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Political Crisis in Bolivia 2019-2020

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The limits of plurality: Analysis of Coverage of the Political Crisis in Bolivia in U.S. Independent Media in September, October, and November of 2019

By: Dawn Marie Paley

At the beginning of September, 2019, I began a new job as editor of *Toward Freedom*, an alternative media website based in Burlington, Vermont. Months before, the president of the board wrote to me and asked me to apply for the job, which had opened up after the writer Benjamin Dangl left the organization after 14 years. Following a number of interviews and an internal process in which I was not included, the board unanimously voted to offer me the position.

I had shared with them my vision for what their page could become: a place for fresh perspectives on global politics from the left that included translations and an effort to get close to social movements, particularly in Latin America. I hoped that, with time, I could weave closer relationships with journalists and activists in other parts of the world.

I signed a written contract that outlined our mutual agreement: they would pay me a salary and provide me with a platform. In exchange, I would take the reins of their website and attempt to give it more relevance and better position it, and in so doing contribute to building knowledge and deeper dialogue with social movements.

Unfortunately, things didn't work out that way. The opinions of the editorial board of *Toward Freedom* about events in Bolivia in October and November of 2019 put the editorial freedom they had promised me into doubt. Over those months, I published more than a dozen English translations of articles and updates by renowned writers and journalists who are part of the Bolivian and Latin American left.

As we will see in this chapter, many of the writers that we translated questioned the simplifying categorization of events as a "coup d'état," and provided elements to help understand what was taking place in all of its complexity. My own reading of events, which I have developed in constant dialogue with Bolivians inside and outside of Bolivia, is that the coup d'état narrative is itself a political discourse that suppresses criticism and prevents an understanding and analysis of the events themselves.

As the political crisis was taking place in Bolivia, it was anything but obvious that what was occurring was a coup d'état. There were certain elements that made it appear that way, and others that pointed in another direction. There is still tension around this issue, and there is much left to understand, but the polarization that has been imposed has made deeper research more difficult. In this chapter, I will look at the consequences of immediately defining what happened in Bolivia as a coup, without even bothering to understand what took place into context.

Despite our efforts to translate and publish critical voices from the Bolivian and Latin American left, the version of events that is dominant in the English-speaking left is that what happened in

Bolivia was a coup d'état; not just any coup d'état, but one that may have been carried out with involvement of U.S. intelligence services and was potentially motivated by the desire to control lithium reserves.

While I worked there, the editorial board of *Toward Freedom* was made up of middle class and wealthy white people, all of them English speakers, with few connections with activists or political movements in Latin America. Most of them were extremely uncomfortable with the complexity and the critical questions raised by the authors I translated about the crisis in Bolivia.

It took a while before I understood that their reactions were not rooted in disagreements about specific issues or information shared by *compañeras* and *compañeros* in Bolivia. Nor did they emerge from a process of studying the facts or making an effort to understand the chronology of events and the different powers that were operating in the country. Rather, their reactions were related to pressure and suggestions from their comrades in the "gringo left" about what was the *correct position* to take as to what happened in Bolivia.

The political crisis in Bolivia came at the cost of 37 lives, nine of them lost before Janine Añez took power. Dozens more were seriously injured.

There is no doubt that the interim government of Añez was violent, racist, and incompetent in every sense. Obviously, its legality was questionable. For one long year, Añez and her cabinet demonstrated their racism, lack of education, and ignorance to the entire world. They greenlighted the army's repression, which led to two bloody massacres, in Senkata (La Paz Department) and Sacaba (Cochabamba Department). When elections finally took place, the right-wing parties were crushed at the polls by the Movement Against Socialism's Luis Arce and David Choquehuanca.

However, the fact that the government that followed the exit of Evo Morales and Alvaro García Linera from the country was a disaster in every sense does not mean that what took place was a coup d'état organized by the right wing in cahoots with the U.S. and the Organization of American States (OAS).

In the months following the crisis, journalist John Lee Anderson traveled to Bolivia. He summed up this problem as follows: "Morales's alleged electoral fraud, and his party's acceptance of new elections without him, makes it difficult to call his ouster a coup. Añez's behavior makes it hard not to."¹

More than two years after the events, many important questions about what took place in Bolivia between November 10 and 12 of 2019 remain unanswered.

There was an institutional vacuum that lasted for nearly two days between when the president fled the country and Añez's taking power. She was the fifth in the line of succession. In the

¹ Anderson, Jon Lee. 2020. "The fall of Evo Morales." *The New Yorker*, March 23, 2020. Consulted December 20, 2022. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/03/23/the-fall-of-evo-morales>.

words of journalist Boris Miranda, who has since passed away, “A power vacuum was created, a power vacuum that is still being discussed, because we still don’t know why so many high-ranking officials from Evo Morales’s party, the Movement Towards Socialism, resigned, clearing the path for what constituted the opposition at the time.”²

Following the resignations and Añez’s coming to power, the Constitutional Court released a communique expressing its agreement with the Añez succeeding as constitutional President. MAS, which still had a two thirds majority in both houses, continued to legislate with Añez and her interim government, and accepted both the resignation of Morales and Añez’s designation as interim president.³

Members of the military like General Williams Kaliman, who were so central to the coup narrative, didn’t enjoy promotions or new privileges under Añez. Rather, following Morales’ resignation, they left their positions.⁴

Vice President Álvaro García Linera, as well as former Defense Minister Javier Zavaleta, later stated that Morales resigned before the army “suggested” he do so.⁵ Zavaleta went on the record saying that he waited until Morales was safely out of the country before he resigned, to ensure he would reach Mexico without any trouble.⁶

To this day there remains a great deal of confusion about what took place over that period: was there electoral fraud or not? Was it a self-coup, or a coup, or a strange combination of both?

On November 11, 2019, I interviewed Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, an activist and academic with a long history of struggle in Bolivia. That night she told me the following about the coup/no-coup

² Viñas, Silvia y Zuñiga, Mariana. 2020. “Bolivia Después de Evo.” *El Hilo*. October 16, 2020. Consulted January 15 2022. <https://elhilo.audio/podcast/boliviavota/>.

³ AFP. 2019. “Tribunal Constitucional de Bolivia avala a Jeanine Añez como presidenta interina”. *El Universo*, November 13, 2019. <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2019/11/12/nota/7601600/tribunal-constitucional-bolivia-avala-jeanine-anez-como-presidenta>; AFP. 2020. “El Congreso boliviano aprueba la renuncia de Evo Morales”. *El Informador*, de enero de 2020. <https://www.informador.mx/internacional/El-Congreso-boliviano-aprueba-la-renuncia-de-Evo-Morales-20200121-0077.html>.

⁴ Callisaya, Luis. 2021. “Mando de Kaliman fue leal a Evo y rechazó estar en la gestión de Añez”. *Página Siete*, July 26, 2021. <https://www.paginasiete.bo/seguridad/2021/7/26/mando-de-kaliman-fue-leal-evo-rechazo-estar-en-la-gestion-de-anez-302068.html>.

⁵ Erbol. 2021. “Zavaleta revela el momento en que se decidió la renuncia de Evo y dos factores ‘contundentes’ tomados en cuenta”. *Erbol*, November 28, 2021. <https://erbol.com.bo/nacional/zavaleta-revela-el-momento-en-que-se-decidi%C3%B3-la-renuncia-de-evo-y-dos-factores-;> “García Linera habla sobre los conflictos sociales de 2019”. 2021. *Que No Me Pierda*. <https://www.facebook.com/quenomepierdabo/videos/145566691007175/>.

⁶ Erbol. 2021. “Zavaleta revela el momento en que se decidió la renuncia de Evo y dos factores ‘contundentes’ tomados en cuenta”. *Erbol*, November 28, 2021. <https://erbol.com.bo/nacional/zavaleta-revela-el-momento-en-que-se-decidi%C3%B3-la-renuncia-de-evo-y-dos-fac>

binary view: “That is how the polarization is being set up, and it means the facts, what actually happened, loses meaning. It means we cannot think about what took place based on words; rather, words are chosen for us, according to which our experience is organized. What I am describing to you is something I’ve never seen before in Bolivia.”⁷

Guided by the words of Gutiérrez Aguilar, and in ongoing dialogue with my comrades, I’ve attempted to make sense of the events in Bolivia in the days and months of October and November 2019. In this chapter, I will explore why alternative media from the U.S. contributed to polarization and silenced Bolivia’s critical left during the months of September, October, and November of 2019.

Why is it that—after a certain opening in some U.S. media following the elections—there was a total closure to critical perspectives that included context about what had taken place in Bolivia?

Independent media

Before I begin to describe how the political crisis was covered by independent media in English, I would like to establish some parameters for the discussion.

In the U.S. and Canada, the terms “independent media” and “alternative media” are used interchangeably. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication, alternative media are “Newspapers, magazines, radio stations, or online media which are not corporately owned and which circulate political messages felt to be under-represented in mainstream media (seen as geared towards maximizing profits and supporting a market model)” (Chandler and Munday 2021).

There isn’t enough space here to review every alternative media project in the U.S. and Canada, which is why I will concentrate on those I consider the most important given their focus on Latin America, their importance as forums for left debate and discussion, and their timely publication of articles, coverage, and investigations about events in the region.

