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## Closing the chapter on Michoacán self-defence groups?

The deadline set by Mexico's federal government for the Michoacán 'self-defence' groups to join local law enforcement bodies or demobilise passed on 10 May. While it was observed by a significant number of vigilantes, it is still far from clear if all of those that decided to take up arms and stand up to organised crime in the western state, given the inability of the authorities to do so, have been convinced to put down their weapons for good. The challenge for the federal government led by President Enrique Peña Nieto now is to show that the security situation in Michoacán is under control; that the security forces will not allow it to deteriorate once again; and that there is no need for the vigilante movement to remain active. If not, the uneasy agreement reached with the 'self-defence' groups could quickly unravel.

The Peña Nieto administration's controversial decision to recognise and engage with the 'self-defence' groups always looked more like an attempt to prevent Michoacán from descending into full chaos rather than part of a carefully considered plan to restore order in the state. That is why ever since the federal security forces got a handle on the situation in Michoacán following President Peña Nieto's decision to order an unprecedented federal intervention in the state, the federal government hurriedly began looking for a way to bring the 'self-defence' movement under control and re-establish the State's monopoly over law enforcement and the delivery of justice to prevent the movement from challenging its authority.

The Mexican authorities eventually concluded that the best way to achieve this was to legitimise the 'self-defence' groups and swiftly incorporate them into the national security apparatus. So the federal commissioner for Michoacán, Alfredo Castillo, negotiated an 11-point deal with the 'self-defence' group leaders within the Consejo General de Autodefensas de Michoacán under which the vigilantes agreed that they would either join a new rural state police corps (Fuerza Rural Estatal [FRE]) or begin demobilising on 10 May provided that the federal government met a series of conditions, primarily the capture of all of the top three leaders of Michoacán's main criminal organisation, Los Caballeros Templarios (LCT) [WR-14-17].

### Hasty assimilation

Despite the fact that some of the conditions have ostensibly not been met (although the LCT's command structure has been practically dismantled, its top leader, Servando 'La Tuta' Gómez Martínez, is still at large), the federal government maintained that it had made enough progress in the fight

**Mireles expelled**  
The announcement to expel José Manuel Mireles from the Consejo General de Autodefensas de Michoacán came less than 24 hours after he released a video in which he criticised the federal government's refusal to push back the demobilisation deadline and questioned the leadership of the federal commissioner for Michoacán, Alfredo Castillo.

against the LCT to underline its commitment to upholding its part of the agreement; and for the 'self-defence' groups to start honouring theirs.

This was rejected by some 'self-defence' group leaders, such as José Manuel Mireles, who insisted that he and his followers would not disarm and disband until all the agreed conditions had been met. Mireles and others even suggested that the deadline be pushed back in order to give the government more time to accomplish this. But the federal government was unmoved. Keen to expedite the institutionalisation of the vigilantes, it insisted that the agreed deadline be observed.

The government's intransigence led to a rift in the 'self-defence' group leadership, which raised concerns that the movement would split into various factions not all of which would recognise the agreement struck with the government. In fact, the tensions resulted in the Consejo General de Autodefensas de Michoacán deciding to expel Mireles from the body before it could agree to go ahead with the demobilisation process as planned by the government.

On 8 May the general coordinator of the Consejo, Alberto 'Comandante Cinco' Gutiérrez, read out a statement announcing its decision to dismiss Mireles from his post as a spokesman for the group and to formally expel him from the body. According to Gutiérrez, the decision was taken after Mireles made a series of public statements in which "he put the [self-defence] movement at risk" and for "violating the rules established by the Consejo General de Autodefensas" (*see sidebar*).

### **Launching the new force**

On 10 May Commissioner Castillo made his way to the municipality of Tepalcatepec, where the Michoacán 'self-defence' movement first took shape back in February 2013, to begin handing out uniforms and government-issued firearms to 'self-defence' group members that had expressed an interest in joining the FRE.

After meeting the leader of the Tepalcatepec 'self-defence' group and the Consejo de General de Autodefensas spokesman, Estanislao Beltrán, Castillo told the potential recruits that they had the choice of joining the FRE on a full time basis, in which case they would have to surrender their previously registered firearms and would only be allowed to carry their government-issued ones; or to join the so-called 'rural defence corps' of FRE reservists, who would be allowed to keep their registered firearms but would only be authorised to use them when called into action by the FRE. According to local press reports a total of 250 of the 450 Tepalcatepec 'self-defence' group members elected to join the FRE full time.

Castillo gave a short speech, after reviewing the new recruits, during which he spelled out their responsibilities: "From now on you will be responsible for protecting your neighbours from criminals and organised crime," Castillo said, adding that "the State is placing its trust in you [...] you now represent the State in Michoacán".

