

BOLIVIA

DEMOCRACY IN PERIL

Bolivia's interim president Jeanine Áñez has scheduled new elections for 3 May. But with members from former ruling party the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) facing intimidation and repression the polls are unlikely to be free and fair.

Bolivia last held elections on 20 October 2019, but allegations of fraud from the Organization of American States' observers and civil-society groups sparked weeks of conflict, which ended in a hard-right orchestrated coup against MAS president Evo Morales on 10 November.

Morales was Bolivia's first indigenous president. After

he came to power in 2006, his government drastically reduced poverty and inequality and took steps to end discrimination against the indigenous majority. But Morales was facing mounting criticism after his decision to ignore a referendum defeat and run for a fourth consecutive term in office.

Forced into exile, Morales is now managing the MAS campaign from Argentina. Former finance minister Luis Arce Catacora, who is widely credited as the architect of the MAS government's economic success, is now candidate for president. Ex-foreign minister David Choquehuanca will run for vice-president. But it is hard to see how MAS will be able to rally its supporters in the current climate.

In January, Bolivia's Ministry of Justice announced the launch of investigations into nearly 600 former members of Morales' government. Many MAS politicians and functionaries have been detained and others have sought refuge in the Mexican embassy,

triggering a diplomatic spat. The interim government has issued an international arrest warrant for Morales on charges of terrorism and sedition after recordings emerged, allegedly of him calling for protesters to stop food from entering cities.

Abuse by security forces is rife. Bolivia's ombudsman has reported that at least 30 people had been killed and more than 700 injured by mid-December. Nine people died when a pro-Morales march reached a police roadblock near the town of Sacaba on 15 November. At least nine more were killed during a military and police operation to clear a blockade in the El Alto municipality of Senkata four days later.

The government has denied responsibility for these killings, but witnesses have told human rights workers they saw security forces shoot. The Inter-American Commission for Human Rights (IACHR) has classified both incidents as massacres.

A teenage survivor of the Senkata killings told how she

BORDERLINES

Chechens denied

Polish border guards are refusing entry to Chechen asylum-seekers, many of whom have faced persecution and torture.

According to multiple reports, Chechens who apply for asylum are routinely mocked and humiliated, before being herded onto trains to the Belarusian city of Brest.

Thousands of people have reportedly been subjected to these 'push-backs' – which contravene EU asylum law – despite pressure from the European Court of Human Rights and numerous NGOs.

The Polish-Belarusian border was once an accessible entry point into Europe for refugees fleeing the Chechen Wars (1994-96 and 1999-2009) and more recently for those escaping the oppressive regime of Chechnya's strongman president Ramzan Kadyrov.

But since the populist Law and Justice Party came to power in Poland in 2015, the door has slammed shut. Once Chechens are dispatched to Belarus – where they are barred from seeking asylum due to Chechnya being a republic of Russia – many end up sleeping rough while attempting to re-enter Poland until their funds are exhausted – one family reportedly made the journey 86 times.

A few slip through – in the first half of 2019, 136 people applied for asylum (from a total of 1,604 would-be applicants). But of these, 95 per cent were rejected, compared to the global average of 86 per cent.

NILS ADLER

A member of the security forces in Sacaba, Cochabamba, on 15 November 2019, the day that nine people were massacred at a march in support of ousted president Evo Morales.

DANILO BALDERRAMA/REUTERS