In addition to my own experience as editor of *Toward Freedom*, I will consider coverage of the political crisis in Bolivia by other independent media outlets. Of all of the publications analyzed here, *Toward Freedom* is the smallest, with a single employee and a tiny budget (less than U.S.\$30,000 per year). *Democracy Now!*, *Jacobin*, *The Nation*, and *The Intercept* are the largest, and they are accessed by much larger audiences in the U.S. and beyond. *Dissent*, *Commune*, and *Ricochet* are smaller, but each is committed to helping readers understand the world through a left-leaning lens.

⁷ Paley, Dawn. 2019. “Bolivia: Organizando el sentido para navegar la tremenda complejidad - zur”. *Zur*, December 13, 2019. <https://zur.uy/bolivia-organizando-el-sentido-para-navegar-la-tremenda-complejidad/>.

The *North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA)* is the only Latin America-focused outlet among those considered here.⁸ During the first months of the crisis in the Bolivia, *Socialist Forum* and *Democratic Left*, the two publications connected to the largest socialist organization in the U.S. (the Democratic Socialists of America, or DSA) didn't publish anything about it.

The Grayzone, *Counterpunch*, and *Mint Press News* are in a category of their own: they self-identify as socialist and anti-imperialist media, but they tend to take positions in support of governments like China and Russia, countries which they do not consider imperialist.

The Grayzone must be taken into account because of its influence on social media and because it represents the most radical effort to position Washington and the Central Intelligence Agency as key actors in the political crisis in Bolivia. *The Grayzone* is known for publishing conspiracy theories (Jelacic 2021). *MintPress News* published the first mention of lithium as a root cause of the coup d'état, and *Counterpunch* published an article attempting to attribute the coup d'état to another strategic mineral.

As we will see, disinformation from the left first appeared in these three outlets before being laundered into more credible independent news outlets.

"Anti-imperialist" media

Over recent years, there has been a growth of media and organizations on the left which devote much of their energy to defending governments they consider to be leftist and/or socialist on the international stage.

For example, when I was working at *Toward Freedom*, I began to have issues with the editorial board due to coverage of the political crisis in Bolivia. However, my problems grew when I commissioned an article critical of the Daniel Ortega administration in Nicaragua, and another about state violence in Venezuela. Even though the articles were written by journalists familiar with the countries about which they were writing, they were targeted by a campaign organized by people in the U.S. who are loyal to those governments and who had friendly relationships with members of *Toward Freedom's* editorial board.

It's worth reviewing the gringo "anti-imperialism" that makes a herculean effort to defend Daniel Ortega, as it gives us a concrete way to understand the structure of a left-leaning political position that proposes a universalist analysis of global geopolitics. To consider just one example, we can look at the report "Live from Nicaragua: Uprising or Coup?" published by the Alliance for Global Justice in 2019. Many of the authors who contributed texts for the report also participated in the campaign to complain against the article on Nicaragua's Covid-19 response published on *Toward Freedom*.

In the report, the authors—one of which includes Max Blumenthal, editor of *The Grayzone*—propose that the popular rebellion in Nicaragua in April 2018 was an attempted coup d'état

⁸ I am a member of NACLA's editorial committee.

financed by the U.S. (and not a massive protest against austerity that led to the killing of over 300 people by state forces). The introduction to the report alleges that “Even the most cursory examination of the events of 2018 cannot help but impress the observer with their similarity to past U.S. practices in Nicaragua, to its current regime change efforts in Venezuela, and to the false flag and fake videos of everyone’s favorite terrorists, the White Helmets of Syria” (Kaufman 2019, 11-12).

Activists like Chuck Kaufman consider the fight against what they call “disinformation” to be among the most important actions of what they call the international solidarity movement (2019, 11). However, their version of events is distorted by their total loyalty to presidents who call themselves ‘socialist’ while de-legitimizing popular and communitarian movements. That delegitimization often takes place through a practice known as fedjacketing, which is when it is alleged that participants in resistance movements (particularly those against austerity, state violence, and authoritarianism) receive funds from or work for agencies that are part of the U.S. government.

In Nicaragua, for example, Kaufman claimed the students who kicked off the protests against Daniel Ortega in 2018 were “trained by U.S.-funded ‘democracy promotion’ programs” (2019, 11). By the same logic, in Cuba, activists and artists who protest against the government of Miguel Díaz-Canel are infiltrated by U.S. NGOs: “At the forefront of Washington’s strategy [in Cuba] are two traditional CIA fronts: the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).”⁹

There are similar examples from all over the world: Belarus, Hong Kong, and most recently, Kazakhstan, where hundreds of thousands of people have mobilized against their governments, only to be accused by activists and journalists from Code Pink, Greyzone, and the Alliance for Global Justice (to name just a few) of being part of U.S.funded “color revolutions.”

It is in Syria where this brand of anti-imperialism has reached its most extreme expression: calling the White Helmets terrorists, as Kaufman does, is a method of hiding the role of the governments of Bashar Al Assad and Vladimir Putin in crimes against humanity, including major chemical weapon attacks on civilians (OPCW 2022; UNGA 2022).

In September of 2021, the United Nations estimated that more than 350,000 civilians had been killed in the conflict in Syria, which was then a decade old.¹⁰ Calling rescue workers like White Helmets terrorists is a means of creating disinformation and justifying the violence of the Syrian state. It puts the lives of rescue workers, massacre survivors, and social organizations under

⁹ Blumenthal, Max. 2021. “Cuba’s Cultural Counter-Revolution: U.S. Gov’t-Backed Rappers, Artists Gain Fame as ‘Catalyst for Current Unrest’ | MR Online,” August 3, 2021. <https://mronline.org/2021/08/03/cubas-cultural-counter-revolution-u-s-govt-backed-rappers-artists-gain-fame-as-catalyst-for-current-unrest/>.

¹⁰ BBC News. 2021. “Syria war: UN calculates new death toll - BBC News”. *BBC News*, September 24, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-58664859>.

threat. At the same time, it demonstrates callous disregard for civilian lives in Syria, including Palestinian refugees and other migrants in Syria.

According to researcher Nerma Jelacic, with regards to Syria, the “disinformation movement has brought together a diverse coalition of leftists, communists, racists, ideologues, anti-Semites, and fascists” (2021, 18). The author notes that *The Grayzone* has played an important role in disseminating Russian disinformation in Syria (Jelacic 2021). More recently, it has done the same with regards to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹¹

These might seem like distant events, but it is important to note the existence and growing popularity of this strain of Stalinism (which calls itself “anti-imperialist”) on the left today. They are convinced that the role of anti-imperialists is to defend governments having rocky relationships with Washington. Their maxim appears to be, “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

Viewing power through this lens delegitimizes protests in any country they consider anti-imperialist, without regard to the political context, the participation of left-leaning organizations or parties in the protests, or a materialist analysis of the struggles. This phenomenon goes beyond media coverage, and it has penetrated various organizations that convene sectors of the left.

“The U.S. anti-war position has largely been defined by the ANSWER Coalition, which has held a virtual hegemony over the U.S. anti-war movement since the Iraq War by neutralizing the space to organize against imperialist aggression by those states they view as ‘opposed’ to U.S. empire.”¹²

This context is vital to understanding coverage of the political crisis in Bolivia on the part of alternative media in the U.S.. The U.S. alternative media includes the same outlets that have promoted fake news about Syria from the left, as well as organizations like Codepink and the ANSWER Coalition.

After months of dialogue and attempts to share information with the board of *Toward Freedom* via translations into English and long explanations about the social and political conditions in Venezuela and Nicaragua, I realized that, for them, the issue was simple. The important thing was to be on good terms with their “anti-imperialist” friends. Plural leftist movements for autonomy and independence (that are not part of progressive governments) complicate the vulgar analysis of anti-imperialists, and as such, in this view, those voices are best quieted and marginalized.

¹¹ Foresta, Mathew. 2022. “Meet the Sneakiest Defenders of Vladimir Putin’s Ukraine Invasion and China’s Xinjiang Repression”. *The Daily Beast*. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/meet-the-sneakiest-defenders-of-vladimir-putins-ukraine-invasion-and-chinas-xinjiang-repression>.

¹² Li, Promise. 2021. “Fighting Anti-Asian Violence Cannot Include Apologism for the Chinese State.” *Lausan*, April 4, 2021. <https://lausancollective.com/2021/fighting-anti-asian-violence/>.

In the end, I decided not to renew my contract after my first year with *Toward Freedom*. The editorial board made it clear that for them, *The Grayzone* is a respectable outlet that ought to be imitated. For them, articles critical of the governments of Venezuela, Nicaragua, or Bolivia are part of a strategy directed by Washington to promote “regime change” in those countries.

In the sections below, I will attempt to understand coverage of the political crisis in Bolivia in September, October, and November of 2019 by combining my experience at *Toward Freedom* with a review of coverage provided in other independent media outlets. To do so, we have to go back to the forest fires in the Bolivian Amazon in September of 2019.

The fires in Chiquitanía

My first experience as an editor was in 2008, first with *The Dominion* and later with *The Media Co-op*, two related independent media projects in Canada. Later, I moved to México and worked as a freelancer, followed by four years as a doctoral student at the Meritorious Autonomous University of Puebla. After graduation, I decided to return to the world of journalism.