More strikingly, Castillo also told the recruits that it was up to them to ensure that "in the near future, be it in a month or in 15 months' time, no more people come out demanding greater State presence [in Michoacán] because they consider that you are not respecting their families and communities". Castillo's words were echoed by Beltrán, who for his part said that "We are now committed and part of the government and can now legally defend

## **FRE recruits not yet fully vetted**

On 13 May the security minister for Michoacán state, Carlos Hugo Castellanos Becerra, said that the majority of the members of the newly formed Fuerza Rural Estatal (FRE) have not yet been subjected to confidence tests. Recognising that FRE recruits are “as in any other institution not exempt from potentially being infiltrated by organised crime”, Castellanos said that the authorities hope to apply these tests to all recruits in the coming days. But Castellanos added that he was confident that because these are “people known in their communities, their commitment to upholding the law should be twice as high”, making the probability of them being infiltrated by organised crime “lower”.

ourselves with weapons [...but] this cannot get out of control and we should soon return to our previous duties”.

## **Lingering questions**

Following the event in Tepalcatepec, Castillo told the local press that the FRE recruitment process would continue in the municipalities that make up the volatile Tierra Caliente region. He said that he expected that the process would be concluded over the course of the next three weeks.

According to Castillo some 3,500 vigilantes have applied to join the FRE and some 1,000 have been pre-selected. However, when confronted with reports that some ‘self-defence’ groups near the port city of Lázaro Cárdenas had said that they would not adhere to the government’s demobilisation programme and had vowed to continue defending their communities, Castillo limited himself to responding that he was “confident that with the regularisation process the chapter of anarchy in Michoacán in which civilians took up arms to fight organised crime will be closed”.

The next few weeks will be crucial for the federal government to show that this will indeed be the case or if, as some local commentators are arguing, the demobilisation process is but another ‘quick fix’ by the Peña Nieto administration that fails to address the root cause of the problem - the historic lack of State presence.

## **Tamaulipas becomes second state to undergo federal intervention**

Just as the federal government appeared to be turning the page in Michoacán, on 13 May Interior Minister Miguel Angel Osorio Chong announced the launch of a major new federal government security initiative for the north-eastern border state of Tamaulipas.

Since early April Tamaulipas has been hit by an upsurge in drug-related violence with over 80 people killed in running gun battles attributed to the resurgence of a turf war between rival drug trafficking organisations that have presence in the state.

Concern about the wave of violence reached a peak when, on 5 May, the newly appointed head of intelligence at the state’s public security ministry, Army Colonel Salvador de Haro Muñoz, was murdered by unidentified gunmen. De Haro’s appointment had been recommended by President Peña Nieto in a bid to reinforce security and his murder quickly focused the federal government’s attention.

Flanked by the governor of Tamaulipas, Egidio Torre Cantú, Osorio Chong said that from now on additional federal security forces would be deployed to the state, which will be divided up into four zones under unified special commands (border, coastal, centre and south). Each of these will be placed under a senior officer from either the army or the navy.

These four commands will implement a three-point plan aimed at using intelligence to dismantle criminal gang structures; counteracting the illegal traffic of drugs, people, weapons and money – roads will now be patrolled for 24 hours a day and security stepped up at ports, airports and customs; and reinforcing the trustworthiness of local institutions (which, reading between the lines, amounts to a thorough purge of the police forces).

On 13 May the local daily *Milenio* reported that between 40% and 60% of the state and municipal police officers in Tamaulipas had failed background checks, either for having ties to drug trafficking organisations or for using illegal substances. In March alone, 58% of municipal police officers evaluated, 408 in total, failed the exam. State police officers fared marginally better, with 213 failing in total.

Osorio Chong also revealed that the Tamaulipas state attorney general’s office will undergo “a complete purge.” It will be replaced by four special regional offices, with the selection process overseen by the national attorney general, Jesús Murillo Karam.

## Gloves off

President Santos launched his toughest attack yet on Óscar Iván Zuluaga on 13 May in the wake of a poll suggesting that he was trailing in the presidential race. Santos accused Zuluaga's right-wing Centro Democrático of "dirty and questionable practices", erecting "a smokescreen" to avoid answering questions about the arrest of a man working for Zuluaga's campaign team accused of illegal wiretapping targeting the peace process [WR-14-18]. Santos said it was time Zuluaga faced up to scandals and stopped "hiding under the cloak of your protector [former president Álvaro Uribe]". Santos said he "never would have believed you would sink so low with the aim of [...] ending the peace process". He also accused the extreme Right of making up lies to poison Colombians: last week Uribe claimed that in 2012 Santos received US\$2m from his former campaign manager, Juan José Rendón, to cover cash problems related to his victorious 2010 electoral campaign.

