of social movements, with the purpose of creating a new international indigenous organization and launching projects for regional integration on the basis of 'plurinationalism' and anti-capitalism. After launching the call for the international congress, Leonidas Iza, a leader of Ecuador's indigenous CONAIE organization, said of Evo "We feel represented by him, he's not just

recognized in Bolivia, but in all the continent."

It's clear that Morales has a future as a political leader in Latin America. Freed from the bureaucratic trappings of power, he can guide social movements at a national and international level, using the experiences he's accumulated successfully leading social struggles to power, and helping defeat a coup after just one year. Those achievements alone make him an obvious figurehead for a project of unification of the Latin American left in particular. Those around the world looking to replicate such success could do worse than to turn to him as a figure that can orientate and provide leadership to those who need it.

Oliver Vargas is a British-Bolivian journalist covering the ongoing coup in Bolivia for MintPress News. His writing has appeared in teleSUR, Redfish and The Grayzone among others.

Source: [MPN News](#)