The first article I posted as editor of *Toward Freedom* in 2019 was a translation of the first chapter of the book *Feminist International* by Argentine writer Verónica Gago. Shortly after, in mid-September, I published a translation of an article by Huáscar Salazar, which explored the expansion of the agricultural frontier and the massive fires that were ongoing in the Chiquitanía region.

The fires, which lasted more than a month and burned more than two million hectares, took place in a pre-electoral context, when there were still three men vying to become Bolivia’s next president (Carlos Mesa, Evo Morales, and Óscar Ortiz). Regardless of the differences between them, Salazar explained that all three represented, albeit in different ways, continuity of the extractive model.

“Former President and now candidate Carlos Mesa proposed this extractive model (with little success) during the neoliberal push many years ago; the progressivism of Evo Morales efficiently operationalized the extractive model; and the oligarchic and landholding elite of Bolivia’s east, represented in Óscar Ortiz, has been one of the main beneficiaries of the extractive model, as have transnational, U.S., Brazilian, Chinese and European capitalists,” wrote Salazar.¹³

I was happy to have published that first article on the fires, written by a respected Bolivian colleague, as a means of covering the pre-electoral landscape. There were no complaints or negative comments about its publication.

¹³ Salazar, Huascar. 2019. “As Bolivia burns, state policy fuels the fire”. *Toward Freedom*, September 16, 2019. <https://towardfreedom.org/story/as-bolivia-burns-state-policy-fuels-the-fire/>.

Apart from the article in *Toward Freedom*, the fires were also covered in three of the alternative media outlets we will consider in this chapter: *Democracy Now!*, *NACLA*, and *The Grayzone* blog.

Two of the outlets took the time to explain the social discontent that was brewing in Bolivia at that time. *Democracy Now!* mentioned the fires twice in its headlines, noting that millions of animals had died, and that a protest of hundreds of thousands of people had taken place in the city of Santa Cruz.¹⁴

For its part, *NACLA* published an article detailing how Morales's hesitation to declare a state of emergency and efficiently mobilize resources to fight the fires could impact his electoral campaign.¹⁵

The Grayzone published a long article alleging that criticism of the Morales administration for its lack of action in the face of the fires was part of a U.S. backed campaign to remove Morales from office.¹⁶ Months later, the same blog would call protests against the fires "the initial stage of the coup."¹⁷

After a long month of fires, the rains started. As soon as the smoke had cleared, the elections got underway.

The 2019 elections

Jacobin, a socialist magazine with significant influence in the (socialist) U.S. left, published two interviews on October 20, 2019, election day in Bolivia: one with then Vice President Álvaro García Linera, and another with the President of the Senate, Adriana Salvatierra.¹⁸

¹⁴ Democracy Now! September 26, 2019a. "2 Million Wild Animals Perish as Fires Rage in Bolivia". *Democracy Now!*
https://www.democracynow.org/2019/9/26/headlines/2_million_wild_animals_perish_as_fires_rage_in_bolivia;
Democracy Now! October 8, 2019b. "Bolivia Rains Quell Fires After 10 Million Amazon Acres Burn". *Democracy Now!*
https://www.democracynow.org/2019/10/8/headlines/bolivia_rains_quell_fires_after_10_million_amazon_acres_burn.

¹⁵ Achtenberg, Emily. 2019. "Will Evo Morales Survive Bolivia's Fires?" *NACLA*, October 16, 2019.
<https://nacla.org/blog/2019/10/16/will-evo-morales-survive-bolivia-fires-election>.

¹⁶ Reed, Wyatt y Norton, Ben. 2019. "Western Regime-Change Operatives Launch Campaign to Blame Bolivia's Evo Morales for Amazon Fires". *The Grayzone* (blog). August 29, 2019. <http://thegrayzone.com/2019/08/29/western-regime-change-operatives-launch-campaign-to-blame-bolivias-evo-morales-for-the-amazon-fires/>.

¹⁷ Blumenthal, Max, y Ben Norton. 2019. "Bolivia Coup Led by Christian Fascist Paramilitary Leader and Millionaire – with Foreign Support". *The Grayzone* (blog). November 12, 2019.. <http://thegrayzone.com/2019/11/11/bolivia-coup-fascist-foreign-support-fernando-camacho/>.

¹⁸ Moreno, Iago y Rogatyuk, Denis. 2019. "Latin America's Pink Tide Isn't Over", October 20, 2019.
<https://jacobinmag.com/2019/10/bolivia-election-alvaro-garcia-linera-evo-morales>; Rogatyuk, Denis. 2021.

The introduction of the interview with García Linera emphasized the achievements of his administration, the same which were highlighted in official discourse: the plurinational constitution, the recognition of the rights of “*pachamama*,” massive social investment, and a reduction of poverty accompanied by economic growth.¹⁹ The authors recognized that victory wasn’t guaranteed for Morales and García Linera and mentioned the 2016 referendum. However, they went on to say that all of the social forces that could potentially be opposed to Morales were part of the rightwing neoliberal opposition (they also mentioned pseudo-environmentalists, linking to *The Grayzone* article).²⁰

The next day, *Democracy Now!* covered the fact that the presidential vote in Bolivia appeared to be headed for a runoff, and between that date and the day Morales resigned, it mentioned the protests—and the growing social tensions—three times.

On October 22, the Center for Economic and Political Research (CEPR) denounced the OAS, asking that it cancel a press release in which it expressed concern for irregularities in the voting process (CEPR 2019). In the communiqué, Weisbrot criticized Republican senator Marco Rubio and others for sharing their opinions about the elections before they took place (ibid). His complaint is somewhat ironic, given that CEPR had prepared a press release congratulating Morales for his victory, which they didn’t publish (however, CEPR didn’t prepare a communiqué in the case that Morales lost) (Personal communication with Dan Beeton, January 10, 2022).

NACLA was the first alternative media outlet in the U.S. to publish an article about the protests that followed the elections, on October 24. Written by Linda Farthing, a researcher and journalist with a long history in Bolivia, it explained in detail potential irregularities during the voting process, including the resignation of Antonio Costas, the Vice President of the Electoral Tribunal.²¹ It also noted that the Bolivian Foreign Ministry had formally requested that the OAS make a review of the election results.²²

Journalist Zeeshan Aleem, who at the beginning of October published an article attempting to make a review of the Morales presidency, wrote another article for *The Nation* on October 25, in which he gave space to the voices of Bolivians concerned about electoral fraud, making

“Building a Bolivia for the Next Generation”. *Jacobin*, October 20, 2019. <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/10/bolivia-election-adriana-salvatierra-mas-evo-morales>.

¹⁹ Moreno, Iago y Rogatyuk, Denis. 2019. “Latin America’s Pink Tide Isn’t Over”, October 20, 2019. <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/10/bolivia-election-alvaro-garcia-linera-evo-morales>.

²⁰ Moreno, Iago y Rogatyuk, Denis. 2019. “Latin America’s Pink Tide Isn’t Over”, October 20, 2019. <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/10/bolivia-election-alvaro-garcia-linera-evo-morales>.

²¹ Farthing, Linda. 2019. “Evo Morales Wins Bolivia’s Election, but Fraud Allegations Tarnish the Victory”. *NACLA*, October 24, 2019. <https://nacla.org/news/2019/10/24/evo-morales-wins-bolivia-declares-victory-protest-fraud>.

²² Farthing, Linda. 2019. “Evo Morales Wins Bolivia’s Election, but Fraud Allegations Tarnish the Victory”. *NACLA*, October 24, 2019. <https://nacla.org/news/2019/10/24/evo-morales-wins-bolivia-declares-victory-protest-fraud>.

mention of hidden servers and other irregularities.²³ That article explored the dissatisfaction in Bolivia without branding all of those in the streets as elites and racist, as would occur later.

Also on October 25, the academic Angus McNelly wrote an article in *Jacobin* in which he detailed the divisions between those who support Morales and those who do not, characterizing those who oppose Morales as right wing and/or instrumentalized by the traditional (racist and proto fascist) political forces of Bolivia's lowlands.²⁴ In his article, McNelly describes a campaign by an opposition united by strategically voting against Evo Morales, and the rise of the racist elites from the lowlands (the departments of Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando, and Tarija).²⁵

In October, the climate in alternative media was generally favorable to the official left-leaning project and Morales's re-election, although there was still a space open for criticism from the left of his government, as a means of understanding the erosion of votes for his party. "Bolivia has seen remarkable stability under Morales, largely based on the expansion of extractive activities in hydrocarbons, minerals, and agriculture, with often disastrous consequences for the environment and local Indigenous peoples," wrote Farthing in *NACLA*.²⁶

After the initial reports described above, over a space of a few weeks, the outlets reviewed for this article did not provide further coverage of post-electoral protests in Bolivia. Instead, attention was focused on understanding Chile's massive social protests, and the outcome of 11 days of popular and anti-neoliberal mobilizations in Ecuador.²⁷

Towards the resignation

On November 8th, I published the translation of a letter with various elements for reflection, written by Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar. It criticized Morales, Mesa, and Luis Fernando Camacho, who began to take on a more important role in events. "The situation in Bolivia is becoming more and more difficult. Bolivian society is being dragged towards the innards of the patriarchal

²³ Aleem, Zeeshan. 2019-10-01. "Bolivia's Remarkable Socialist Success Story", 2019-10-01. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/economics-socialism-bolivia-evo/>; Aleem, Zeeshan. October 25, 2019. "Bolivian Ballot Boxes Are Burning," <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/bolivia-elections-morales/>.