## ANDEAN COUNTRIES

### COLOMBIA | POLITICS & JUSTICE

## Petro back with a bang

A few short months ago it looked like Gustavo Petro's political career was over. Now not only is his career back on track but he could also play a decisive role in presidential elections on 25 May. Colombia's council of state granted precautionary measures this week on behalf of Petro, the mayor of Bogotá, temporarily suspending the decision by the prosecutor general's office to dismiss him and bar him from holding public office for 15 years. The council of state ruling is highly significant because it should satisfy President Juan Manuel Santos and pave the way for Petro to throw his weight behind Santos's re-election bid as 'the option for peace'. This could be crucial. Recent opinion polls suggest that Santos's right-wing rival, Óscar Iván Zuluaga, is coming up fast on the rails. Santos is running a poor third in Bogotá and Petro's endorsement could give him a lift.

Petro was returned to office on 23 April after a local judge ruled that President Santos should have accepted the precautionary measures issued by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in Petro's favour [WR-14-17]. But this ruling was immediately challenged by the prosecutor general, Alejandro Ordóñez, and Santos himself. Santos had little choice. He had ignored the IACHR ruling because it would have set a dangerous precedent, potentially leading to an avalanche of legal cases by other officials dismissed by the prosecutor general, past or future, at the IACHR. Santos will have no problem accepting the ruling by the council of state. For one thing it is a powerful judicial body composed of 27 magistrates and not one judge in isolation, but it also effectively brings the case back within the Colombian judicial system, removing the IACHR can of worms.

The council of state ruled that the prosecutor general had failed to show that Petro took his action with "the unambiguous and unequivocal intention of ignoring his duties and transgressing the juridical order". It said that the decision by the prosecutor general did not follow "the criteria of the law to determine the seriousness of the mistake [...] conspires against administrative due process by failing to acknowledge the principle of proportionality of penalty". Ordóñez plans to challenge the council of state ruling but Petro is in an ever-stronger position as it looks likely that he will still be in power by at least the end of June, which would mean that the mayoralty will remain in the hands of his party, Movimiento Progresistas, until the end of his term in December 2015.

On the same day as the council of state ruling, Progresistas signed an accord with senior representatives of the Partido Liberal (PL), part of the ruling coalition, in an apartment in northern Bogotá, in support of the peace process. While it does not explicitly mention electoral matters, it is tantamount to endorsing the re-election of Santos. Petro arranged to meet Santos in the Casa de Nariño presidential palace shortly after he was restored to office for a private meeting which appears to have formed the basis for this nine-point accord on peace, education and health. The accord stems from the fact that Petro is worried about the prospects of sealing a peace deal with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc) leftist guerrillas should Zuluaga win. Santos celebrated the completion of "60% of the peace process" this week after the Farc reported that it was just "three or four paragraphs" away from an accord on the third of five topics on the peace agenda – the drugs issue.

The accord with Progresistas could win Santos crucial votes in Bogotá. A poll by Centro Nacional de Consultoría this week showed Zuluaga would win a June run-off against Santos by 42% to 34%. Other polls suggest that Santos still has a (slight) advantage but in Bogotá he is lagging behind Zuluaga and Enrique Peñalosa, the candidate for Alianza Verde, the coalition to which Progresistas, controversially, belongs.

**FX crisis**

Venezuela's foreign currency shortage crisis – the root cause of its woes – remains serious. Alitalia has cancelled its Rome-Caracas service as of 1 June, because of pending debts, even as the state oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela* (Pdvsa) announced a new US\$5bn bond issue “to finance investment projects, including investment for the nation's social development”. Pdvsa issued US\$4.5bn in November, of which US\$3.0bn was used pay off debts to oil service providers, with the rest sold to the central bank. The new bond will increase Pdvsa's total debt to US\$48.3bn. Imports may have fallen 38% year-on-year in the first four months of 2014, local economists calculate, based on the number of currency requests published by the new national centre for external trade (Cencoex).

**Radicals try to fill the vacuum as talks stall**

Hours before the Union of South American Nations (Unasur) troika was due back in Caracas in a bid to revive the stalled government-opposition dialogue, the national guard detained over 100 people on 14 May after another night of violence during student-led protests. Diego Scharifker, a councillor for the Caracas municipality of Chacao and a national executive member of the radical opposition party *Un Nuevo Tiempo*, said it was “a night of terror” and “another dark chapter” in the country's history.

The clashes and mass detentions in the past week will seriously complicate things for the three foreign ministers representing Unasur, which is mediating the talks along with a good faith witness from the Vatican.