²⁴ McNelly, Angus. 2019. "The Two Bolivias". *Jacobin*, October 25, 2019. <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/10/bolivian-election-evo-morales-mas-opposition>.

²⁵ McNelly, Angus. 2019. "The Two Bolivias". *Jacobin*, October 25, 2019. <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/10/bolivian-election-evo-morales-mas-opposition>.

²⁶ Farthing, Linda. 2019. "Evo Morales Wins Bolivia's Election, but Fraud Allegations Tarnish the Victory". *NACLA*, el October 24, 2019. <https://nacla.org/news/2019/10/24/evo-morales-wins-bolivia-declares-victory-protest-fraud>.

²⁷ Brown, Kimberley. 2019. "Ecuador: After a Blaze of Protests, A Grey Horizon". *Toward Freedom*, el 26 de octubre de 2019. <https://towardfreedom.org/story/ecuador-after-a-blaze-of-protests-grey-days-on-the-horizon/>; Kim, Caroline y Ferretti, Pierina. 2019. "Interview from Chile: Neoliberal Anguish Explodes Public Space". *Toward Freedom*, el 29 de octubre de 2019. <https://towardfreedom.org/story/interview-from-chile-neoliberal-anguish-explodes-public-space/>.

symbolic order that sustains the logic of war and that guarantees the expansive and colonial accumulation of capital,” wrote Gutiérrez.²⁸ This article was among the first to ring the alarm bell on the dangerous polarization that was beginning to occur.

That same day, *The Nation* published a column by Mark Weisbrot from CEPR, which marked a shift in coverage in alternative media in English. According to Weisbrot, the main organization responsible for the political crisis in Bolivia was the OAS.²⁹ That day, CEPR also published a report rejecting the allegations of fraud made by the OAS (Long et al 2019).

On November 9, Vijay Prashad, director of the Tri-Continental Institute and one of the most visible self-identified anti-imperialists in the U.S.; together with U.S. academic and linguist Noam Chomsky, published a letter suggesting that there was a coup d'état underway in Bolivia. “The coup is driven by the Bolivian oligarchy, who are angered by the fourth election loss by their parties to the Movement for Socialism,” they wrote.³⁰ It is not clear who the source was for this information.

At that time, I was living with a Bolivian comrade, and I remember waking up on November 10 and listening to Bolivian radio stations online so we could follow events there as they happened. Beginning early that morning, protest caravans had been leaving Potosí towards La Paz. That morning, the OAS published the first version of its report on the October 20 elections, and called on Bolivian authorities to convene a new election.

Hours later, the Bolivian Workers' Central called on Morales to resign, as did many other people and social organizations. Later, General Kaliman suggested Morales resign. That day, Morales resigned, as did his vice president García Linera; the president of the Senate, Adriana Salvatierra; the first vice president of the Senate, Rubén Medinaceli; and the president of Congress, Víctor Borda. They all claimed that they and their families were under threat. In later interviews, García Linera denied that he had given orders for all MAS representatives to resign, saying that he had only asked Salvatierra to resign.³¹

On November 10th, I published another translation of an article by Huáscar Salazar in *Toward Freedom*. He argued that Fernando Camacho, a conservative politician with fascist leanings,

²⁸ Gutiérrez Aguilar, Raquel. 2019. “Bolivia: la profunda convulsión que lleva al desastre”. *El Salto Diario*, el 11 de noviembre de 2019. <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/bolivia/bolivia-la-profunda-convulsion-que-lleva-al-desastre->.

²⁹ Weisbrot, Mark. 2019. “The Trump Administration Is Undercutting Democracy in Bolivia”, November 8, 2019. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/bolivia-election-oas/>.

³⁰ Chomsky, Noam y Prashad, Vijay. 2019. “We Stand Against the Coup in Bolivia (Statement from Noam Chomsky and Vijay Prashad)”. *Peoples Dispatch* (blog). November 9, 2019. <https://peoplesdispatch.org/2019/11/09/we-stand-against-the-coup-in-bolivia-statement-from-noam-chomsky-and-vijay-prashad/>.

³¹ Que No Me Pierda. 2021. “García Linera habla sobre los conflictos sociales de 2019”. *Que No Me Pierda*. <https://www.facebook.com/quenomepierdabo/videos/145566691007175/>.

had become even more famous due to an effort from power to “paint those accusing [the Morales administration] of fraud as an antagonistic enemy” (Toward Freedom 2020).

On November 11, *Democracy Now!* mentioned the resignation of Morales, his vice president, the president of the Senate and the president of Congress in its headlines.³² Later in the same program, there was a segment with Weisbrot, during which he insisted (without any proof) that there was no doubt that it was a military coup, that the report presented on November 10th by the OAS did not contain evidence of electoral fraud, and that it was “very obvious” that the Donald Trump administration had pressured the OAS to declare the elections as fraudulent.³³

Amy Goodman, the host of *Democracy Now!*, asked Weisbrot if the CIA was involved in the coup in Bolivia, as it had been in 1952, 1964, 1970, and 1980. “I would add it to the list. I mean, we don’t have the hard evidence of what they did... But I think we’ll probably find out more later. But it’s just — it is very obvious that they supported this coup,” he replied.³⁴ To this day there is no clear and concrete evidence of Washington’s involvement in Bolivia during those days in November. With this statement, Weisbrot opened the first channel of disinformation about events in Bolivia.

The same day, the writer and future Pulitzer Prize winner Greg Grandin wrote a six-point list in *Jacobin* on how to understand a military coup, spanning the period from Salvador Allende in 1973 to what took place days earlier in Bolivia. Without entering into a detailed interpretation of events in Bolivia, he noted that “If the military intervenes after the president agrees to the protestors’ demands — like what happened in Bolivia, when Evo Morales agreed to new elections — it is a coup.”³⁵ He claimed that nuanced positions on this type of event often strengthen the right. He failed to mention that by then, protesters had gone beyond calling for new elections, and were calling for Morales’s resignation.

That day, *The Grayzone* wrote an article about Camacho, who they called the “leader” and the “muscle” that would carry out the coup.³⁶ Blumenthal and Norton positioned him in that manner

³² Democracy Now! November 11, 2019c. “Longtime Bolivian President Evo Morales Resigns”. *Democracy Now!* https://www.democracynow.org/2019/11/11/headlines/longtime_bolivian_president_evo_morales_resigns.

³³ Democracy Now! 2019. “A Coup? A Debate on the Political Crisis in Bolivia That Led to Evo Morales’s Resignation”. *Democracy Now!* https://www.democracynow.org/2019/11/13/bolivia_evo_morales_coup_debate.

³⁴ Democracy Now! 2019. “‘This Is a Military Coup’: Bolivian President Evo Morales Resigns After Army Calls for His Ouster”. November 11, 2019. *Democracy Now!* https://www.democracynow.org/2019/11/11/evo_morales_bolivia_protests_military_coup.

³⁵ Grandin, Greg. 2019. “A Few Tips on How to Understand Latin American Coups”, el 11 de noviembre de 2019. <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/11/greg-grandin-bolivia-evo-morales-coup-latin-america>.

³⁶ Blumenthal, Max, y Ben Norton-. 2019. “Bolivia Coup Led by Christian Fascist Paramilitary Leader and Millionaire – with Foreign Support”. *The Grayzone* (blog). November 12, 2019. <http://thegrayzone.com/2019/11/11/bolivia-coup-fascist-foreign-support-fernando-camacho/>.

regardless of the fact that they also stated that Camacho had taken advantage of a power vacuum created after the resignation of Morales and other high level MAS representatives.³⁷

On November 11, I published two articles in *Toward Freedom*. One was a translation of a controversial column written by well-known Bolivian feminist María Galindo, who was in La Paz, calling attention to acts of violence carried out by the right as well as by fascistic supporters of MAS. The original version of the article was published by the Argentine cooperative *La Vaca*. Since then, Galindo has affirmed that what took place was a coup.

In addition, I translated and published an article by Uruguayan journalist Raúl Zibechi, which was originally published in *Desinformemonos*, an autonomous news website based in México City. Zibechi's article begins with the following paragraph:

What caused the fall of the government of Evo Morales in Bolivia is an uprising by the people of Bolivia and their organizations. Their movements demanded his resignation before the army and police did. The Organization of American States sustained the government until the bitter end. The context for what is taking place in Bolivia did not start with electoral fraud; rather it began with systematic attacks by the Evo Morales and Álvaro García Linera administration against the same popular movements that brought them to power, to the point that when they needed the movements to defend them, the movements were deactivated and demoralized.

The next day, Morales and García Linera left Bolivia for México, and a deluge of articles and columns about Bolivia began to appear in U.S. left-leaning media. For his part, Zibechi maintains that Morales and García Linera's exit from Bolivia was not a coup, but that later there was a coup, when Añez took power (Interview, January 10, 2022).

Pressure began to mount at *Toward Freedom*. The person whose family has financed the outlet during several decades shared part of an email she had received from Vijay Prashad, who has a long history of taking positions in favor of progressive governments in the hemisphere. Prashad wrote:

Incidentally, and in the spirit of mutual engagement, I have been disappointed by the coverage at *Towards Freedom* regarding Bolivia. Imagine if this were in South Africa; and the comparison does not hold because Morales is far more a person of the Left than the ANC leadership. But nonetheless, imagine it for a minute. We deeply dislike Ramaphosa. Imagine that there was a coup against Ramaphosa, and that the beneficiary was going to be the Vryheidsfront Plus. I would be on the streets of Johannesburg in a

³⁷ Blumenthal, Max, y Ben Norton-. 2019. "Bolivia Coup Led by Christian Fascist Paramilitary Leader and Millionaire – with Foreign Support". *The Grayzone* (blog). November 12, 2019. <http://thegrayzone.com/2019/11/11/bolivia-coup-fascist-foreign-support-fernando-camacho/>.

second to fight against that coup and to make it clear that this is not the time for nuance.

I suppose that is my problem with the articles on the site (Prashad and Lloyd, 2019). As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, *Toward Freedom* was one among a small handful of media outlets in the U.S. that provided space, on repeated occasions, for the critical left within Bolivia to speak out in English as the crisis in their country was taking place.

Even so, their voices were so upsetting to Prashad that he took the time to write to the owner of *Toward Freedom*, imposing polarization with a familiar message: either you are against the coup, or you are with the coup plotters.

The coup narrative crystallizes

On November 13, *Democracy Now!* dedicated most of its program to covering the crisis in Bolivia by featuring a “debate” between two progressive men about whether or not there had been a coup. The two guests were Pablo Solón, the former ambassador to the United Nations under the MAS government, who was in La Paz, and Kevin Young, a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

In response to the first interview question (whether the events in Bolivia could be described as a coup or not) Solón responded: “I think it’s very complicated to say it’s a coup... To say this is a coup d’état planned by the White House, the right-wing forces, fascist forces, I think it makes a caricature out of what is really happening.”³⁸

But from Massachusetts, there was no attempt at nuance. Evo didn’t finish his term and the army intervened to request he resign, so it was a coup. “I think that’s pretty straightforward. That shouldn’t be controversial,” said Young.³⁹

Young went on to explain that MAS was in a state of disarray, and that with all the resignations, the path to a constitutional resolution of the conflict wasn’t clear.⁴⁰ He emphasized (without concrete proof) the role of the U.S. in the coup d’etat.⁴¹

Solón went on to describe aspects of the crisis based on what he was seeing on the ground, mentioning that large parts of the population—and not just the right—took part in protests against fraud after October 20th. Young sidestepped mention of protests and instead alleged

³⁸ Democracy Now! November 12, 2019. “A Coup? A Debate on the Political Crisis in Bolivia That Led to Evo Morales’s Resignation.” https://www.democracynow.org/2019/11/13/bolivia_evo_morales_coup_debate.

³⁹ Democracy Now! November 12, 2019. “A Coup? A Debate on the Political Crisis in Bolivia That Led to Evo Morales’s Resignation.” https://www.democracynow.org/2019/11/13/bolivia_evo_morales_coup_debate.

⁴⁰ Democracy Now! November 12, 2019. “A Coup? A Debate on the Political Crisis in Bolivia That Led to Evo Morales’s Resignation.” https://www.democracynow.org/2019/11/13/bolivia_evo_morales_coup_debate.

⁴¹ Democracy Now! November 12, 2019. “A Coup? A Debate on the Political Crisis in Bolivia That Led to Evo Morales’s Resignation.” https://www.democracynow.org/2019/11/13/bolivia_evo_morales_coup_debate.

that the U.S. media had jumped on the narrative of fraud following the release of the OAS's preliminary report (which doesn't make sense in relation to the question, because the report wasn't published until November 10).⁴²

In a good summary of the position that would come to dominate in the U.S. after that date, Young said: "It's a complex situation, and it's a coup with some popular support, but it's still a coup."⁴³ During the entire interview, which continued into a second segment, Young would continue to return to the same point.

This insistence by a professor who lives in the U.S. is in many ways emblematic of the coloniality that dominated political coverage of the political crisis in Bolivia in the U.S. independent media. Meanwhile, Solón, who at the outset of the Morales administration had been the Bolivian ambassador to the UN and its principal negotiator on climate change, spoke frankly from La Paz about the difficulties of calling what was taking place a coup d'état.

But Young didn't hold back in insisting on the *correct* line, which coincided with what Morales and his team were saying about what had taken place. Incredibly, after that debate, *Democracy Now!* also closed ranks, deciding that the version of a coup d'état was the only correct way of perceiving the crisis.

Writing in *NACLA*, Linda Farthing and Olivia Arigho-Stiles advanced a perspective that looked at the causes of the post-election protests, the violence against members of MAS, and composition of the Bolivian right.⁴⁴ In an interview for the *Intercepted* podcast, anthropologist Brett Gustafson was cautious on various points, avoiding entering into the dominion of fake news. He said it wouldn't be possible to know if the CIA had a hand in events for at least 30 years, and that "The right-wing in Santa Cruz is quite capable of mobilizing itself."⁴⁵ Gustafson admitted his own difficulties in interpreting events in Bolivia and mentioned irregularities in the electoral process, the co-optation of social movement bases by MÁS, the reversal of land reforms, and the links between the Morales government and landowning elites in the Media Luna region.⁴⁶

⁴² Democracy Now! November 12, 2019. "A Coup? A Debate on the Political Crisis in Bolivia That Led to Evo Morales's Resignation." https://www.democracynow.org/2019/11/13/bolivia_evo_morales_coup_debate.

⁴³ Democracy Now! November 12, 2019. "A Coup? A Debate on the Political Crisis in Bolivia That Led to Evo Morales's Resignation." https://www.democracynow.org/2019/11/13/bolivia_evo_morales_coup_debate.

⁴⁴ Farthing, Linda y Arigho-Stiles, Olivia. 2019. "Bolivia's Tragic Turmoil". *NACLA*, November 15, 2019. <https://nacla.org/news/2019/11/15/Bolivia-Morales-Camacho>.

⁴⁵ Intercepted. 2019. "Bolivia and Brazil at the Crossroads". <https://theintercept.com/2019/11/13/bolivia-and-brazil-at-the-crossroads/>.

⁴⁶ Intercepted. 2019. "Bolivia and Brazil at the Crossroads". <https://theintercept.com/2019/11/13/bolivia-and-brazil-at-the-crossroads/>.

The Nation stood out among alternative media by publishing articles by journalists who were in Bolivia during the political crisis. In an article published days later, reporter Jacquelyn Kovarik said the extreme right in Bolivia “has exploited the power vacuum and stoked anti-indigenous sentiment.”⁴⁷ This is an example of the generalized confusion that existed in the country. Kovarik gave voice to a key question many Bolivians were asking at that time: “¿Hay salida? Is there a way out?”⁴⁸

At *Toward Freedom*, we translated and published a speech by Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui in the Women’s Parliament, an autonomous space for debate and discussion in La Paz, and which was organized by Mujeres Creando. There, Rivera Cusicanqui noted that she didn’t agree with a triumphalist narrative, which she called “an excess,” or with the coup d’état narrative. The latter, she said, “simply legitimizes in a complete package, wrapped in cellophane, the entire Evo Morales government in the moment when it is most degraded.”⁴⁹

Rivera Cusicanqui expressed profound sadness that Morales had left the country as he did and rejected the polarization that was forcing a choice between triumphalism and defeatism via the narrative of a coup d’état. The rejection of polarization was a constant refrain of women and men who are part of the critical left during the most intense days of the crisis. Later, Rivera Cusicanqui stated that she did not believe that Añez had arrived to power via constitutional means, but also that there had been fraud.

In Rivera Cusicanqui’s own words, “It is very sad what has happened, *compañeras*, and the triumphalism that we have recovered democracy the moment Evo boarded a plane seems to me at once a banality and extraordinary simplistic view. But the defeatism suggesting that there was a coup d’état here and that everything has been lost is false. That would mean that we would have to think that MAS is the only option we have for an interethnic, plural, pluricultural Bolivia.”⁵⁰

After November 15th, coverage of events in Bolivia in the alternative media was drastically reduced. We continued to translate and post articles at *Toward Freedom* that were written by Bolivian writers and others: Zibechi, professors in the Graduate School in Development at San Andrés University, Chaski Clandestina, Salazar Lohman, Nuria Alabao, Magali Vianca Copa Pabón, and Vladimir Díaz Cuellar (Toward Freedom 2020).

⁴⁷ Kovarik, Jacquelyn. 2019. “Bolivia’s Anti-Indigenous Backlash Is Growing”. *The Nation*, November 13, 2019. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/bolivia-morales-whipala/>.

⁴⁸ Kovarik, Jacquelyn. 2019. “Bolivia’s Anti-Indigenous Backlash Is Growing”. *The Nation*, el 13 de noviembre de 2019. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/bolivia-morales-whipala/>.

⁴⁹ Toward Freedom. 2020. “Toward Freedom’s Bolivia Reader.” <http://towardfreedom.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Toward-Freedoms-Bolivia-Reader.pdf>. Page 27.

⁵⁰ Toward Freedom. 2020. “Toward Freedom’s Bolivia Reader.” <http://towardfreedom.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Toward-Freedoms-Bolivia-Reader.pdf>. Page 29.