The opposition *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática* (MUD) has backed away from talks, citing the latest violence and alleging that the government of President Nicolás Maduro is not really serious about the dialogue. However, several observers suggest that the MUD moderates engaged in the talks, led by the coalition's executive secretary Ramón Guillermo Avelledo, have pulled back temporarily so as to “throw a bone” to those opposition radicals so infuriated last week when the US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Roberta Jacobson, said in her senate testimony that the US State Department had been asked not to consider applying sanctions to Venezuelan government officials so as not to damage the fragile talks. Radicals immediately called out Avelledo, who denied any such request, but the incident exacerbated the deepening rift in the MUD. In Uruguay on 14 May, Jacobson said she had erred in her testimony and clarified that while some people had suggested that the US hold back on sanctions, that suggestion emphatically had not come from those people taking part in the dialogue process.

If that looked like an effort to rescue Avelledo, the latest violence, in the view of some, was another attempt by the alleged military wing of the government to poison the atmosphere further ahead of the arrival of the Unasur troika. The MUD's deputy secretary, Ramón José Medina, claims that “a radical and military wing” headed by the national assembly president, Diosdado Cabello, the opposition's favourite bogeyman, and backed by Interior Minister General Miguel Rodríguez Torres, is deliberately seeking to undermine the dialogue. Complaining about the mixed signals coming from the government, Avelledo has called upon President Maduro to decide “between winning a war or winning the peace”. Meanwhile Maduro himself has repeated that right-wing extremists, backed by counterparts in the US, are acting to sabotage the dialogue, pointing out that he personally invited the MUD and other political actors to a dialogue at the presidential palace back in January – only for opposition hardliners to kick off the violent protests in February in an effort to wreck that dialogue. Observers agree that extremists on both sides are trying to run the show, potentially leading to a dangerous impasse.

**Correa gives his view**

Ecuador's President Rafael Correa identified Venezuela's economic woes as a key trigger for the social and political crisis. “They have made, with the greatest respect, from my point of view, economic errors, for that there are economic problems and that exacerbates the contradictions”, Correa said in Chile, in comments widely re-circulated as if directly critical of the Maduro administration. However Correa in fact staunchly defended the Bolivarian government and blamed much of the current situation on “oligarchs” reluctant to give up power.

## Ramos Heredia and the First Lady

The new attorney general, Carlos Ramos Heredia, said his family had never had anything to do with the family of Nadine Heredia and that he did not even know they were distant cousins until President Humala took office. There has been press speculation that Humala stitched up a deal with the CNM in 2011 to clear the way for Ramos to be appointed as a supreme prosecutor and eventually as attorney general. While the CNM's decision to overlook certain candidates for supreme prosecutor looks like it smacks of political interference, Ramos Heredia was appointed as a supreme prosecutor in January 2011 – six months before Humala came to power.

## New attorney general excites controversy

The new attorney general, Carlos Ramos Heredia, took office on 12 May amid a wave of media-fanned public suspicion. The suspicion stems in part from his familial ties (he is a cousin of First Lady Nadine Heredia) but mostly from the fact that he is the subject of a constitutional complaint in congress for the manner in which he dealt with the allegations of corruption, bribery and even orchestration of murder against the regional president of Áncash, César Álvarez Aguilar [WR-14-14]. Ramos takes office in the midst of a power clash between the constitutional tribunal (TC) and the council of magistrates (CNM), which has damaged Peru's judicial credibility.

Ramos Heredia was elected last month to the post of attorney general for three years by four votes to one by his colleagues on the board of supreme prosecutors. His appointment is controversial because recent developments in Áncash have exposed his decision-making regarding Áncash over the last two years as, at best, flawed. Ezequiel Nolasco, a candidate for regional president in Áncash in this October's elections, predicted his own murder in mid-March after striving to expose the corrupt regime he alleged was being run by Álvarez. Ramos Heredia is not only being investigated by congress but also by the CNM in relation to the removal of four regional prosecutors in 2012 investigating 'La Centralita', a store in Chimbote, the capital of Áncash's province of Santa, believed to be a front for a wiretapping operation against politicians, prosecutors and journalists critical of Álvarez. Ramos also refused to investigate Hugo Dante Farro Murillo, the president of Santa's board of public prosecutors, for colluding with Álvarez.

Ramos made a series of media appearances this week to try and clear his name. In an interview published by the national daily *La República* on 12 May, Ramos promised "transparency, impartiality and objectivity", and to fight corruption, narco-trafficking, money laundering and organised crime. During his swearing-in ceremony he said he would work with the comptroller general's office and the ombudsman to tackle corruption, and strengthen ties with other state institutions as "the attorney general's office cannot be an island". Ramos denied any links with the government of President Ollanta Humala (*see sidebar*) or Álvarez. He also added, intriguingly, that "What is happening in Áncash is being repeated in Tumbes, Trujillo and Chiclayo. The north of the country is a very disturbing time bomb and we need to work hard before it blows up."

### Inter-judicial power clash

Ramos also expressed his hope that the power clash between the CNM and the TC would be resolved swiftly to restore "juridical stability" to Peru. The two bodies have been on a collision course for several years, since the TC began considering a case brought in 2011 by Mateo Castañeda Segovia who claimed he had been unjustly overlooked by the CNM to become a supreme prosecutor. On 30 April three TC magistrates signed a resolution annulling the CNM's appointments of Nora Miraval and Zoraida Ávalos as supreme prosecutors and appointing Castañeda to the position. The CNM denounced the TC magistrates before congress for usurping its powers and called for them to be suspended.

On 8 May the TC annulled its resolution, confirmed Miraval and Ávalos in their positions and removed Castañeda, "in the interests of peace", TC magistrate Gerardo Eto Cruz, one of the three who issued the resolution, said. But one of his colleagues, Carlos Mesía, is taking the conflict further. On 11 May Mesía denounced the Peruvian State before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (CorteIDH) for the constitutional charge brought against him, Eto and Ernesto Álvarez by the president of congress, Daniel Abugattás, for issuing the resolution. Mesía said it was not within the remit of congress to object to judicial resolutions as it interfered with the TC's "independence and autonomy".

### Military aligned with Morales

While the current commander-in-chief, Admiral Víctor Baldivieso has been less explicit, his predecessors have all raised eyebrows after making comments which appear to align the military with the political project of President Evo Morales, raising questions about its independence as an institution. Baldivieso's immediate predecessor, General Edwin de la Fuente, described the FFAA as "socialist", "anti-capitalist" and "anti-imperialist", echoing comments made in November 2010 by then-head of the FFAA, General Antonio Cueto, and which were then repeated by his successor, General Tito Gandarillas, during his inauguration in January 2012. This co-opting of the military by the government is typical of the regional left-wing integration bloc, Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (Alba), established by the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez (1999-2013).

### Deal on the cards with military officers

President Evo Morales looks to have averted a key threat ahead of the October 2014 general elections, which he is widely tipped to win. Last week the association of armed forces sergeants and NCOs (ASCINLASS), which recently staged unprecedented protests calling for reform of the armed forces (FFAA), resulting in the dismissal of over 700 officers [WR-14-16], announced it was calling off protests after the FFAA high command agreed to dialogue.

On 9 May the FFAA's chief of staff, General Fernando Aramayo, told reporters that "nearly 100%" of the dismissed officers had returned to their posts. His announcement came just over a week after FFAA commander-in-chief, Admiral Víctor Baldivieso, told reporters that the military high command had agreed to dialogue with ASCINLASS and that a dialogue table had been set up to discuss an 18-point agenda.

This represented a softening of the stance by the military leadership, which had previously maintained that ASCINLASS's demands - which had centred on the need to address "discrimination within the FFAA" against the mainly indigenous NCOs - were not up for negotiation. Among other things, these demands call for NCOs to be allowed the same educational opportunities as their seniors; for the ranks of NCO and sergeant to be replaced with the position of "technical officer"; and health and other benefits.

With partial agreements already reached on 16 of the 18 points (including calls for the dismissed officials to recover their posts), Baldivieso said the two pending points relate to pay, which he noted lies in the hands of the defence ministry, and the proposed reform of the 'organic law of the armed forces' - the protesters' main demand. While there was arguably little risk of the revolt spreading up the ranks, given that the leadership has in the past revealed itself to be firmly aligned with the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) government (*see sidebar*), the fruitful dialogue process will be a relief for President Morales given the risk that it could have spread to other sectors.

### Revisiting the military dictatorship

One potential point of tension with the military could stem from the announcement made by the Morales administration earlier this year of its plans to redress past injustices committed during the various military dictatorships (1964-1982).

On 14 February, the inter-institutional council for the clarification of forced disappearances, Consejo Interinstitucional para el Esclarecimiento de Desapariciones Forzadas (Ciedef, which is presided over by the justice ministry), along with the attorney general's office and the La Paz-based Universidad Mayor de San Andrés (UMSA), signed an agreement to coordinate joint actions to investigate forced disappearances during the 18-year period.

At the time the deputy justice minister, Ericka Chávez, told reporters that the aim of the agreement is to identify the victims of forced disappearances during the dictatorship and promote the declassification of military archives.

According to figures from the association of relatives of the detained and disappeared (ASOFAMD), there are some 156 cases of people reported 'disappeared' in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

While local human rights groups have long called on the Morales government to pass legislation which would declassify military archives spanning the dictatorship era, the military has proven less than forthcoming, maintaining that it does not possess any relevant documents that might help to clarify these disappearances.