Elsewhere, there were few spaces left for any hint of criticism of Morales following his exile in México. These included an article by Zeeshan Aleem in *The Nation*, in which he quoted Bolivians without stigmatizing them for their participation in post-election protests, or demonizing those who spoke against Evo Morales.⁵¹ “In conversations with Bolivians, I’ve encountered people speaking with tremendous confusion, fear, and sadness about how the past week has gone,” he wrote on November 18, 2019.⁵²

Dissent Magazine published an article contextualizing the participation of the left in the protests after October 20.⁵³ And in *Commune* magazine, which later collapsed following accusations of sexual harassment by a male member of the collective, published an article by Bruno Bosteels echoing the call to avoid polarization.⁵⁴

For its part, *Verso*, a book publisher in New York, published an interview with two experts on Bolivia, who provided historical context and mentioned various left-wing struggles against the Morales administration, while at the same time affirming the absolute necessity of naming what took place a “coup.”⁵⁵

A lithium coup?

The first mention of lithium was in *Mint Press*, which published a listicle on understanding events in Bolivia on November 11. The article affirmed a coup had taken place and stated that lithium could be a potential motivating factor.⁵⁶ At the end of the article were links to more than 30 demonstrations against the coup and for Evo Morales, the majority of which were called by the ANSWER coalition.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Aleem, Zeeshan. 2019-11-18. “Bolivia’s Coup Is Still Happening”. *The Nation*, 2019. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/bolivia-coup-morales/>.

⁵² Aleem, Zeeshan. 2019-11-18. “Bolivia’s Coup Is Still Happening”. *The Nation*, 2019. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/bolivia-coup-morales/>.

⁵³ Mathias, Christine. 2019. “The World Upside Down in Bolivia”. *Dissent Magazine*, el 22 de noviembre de 2019. https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/the-world-upside-down-in-bolivia.

⁵⁴ Bosteels, Bruno. 2019. “A Militarized Stalemate in Bolivia”. *Commune*, el 22 de noviembre de 2019. <https://communemag.com/a-militarized-stalemate-in-bolivia/>.

⁵⁵ Smith, Ashley. 2019. “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Macho Camacho: Jeffery R. Webber (with Forrest Hylton) on the Coup in Bolivia”. *Verso* (blog). el 15 de noviembre de 2019. <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4493-the-eighteenth-brumaire-of-macho-camacho-jeffery-r-webber-with-forrest-hylton-on-the-coup-in-bolivia>.

⁵⁶ Fiala, Emma. 2019. “5 Fast Facts About the Military Coup in Bolivia and What You Can Do”. *MintPress News*, el 11 de noviembre de 2019, sec. Daily Digest. <https://www.mintpressnews.com/5-fast-facts-military-coup-bolivia-can/262741/>.

⁵⁷ Fiala, Emma. 2019. “5 Fast Facts About the Military Coup in Bolivia and What You Can Do”. *MintPress News*, November 11, 2019. <https://www.mintpressnews.com/5-fast-facts-military-coup-bolivia-can/262741/>.

The next day, Prashad took up the argument, publishing an article explaining that “the coup against Morales cannot be understood” without analyzing lithium contracts signed between Bolivia and China in the context of what the author called the “new cold war.”⁵⁸ The article goes on to mention conflicts between Canadian, Indian, Swiss, and other companies and the Bolivian government since Morales took office.

In his article, Prashad mentioned how, on November 4th—in the middle of the political crisis but before Morales left office—the Bolivian government canceled a German owned concession to exploit lithium following protests by local communities.⁵⁹ He went on to speculate that the Bolivian government was going to seek to make a deal with a Chinese firm. “The idea that there might be a new social compact for the lithium was unacceptable to the main transnational mining companies,” he wrote.⁶⁰ He said that after November 10, Tesla—a company that builds electric cars that depend on lithium—shares rose precipitously.⁶¹

Prashad ignored the fact that the protests were against the signing of contracts between the Morales government and a German company. Protestors claimed that too few benefits would accrue to local residents because the royalty payment was only three percent, and that lithium was being handed over to an inexperienced German company for a 20 year period.

A week later, Prashad published another article, this time in *Counterpunch*, titled: “The Coup in Bolivia Has Everything to Do With the Screen You’re Using to Read This.”⁶² As a journalist, I understand that it’s possible that Prashad didn’t write the headline of the article, which doesn’t present any proof at all of what the headline affirms. The article suggests the coup in Bolivia

⁵⁸ Prashad, Vijay. November 12, 2019a. “Opinion | After Morales Ousted in Coup, the Lithium Question Looms Large in Bolivia”. *Common Dreams*, November 12, 2019a. <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2019/11/12/after-morales-ousted-coup-lithium-question-looms-large-bolivia>.

⁵⁹ Prashad, Vijay. November 12, 2019a. “Opinion | After Morales Ousted in Coup, the Lithium Question Looms Large in Bolivia”. *Common Dreams*, November 12, 2019a. <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2019/11/12/after-morales-ousted-coup-lithium-question-looms-large-bolivia>.

⁶⁰ Prashad, Vijay. November 12, 2019a. “Opinion | After Morales Ousted in Coup, the Lithium Question Looms Large in Bolivia”. *Common Dreams*, November 12, 2019a. <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2019/11/12/after-morales-ousted-coup-lithium-question-looms-large-bolivia>.

⁶¹ Prashad, Vijay. November 12, 2019a. “Opinion | After Morales Ousted in Coup, the Lithium Question Looms Large in Bolivia”. *Common Dreams*, November 12, 2019a. <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2019/11/12/after-morales-ousted-coup-lithium-question-looms-large-bolivia>.

⁶² Prashad, Vijay 2019. “The Coup in Bolivia Has Everything to Do With the Screen You’re Using to Read This”. *CounterPunch.Org*, November 20, 2019. <https://www.counterpunch.org/2019/11/20/the-coup-in-bolivia-has-everything-to-do-with-the-screen-youre-using-to-read-this/>.

was carried out for indium, another rare mineral of which Bolivia has considerable reserves.⁶³ This hypothesis didn't have the same impact as the lithium coup theory, but it was equally as fantastical.

Prashad's suggestion that there was a coup over lithium is disinformation, a term that refers to "deliberately misleading or biased information; manipulated narrative or facts; propaganda."⁶⁴ Prashad cherry picked details to build his argument (the history of coups in Bolivia, protests against foreign companies in the lithium sector, and the greed of the transnational mining sector), and left aside facts that contradicted his narrative (the non-existence of lithium as a national issue in the post-electoral protests, and that the protests in Potosí were against the Morales government for granting concessions for national resources with very low revenues accruing to the region).

Speculation about the role of lithium in Bolivia's political crisis is part of Prashad's desire—which would later be replicated by other left pundits—to see the country as a theater of conflict that is best understood when interpreted through the lens of the "new cold war."

With his lithium coup theory, Prashad demonstrates a deep ignorance (or a fickle relationship to the truth) of Bolivia's political and social situation. It is as if Bolivia were an empty container waiting to be filled by foreign pundits on the right and left, a well-worn formula that removes any possibility of protagonism by local social forces.

Much later, Morales and Luis Arce, who would become president leading the MAS party in 2020, claimed what took place in 2019 was a lithium coup carried out on Tesla's behalf. "We're absolutely sure that the economic objective of the coup d'état was control of Bolivian lithium," said Arce during a visit to México in March of 2021.⁶⁵ This example is a very clear case of disinformation laundering on the left, a phenomenon which has not been sufficiently studied outside of the political right (Freelon et al 2020).

In Bolivia today, according to Solón, in spaces close to organizations linked to the MAS government, "you have to first swear a coup took place in order to start talking about reality," (Interview with Pablo Solón, January 6, 2022).

A coup made in the U.S.A.?

⁶³ Prashad, Vijay. 2019. "The Coup in Bolivia Has Everything to Do With the Screen You're Using to Read This". *CounterPunch.Org*, November 20, 2019. <https://www.counterpunch.org/2019/11/20/the-coup-in-bolivia-has-everything-to-do-with-the-screen-youre-using-to-read-this/>.

⁶⁴ Dictionary.com. n/d. "Disinformation Definition & Meaning". Consulted January 15, 2022. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/disinformation>.

⁶⁵ Cortez Zárate, Roberto. 2021. "Luis Arce acusa a Tesla de estar detrás de golpe de Estado en Bolivia". *El Sol de México | Noticias, Deportes, Gossip, Columnas*. March 24, 2021. <https://www.elsoldemexico.com.mx/mundo/golpe-de-estado-en-bolivia-fue-para-controlar-litio-querian-que-tesla-lo-explotara-luis-arce-presidente-bolivia-6514716.html>.

The Grayzone published an article on November 13 about the military training of high ranking police and soldiers, based in part on a series of recordings—which were never verified and which show signs of having been altered—of conversations among supposed coup plotters.⁶⁶ The article describes how Kaliman and other Bolivian soldiers were trained in the U.S., in the School of the Americas, and how police commanders had gone through an exchange program with U.S. police.⁶⁷ It is well established that high ranking soldiers from almost every country in the Americas have gone through the School of the Americas. Such participation alone is hardly proof of coup-plotting.