## Tax reform

The government's tax reform passed in general terms in the lower chamber on 13 May by 72 votes to 48. The Nueva Mayoría voted unanimously as a bloc in favour of the reform while the opposition Alianza por Chile, minus one deputy from Renovación Nacional (RN), Gaspar Rivas, opposed the reform. The lower chamber will vote on the particulars of the reform before it goes to the senate, where the Nueva Mayoría has a sufficient majority to carry it. The president of the conservative Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI), Ernesto Silva, said the reform was "a terrible project for Chile" and accused the government of "bulldozing it through by imposing its majority" rather than seeking to hold a constructive debate over it.

## BRAZIL & SOUTHERN CONE

### CHILE | POLITICS

## Students call time on truce

President Michelle Bachelet faced her first significant protest on 8 May since taking power two months ago. Her government managed to undercut support for what was billed by social organisations as 'the march of marches' on 22 March, principally by dissuading students from taking part. But this time around it was unable to do so as between 40,000 and 100,000 (reflecting the disparity between the figures of the police and organisers) students from the three main university federations marched in Santiago, and seven other cities across Chile, frustrated by the lack of clarity of the reform proposals of the education minister, Nicolás Eyzaguirre. Since then the student movement has divided over whether to radicalise protest action or give the government time to react.

The protest march itself was peaceful with the government allowing participants to pass in front of the La Moneda presidential palace, a symbolic gesture from the Bachelet administration as this was prohibited by former president Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014) in 2012. It turned violent in a city square at the end, however, when a group of hooded individuals clashed with the police: 20 carabineros were injured; 101 arrests were made.

Former student leaders that now sit in the national congress led the marches: Gabriel Boric in Santiago and Camila Vallejo and Karol Cariola in Valparaíso. Vallejo and Cariola are deputies for the Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh), part of Bachelet's Nueva Mayoría coalition. They maintained that having a seat in congress should not preclude participating in a march as it was necessary to fight on all fronts to get the sweeping education reform they crave. Not everyone in the Nueva Mayoría shared their view.

The main three university federations saw the march as tantamount to firing a warning shot to urge the Bachelet administration to clear up what they see as ambiguities on key points, such as a free universal higher education and ending for-profit education. The day after the march, however, the secondary school student association, Asamblea Coordinadora de Estudiantes Secundarios (Aces) and the Federación de Estudiantes de la Universidad de Santiago (Feusach), decided to go further. They called on the comptroller general's office to investigate Eyzaguirre "for abandonment of duties". Lorenza Soto, the spokeswoman for the Aces, argued that Eyzaguirre was only regulating for-profit education and not honouring a campaign promise to eliminate it.

Eyzaguirre has held a number of meetings with various groups of students since picking up the education portfolio, but they have become increasingly disillusioned with his circumlocution and concerned about the 'small print' accompanying his eventual reform proposal. After the march, Eyzaguirre called on the students to show "patience", arguing that the reform was "complex" but promising that he would send three bills to congress, before Bachelet delivers her state-of-the-nation address on 21 May, which would "go to the heart of the education system". He said the bills would address the three main bones of contention for students by ending for-profit education; modifying the *copago* (copayment, shared funding of monthly tuition fees); and ending school selection.

The main university federations are still prepared to take part in talks with Eyzaguirre - but not indefinitely. If he fails to come up with the goods by 21 May, there is a good chance they will pitch in their lot with the Aces and Feusach and really start to ratchet up the pressure on the Bachelet administration.



**Sick with violence****Disarmament**

In defence of its record on criminality, Jorge Capitanich highlighted the government's weapons amnesty programme which he claimed had resulted in the destruction of more than 272,000 firearms since 2007, 153,846 of which were voluntarily handed over. Capitanich pointed out that the United Nations had praised Argentina's success in this programme and the reduction in the number of its weapons' manufacturers.

Much of the rapprochement between the government of President Cristina Fernández and the Argentine Roman Catholic Church threatened to unravel this week after the Episcopal Conference published a letter lamenting, in stark terms, the rise of violence in Argentina. Jorge Capitanich, the cabinet chief, responded by describing the letter as part of a "deliberate attempt" to blame the federal government for rising crime, when the provincial governments were the authorities responsible. The letter comes at a critical time in the debate over criminal justice: plans to reform the penal code are currently bogged down in congress, with many opposition leaders claiming the reform would benefit criminals.

According to the bishops, Argentina is "sick with violence" and rife with social exclusion, corruption and judicial inefficiency. "The forms of violence that society suffers on a daily basis are numerous," they wrote. "Many people live in fear of entering or leaving their homes, are scared of being alone, or worry about their children returning from school." The bishops were careful, however, to avoid criticising the government directly, and even echoed many of the government's explanations for the rise in crime. "It's worth [...] recognising that violence includes social exclusion, the deprivation of opportunities, hunger and marginalisation," they wrote. Much of the letter concentrated on the media's failure to report crime objectively and sensitively.