Later, *The Grayzone* fed the narrative that the U.S. Army was linked to the political crisis in Bolivia. “As ,attachés they would have been in constant communication with the Pentagon and other agencies; it is no stretch of the imagination to wonder if they were **still in contact with their U.S. counterparts** as the overthrow of the Morales government unfolded,” wrote Leonardo Flores, activist with the group Codepink.⁶⁸

When Flores speculated on the involvement of the U.S. army and called Camacho the “millionaire coup leader,” his sources are *The Grayzone* articles mentioned above.⁶⁹ In mid-November, *Jacobin* published an article making the now-familiar argument that there was a coup d’état. The author alleged that Washington was supporting far right groups in Bolivia, and again linked to a *The Grayzone* post, but didn’t present any proof.⁷⁰

Beyond documenting in great detail the training of members of Bolivia’s security forces in the U.S., *The Grayzone* never presented evidence that the U.S. directly intervened to foster the 2019 political crisis. Neither did Mark Weisbrot of CEPR. That said, their comments played an important role, one that a serious news outlet would not have been publish without providing

⁶⁶ Sprague, Jeb. 2019. “Top Bolivian Coup Plotters Trained by U.S. Military’s School of the Americas, Served as Attachés in FBI Police Programs”. *The Grayzone* (blog). el 13 de noviembre de 2019. <http://thegrayzone.com/2019/11/13/bolivian-coup-plotters-school-of-the-americas-fbi-police-programs/>;
Terceros, Iván. 2019. “FILTRACIÓN DE AUDIOS MANIPULADOS y DE DUDOSAS FUENTES”. el 3 de noviembre de 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/ivntres/posts/3673838675989928>.

⁶⁷ Sprague, Jeb. 2019. “Top Bolivian Coup Plotters Trained by U.S. Military’s School of the Americas, Served as Attachés in FBI Police Programs”. *The Grayzone* (blog). el 13 de noviembre de 2019. <http://thegrayzone.com/2019/11/13/bolivian-coup-plotters-school-of-the-americas-fbi-police-programs/>.

⁶⁸ Flores, Leonardo. 2019. “U.S. and OAS help overthrow another government: Behind the coup against Bolivia’s Evo Morales”. *The Grayzone*, el 14 de noviembre de 2019. <https://thegrayzone.com/2019/11/14/oas-us-coup-bolivia-evo-morales/>.

⁶⁹ Flores, Leonardo. 2019. “U.S. and OAS help overthrow another government: Behind the coup against Bolivia’s Evo Morales”. *The Grayzone*, el 14 de noviembre de 2019. <https://thegrayzone.com/2019/11/14/oas-us-coup-bolivia-evo-morales/>.

⁷⁰ Wilgress, Matt. 2019. “The Far-Right Coup in Bolivia”. *Jacobin*, el 14 de noviembre de 2019. <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/11/bolivia-coup-evo-morales-jeanine-anes-indigenous-violence>.

evidence. Such comments entered into the realm of disinformation to present the narrative that there was a coup d'état in Bolivia which was influenced by the actions of the U.S. army and the CIA.

I asked Amy Kennemore, a professor at the University of California San Diego who had done doctoral studies on legal pluralism in Bolivia and lived in the country between 2014 and 2019, how she understood the efforts to link the U.S. army to the political crisis in Bolivia. "I see where that could come from, and why people might say that. We are just starting to understand and speak out about the role of the U.S. in the Cold War," she said in a January 2022 interview from her home in San Diego.

"I get it, people want to prove they know that the CIA has intervened in almost every country in Latin America, and interrupted their democracies with coups. I get it. But now we're living in a different political moment. If you think about it, the U.S. doesn't have a strategic geopolitical interest in Bolivia," (interview with Amy Kennemore, January 5, 2022).

To date, the speculation about U.S. security forces supporting the coup in Bolivia has not been proven. If one day participation by Washington is indeed demonstrated, it should be understood as additional to the process of political decomposition being lived in Bolivia, but not as the only factor.

In June of 2021, *The Intercept* reported on a series of leaks that demonstrated a more recent coup attempt on the part of the interim government of Añez. *The Intercept's* sources inside the U.S. security apparatus confirmed they were aware of the plot, but "No one really took them [those who were planning the coup] seriously, as far as I know."⁷¹

Authorized voices against the critical left

When I reviewed the articles from English alternative media in order to write this article, I noted that many spoke about Bolivia, but few Bolivians were provided the opportunity to express themselves.

Of all the articles and interviews I looked at from alternative media in September, October, and November of 2019, the voices of Bolivian activists and analysts (who were not part of the government) were included in the translations posted on *Toward Freedom*: translation of a piece by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui in *Capital, Nature, Socialism*, and the interview with Pablo Solón in *Democracy Now!*⁷²

⁷¹ Blair, Laurence y Grim, Ryan. 2021. "BOLIVIAN EX-MINISTER OF DEFENSE PLOTTED A SECOND COUP U.S.ING U.S. MERCENARIES". *The Intercept*, el 17 de junio de 2021. <https://theintercept.com/2021/06/17/bolivia-coup-plot-mercenaries/>.

⁷² Ver: Democracy Now! November 13, 2019. "After Evo: As Right-Wing Senator Declares Herself President, What's Next for Bolivia?" https://www.democracynow.org/2019/11/13/bolivia_evo_morales_coup_debate_pt2; Democracy Now! November 12, 2019. "'This Is a Military Coup': Bolivian President Evo Morales Resigns After Army Calls for His Ouster" https://www.democracynow.org/2019/11/11/evo_morales_bolivia_protests_military_coup; Cusicanqui, Silvia Rivera. 2019. "Evo and the Movements: A Long Process of Degradation". *Capitalism Nature Socialism*. November 19, 2019. <http://www.cnsjournal.org/evo-and-the->

These few voices from the critical left denounced racism and violence on the right, and pointed to how polarization is a major problem, while maintaining a critical position with respect to the coup narrative.

On the other hand, following Morales's resignation, *Jacobin* magazine featured a single, authorized voice, whose articles and interviews were translated and published: Álvaro García Linera.⁷³

Far from responding to criticism about his administration and the democratic process or seeking pathways for a democratic solution to the crisis, García Linera wrote that, even though his party had won election, support for Morales had dipped, which sparked ambitions of the "traditional urban middle classes" who wished to take power, motivated by "racial hatred."⁷⁴

At that time, Bolivia was experiencing "...generalized confusion, caused by a conflict in which there is no end in sight," according to Huáscar Salazar, writing on November 25, 2019.⁷⁵ In response to international coverage of the crisis, a group of professors of the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés in La Paz wrote a letter criticizing simplistic affirmations about the coup d'état, which "...lead to an erasure of the diversity of subjects who have mobilized over the past weeks..."⁷⁶

"What can we do to prevent violence?" was one among many open questions in Bolivia at that time.

That becomes very clear in this article by *Chaski Clandestina* (which doesn't mention the word 'coup') which we translated and published. It was written by a comrade who was in mourning after participating in the funeral procession for eight people who were killed in Senkata:⁷⁷

I keep asking myself where we are going to get the strength to rebuild everything that, over 14 years, the now-collapsed regime rotted within social organizations, corroding them like

movements-a-long-process-of-degradation/; Toward Freedom. 2020. "Toward Freedom's Bolivia Reader". <http://towardfreedom.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Toward-Freedoms-Bolivia-Reader.pdf>.

⁷³ García Linera, Álvaro. November 20, 2019. "In Moments of Crisis, Behind Every Moderate Liberal, There's a Fascist". *Jacobin*, November 20, 2019. <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/11/alvaro-garcia-linera-bolivia-coup-evo-morales-más>; García Linera, Álvaro. November 19, 2019. "The Military Coup that Overthrew Our Government Was Revenge Against Indigenous Bolivians". *Jacobin*, November 19, 2019. <https://jacobin.com/2019/11/evo-morales-coup-indigenous-bolivia-alvaro-garcia-linera>

⁷⁴ García Linera, Álvaro. November 19, 2019. "The Military Coup that Overthrew Our Government Was Revenge Against Indigenous Bolivians". *Jacobin*, November 19, 2019. <https://jacobin.com/2019/11/evo-morales-coup-indigenous-bolivia-alvaro-garcia-linera>

⁷⁵ Toward Freedom. 2020. "Toward Freedom's Bolivia Reader". <http://towardfreedom.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Toward-Freedoms-Bolivia-Reader.pdf>.

⁷⁶ Toward Freedom. 2020. "Toward Freedom's Bolivia Reader". <http://towardfreedom.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Toward-Freedoms-Bolivia-Reader.pdf>.

⁷⁷ La cifra final de muertos en Senkata según el Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes es 11. Ver: GIEI 2021.

acid. How do we reject the violence generated by groups of armed civilians (*grupos de choque*) and the formation of paramilitary groups, which is occurring from many sides. How do we face state repression, which will affect all of us. As we mourn our dead, others, way up above, are negotiating and making cold calculations on the blood that has been spilled.⁷⁸ In addition to two articles by García Linera, *Jacobin* published three articles between November 17 and the end of that month. In none of them is there any confusion. What is remarkable is that none of the three articles quotes a single activist or analyst from Bolivia.⁷⁹ Articles published in the U.S. alternative media in late November hammered home the point of denouncing the coup d'état, instead of focusing on generating a deeper understanding of the material conditions of the crisis. Example 1: "If there was any doubt before, the horrifying events of the past week in Bolivia should have laid those doubts to rest: it was a coup."⁸⁰ Example 2: "A Week After the Coup in Bolivia, There's Still No Proof of Electoral Fraud."⁸¹ Example 3: "A Coup in Bolivia, Yet Again."⁸²

These articles don't quote Bolivians (except the rancid politicians of the Áñez government), but a *Jacobin* article does quote Bernie Sanders, who was then running to become the Democratic Party's presidential candidate.⁸³ That helps us contextualize the response from the progressive sector in the U.S., which was influenced by its own political context, which was then polarized around the primaries to elect the leader of the democratic party.

In another article published in *Jacobin* in December of 2019, Natasha Lycia Ora Bannan and Kevin Cashman emphasized that while Sanders had criticized the coup in Bolivia, and Elizabeth Warren hadn't, therefore, Sanders is critical of imperialism and Warren is a dime a dozen liberal.⁸⁴ That same logic surfaced in Canada, where *The Ricochet* published an article titled "You

⁷⁸ Chaski Clandestina. 2019. "De Senkata a La Paz, crónica de un cortejo fúnebre". *Chaski Clandestina*, el 22 de noviembre de 2019, sec. AUDIOS. <https://chaskiclandestina.org/2019/11/22/cronica-cortejo-funebre>.

⁷⁹ Cashman, Kevin. 2019. "A Week After the Coup in Bolivia, There's Still No Proof of Electoral Fraud". *Jacobin*, el 17 de noviembre de 2019. <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/11/evo-morales-bolivia-coup-election-fraud-organization-of-american-states>; Field, Thomas. 2019. "A Coup in Bolivia, Yet Again". *Jacobin*, el 18 de noviembre de 2019. <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/11/coup-bolivia-history-evo-morales-jeanine-anez>; Hetland, Gabriel. November 20, 2019b. "Understanding Bolivia's Nightmare". *NACLA*, November 20, 2019. <https://nacla.org/news/2019/11/19/bolivia-morales-coup>.

⁸⁰ Hetland, Gabriel. November 20, 2019. "Understanding Bolivia's Nightmare". *NACLA*, November 20, 2019. <https://nacla.org/news/2019/11/19/bolivia-morales-coup>.

⁸¹ Cashman, Kevin. 2019. "A Week After the Coup in Bolivia, There's Still No Proof of Electoral Fraud". *Jacobin*, el 17 de noviembre de 2019. <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/11/evo-morales-bolivia-coup-election-fraud-organization-of-american-states>.

⁸² Field, Thomas. 2019. "A Coup in Bolivia, Yet Again". *Jacobin*, el 18 de noviembre de 2019. <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/11/coup-bolivia-history-evo-morales-jeanine-anez>.

⁸³ Hetland, Gabriel. November 20, 2019b. "Understanding Bolivia's Nightmare". *NACLA*, November 20, 2019b. <https://nacla.org/news/2019/11/19/bolivia-morales-coup>.

⁸⁴ Ora Bannan, Natasha Lycia y Cashman, Kevin. 2019. "Bernie Sanders Is a Critic of US Imperialism. Elizabeth Warren Is Not." November 12, 2019. <https://jacobinmag.com/2019/12/bernie-sanders-elizabeth-warren-foreign-policy-bolivia>.

can't be neutral about the racist coup d'état in Bolivia" and added—without presenting any evidence—that Canada too was behind the coup.⁸⁵

"There's a very serious process on the left, which is to pass ethical judgment, rather than political judgment... It's a kind of ethical censorship, and it disqualifies you," said Raúl Zibechi in an interview about this phenomenon. As a result, says Zibechi, "journalism and investigative journalism is abandoned," and instead, we're left with propaganda (interview with Raúl Zibechi, January 2022).

By way of conclusion

To end this chapter, I'd like to share some of my reflections following my conversation with Zibechi, who has been covering Latin America for left-leaning and progressive media for more than four decades.

"There's two ways of looking at the world: there is the perspective, let's say, of emancipation or social struggle, where the emphasis is on feminism, on Indigenous peoples, and so on, and there's the geopolitical perspective, which is very popular today," he said. "From a geopolitical perspective, if you criticize power and that power is right wing, it is fine; but if you criticize power on the left, the same criticism is bad," (interview with Raúl Zibechi, 2022).

My experience as editor of *Toward Freedom*—and now, reviewing the coverage of Bolivia in the alternative media—confirms the veracity of Zibechi's words. For some, like Prashad, it wasn't admissible for a single media outlet to publish voices of the critical left in Latin America about the resignation of Morales in English. It is clear to me that actions to dissuade coverage of the facts and unpopular opinions emerge, at their root, from the neo Stalinist left. They want to be the ones who decide whose voice is legitimate, and to determine who is and is not allowed to speak about their own country.

To understand the reading of Bolivia that predominated in the U.S. left at the end of 2019, we would need to study the political context in the U.S. at that time, something which cannot be further elaborated on here due to the constraints of this article.

In brief, during that period, Trump was in power in the U.S. and Sanders was gaining ground as a potential Democratic Party candidate in the 2020 elections. Organizations like the DSA were experiencing a historic surge in membership. For socialist activists of all ages active in the U.S., it was the closest they have been to political power. With respect to alternative media, *Jacobin* in particular is closely related to the resurgence of the DSA.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ O'Keefe, Derrick. 2019. "You can't be neutral about the racist coup d'état in Bolivia". *Ricochet*, November 18, 2019. <https://ricochet.media/en/2823>.

⁸⁶ Smith, Ashley, y Charlie Post. 2022. "The U.S. Left at a Strategic Impasse". *Tempest* (blog). el 10 de enero de 2022. <https://www.tempestmag.org/2022/01/the-u-s-left-at-a-strategic-impasse/>.

This context gives us two important perspectives to understand alternative media coverage of the crisis in Bolivia.

The first is that the failure of the U.S. left to generate organized, massive, and sustained movement makes it difficult for its members to understand the experiences of struggle in Bolivia that brought Evo Morales to power in 2006. U.S. leftists have never gotten close to governing their own country, nor have they lived under a leftist government. They have not worked on and theorized around the idea of building a “counter-left” in their own context, as it has never been necessary. Only the most critical understand the actions that must follow upon recognizing “the organizations and movements in many countries in Latin America are much more developed than in our own.”⁸⁷

For many on the left in the U.S., Evo Morales being in power represents the ideal scenario: a socialist leading the government. But that horizon shuts down the possibility of acknowledging Indigenous, feminist, and anti-extractivist communalist autonomies, and it does so by imposing the following binary: you are with Evo, or you are with the fascists. This perspective soundly ignores the degradation of social organizations through cooptation and repression during the first 13 years of the MAS government.

This brings us to the second perspective: the difficulty for the *gringo* left to step out the analytic supremacy it has assumed. When I started to study the political flows within the U.S. in October and November of 2019 to write this article, it felt a little ironic. It seems many who commented from the comfort of their offices in the U.S. didn’t take the time to review the conditions of the plurality of left movements and autonomies in Bolivia in the run up to the political crisis.

U.S. ‘anti-imperialists’ are so focused on the power of Washington, and so used to being listened to when they speak, that they theorize out loud about events in another country without even checking in with activists and comrades on the ground. Their cries of a coup d’état organized by the Bolivian right (working hand in hand with Washington) fit perfectly with the official narrative of progressive governments and ignore the possibility of desire and social struggle beyond the party structure.

There are many questions that are still unanswered, not just to understand what took place in La Paz between November 10 and 12, 2019, but also to begin to distinguish between independent journalism and propaganda. For those of us outside of Bolivia, we must ask ourselves how we can improve our ability to listen so that we can actually hear the plurality of left struggles for autonomy. Given the complexity of what took place in Bolivia in 2019, and how important it remains today, I consider these questions urgent.

The events in Bolivia in the southern spring of 2019 make clear that they should be analyzed from their local contexts, and not exclusively interpreted through a rote analysis that blames the

⁸⁷ Tylim, Natalia. 2021. “Is This What Solidarity Looks Like?” *Tempest*. July 26, 2021. <https://www.tempestmag.org/2021/07/is-this-what-solidarity-looks-like/>.

U.S. for a coup d'état without attempting to understand the social and political conditions inside the country. I think it is eminently reasonable that as journalists, even with all the ideological baggage we may carry, we ought to do journalism, not propaganda, and never, ever, disinformation.

When we spoke in early 2022, Pablo Solón commented that some of his friends, who are part of the left in the U.S., told him in private they agreed with his perspective, but that they had to give priority to the fight against imperialism. "Numerous friends on the left told me that, apologetically. 'We believe you, and we think you're right, but the pressure is tremendous,'" they told him (interview with Pablo Solón, 2022).

I, too, felt that pressure, so much so that I left a stable job during a pandemic. I remember when Prashad contacted *Toward Freedom* saying it wasn't the time for nuance. I am increasingly convinced that for the segment of the U.S. left that can't get over the fantasy that Washington is the all-seeing and all-hearing force that moves tens of thousands of people to protest around the world as if they were puppets, there will never be time for nuance. That's why we need to understand with great clarity that what they are doing is propaganda, not journalism.

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