Nevertheless, the comments drew a stinging rebuke from the government and its allies. "Argentina might have some pending issues, but it's not sick with violence," José Ottavis, the secretary general of the Partido Justicialista (PJ), said. He went on to list what he said were years of greater violence under previous governments, including the military coup of 1976 and the economic crisis years of 1989 and 2001.

Capitanich acknowledged that crime was a problem but stressed that it was not the exclusive responsibility of the federal government. Jorge Oesterheld, the spokesman for the Episcopal Conference, responded that "maintaining a climate of peace and harmony is the responsibility of the national government". The president of the Episcopal Conference, José María Arancedo, insisted that the report was "not an attack on the government". Until the elevation of Jorge Bergoglio to Pope Francis, relations between the government and the Church had been strained. Since last year, however, President Fernández has sought closer, better ties with the Church through the pontiff.

On 9 May, the day before the letter's publication, Sergio Berni, the national security secretary, took to the airwaves to defend Argentina's record on public security. He used United Nations data to show that Argentina was, in terms of homicides at least, one of the safest countries in the region, along with Uruguay and Cuba. Berni said the greatest threat to public order came from ineffective judges, many of whom, he argued, should be replaced with "vending machines" or "robots", adding, "we don't have a problem with laws but their interpretation."

**Football gangs and drug traffickers**

Eight people affiliated to the Buenos Aires football clubs El Porvenir and Independiente were arrested on 14 May, carrying 60kgs of marijuana, 2kgs of cocaine and three guns. The men are accused of running a drug delivery service in the southern suburbs of Buenos Aires. The arrests highlight the role of the Barras Bravas, essentially football hooligans who have developed into powerful, co-ordinated criminal organisations. Two months ago the president of El Porvenir, Enrique Merelas, found his car torched by unknown assailants. Merelas subsequently complained that the club had become a "drug warehouse". The fact the latest arrests involved suspects from two rival clubs suggest that Barras Bravas are increasingly prioritising criminal activities over footballing rivalry.

## Strike chaos ahead of World Cup

### Tourism ministry predicts World Cup windfall

Figures from the ministry of tourism published on 14 May predict visitors to Brazil will spend a total of R\$6.7bn (US\$3bn) during the period of the World Cup, from 12 June until 13 July. Rio de Janeiro is expected to receive the most: R\$1bn (US\$450m), followed by Brasília, R\$888m (US\$402m); and Fortaleza, R\$782m (US\$354m). Curitiba is at the bottom of the list of the 12 host cities, with a projection of R\$297m (US\$134m). The 300,000 foreign tourists expected to visit, based on ticket sales from early April, are projected to spend an average of R\$5,500 (US\$2,500) excluding air fares.

With less than a month to go until the start of the Fifa World Cup, strikes and industrial actions are convulsing many of Brazil's host cities. In Rio de Janeiro, a 48-hour strike by bus drivers and fare collectors resulted in less than 18% of the bus fleet operating. The lack of public transport is merely the most visible face of the unrest currently gripping the city: teachers, municipal engineers, architects, geologists and public museum staff have also been on strike, as have banks' private security guards.

Teachers are currently on strike in São Paulo and Manaus. Workers at the Manaus factory of Ambev, the brewery, are threatening industrial action ahead of the World Cup. Rubbish collectors in Belo Horizonte have downed brooms. Students from the Movimento Passe Livre, the free bus pass movement which kicked off last year's major protests, organised a significant demonstration outside the city hall in Porto Alegre. On 13 May military police and the fire service protested in Recife; on 14 May they went on strike, forcing the local government to call in the army. In Cuiabá the military police are threatening to go on strike during the tournament. Airline staff from the Latam Group (which combines LAN and TAM) have also threatened to walk out during the World Cup.

Outside of the country, staff in 13 Brazilian embassies and consulates, including those in New York, Atlanta, Los Angeles, London, Montreal, Brussels and Paris are also on strike, just as many would-be World Cup tourists are seeking visas. Brazil's Berlin embassy was also attacked earlier in the week by a small group of activists who daubed the building with the slogan: "Nao vai ter Copa" [sic] ("There's not going to be a World Cup"). The vandalism prompted some Brazilian commentators to wonder whether the World Cup would attract international anti-capitalist protesters, who might swell the number of the local 'black blocs'.

A key test of the strength of the anti-World Cup movement will come this Thursday, 15 May: "the International Day of Struggles against the World Cup". Events are being planned in 50 Brazilian cities, though the focus is likely to be São Paulo. All host cities have their own "People's World Cup Committees", but São Paulo's is the largest and best-organised. According to the group's press release, 90 different outfits have committed to attend the protest, among them the MPL and the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto (MTST).

The MTST is currently occupying a stretch of land around 4km from the Itaquero stadium, which is due to host the opening match of the World Cup. Last week the group briefly occupied the offices of a number of the major construction conglomerates that won lucrative contracts for the World Cup, including Odebrecht, OAS and Andrade Gutierrez.

In host cities across Brazil the branch of the military police tasked with handling public order, the Batalhão de Polícia de Choque, is currently carrying out very public demonstrations, approved by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), of how they intend to contain protests during the tournament. In Rio, the latest demonstration is planned for 15 May, a few hours ahead of the anti-World Cup protests.

#### "Don't react"

The civil police in São Paulo will circulate a booklet in English, Spanish and French to World Cup visitors arriving in the city on how to react in case of an assault. The basic message is "Don't react. Don't shout. Don't argue". The head of the city's World Cup organising committee, Mario Leite, argued that many of the foreign visitors to Brazil will not be as accustomed to dealing with street crime as Brazilian tourists.

## To the north-east in search of votes

This week President Dilma Rousseff and her leading rivals for the presidency, Aécio Neves, of the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB) and Eduardo Campos of the Partido Socialista Brasileiro (PSB), have been in the north-east of Brazil, a comparatively poor region that accounts for 27% of the electorate, second only to the south-east (where 43% live). In 2010, Rousseff won 61.6% of the votes in the north-east; a recent poll found that only 52% now intend to vote for her in October. To ensure victory, she needs to shore up her support base in the area.

Over the past few days President Rousseff has visited the states of Ceará, Pernambuco and Paraíba; on 16 May she is due to return to Paraíba and Piauí, where she is due to open a social housing project. Neves and Campos, meanwhile, have been in Bahia, where they had to share dominance of the local media with former president Lula da Silva (2003-2010), campaigning on Rousseff's behalf. Marina Silva, Campos's popular candidate for the vice-presidency, has been in Fortaleza, the capital of Ceará.

Rousseff's problem is that she is a known quantity in the region, and therefore may not pick up many undecided voters. Indeed, her priority appears to be stopping the slide in her support there. A recent commercial by the ruling Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) warns voters of the possible consequences of an election victory by the opposition. "The employment of today can't be allowed to turn back to the unemployment of yesterday. We can't listen to false promises. Brazil does not want to go back," the advert claims.

Campos, a former governor of Pernambuco, accused the government of using fear in its electoral messages. "Bolsa Família [the successful conditional benefits programme] is not the achievement of any one party; it's the triumph of the Brazilian people, which no-one can take away. Let's stop with this terrorism, with this lack of respect that wants to discuss Brazil only with threats and scaremongering," he said. Neves echoed Campos's criticism.

Campos is still not well known outside his home state, but he is hoping to present himself as the true heir to Lula, in whose government he once served. Lula, like Campos, is from Pernambuco. Neves, grandson of Tancredo Neves, the president-elect who died just before taking office, is better known nationally than Campos, though as a mineiro (from the south-eastern state of Minas Gerais) offering the most right-wing agenda of the candidates, the north-east is not his natural habitat.

Most political analysts continue to note that it is very early in the election cycle to read much into the opinion polls. Nevertheless the latest Datafolha poll shows Rousseff haemorrhaging votes. Published on 9 May, the poll put Rousseff on 37%; Neves on 20% and Campos on 11%.

### Senate inquiry into Petrobras underway

On 14 May the senate began its official investigations into allegations of corruption and mismanagement at the state-owned oil company, Petrobras. Opposition senators boycotted the first session of the inquiry, angered at the decision to grant precedence to the senate inquiry (controlled by government sympathisers), and not to the full mixed congressional inquiry (which would be dominated by the opposition). The mixed inquiry is due to begin in two weeks' time.

### Health insurance plans scrapped

On 14 May, the national health agency (ANS) temporarily suspended the sale of 161 different health insurance plans from 36 different companies. Currently 1.7m Brazilians use one of these schemes. The companies are effectively being punished for poor service provision.

**Solís constructs glass house****Transparency will prevail**

The first thing President Solís did upon taking office was to make his cabinet ministers sign a commitment to preserve high standards of ethical conduct in public office, and in the use of state resources, to uphold his campaign promise to put transparency and accountability uppermost. Opposition parties applauded this move and the leader of the Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) in the legislative assembly, Juan Luis Jiménez, offered the backing of his party's 18 seats for "projects of national importance" sent by the executive.

Luis Guillermo Solís was inaugurated on 8 May, becoming in the process the first representative of the centre-left Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC) to don the presidential sash. Solís devoted a significant segment of his inaugural speech in the national stadium in San José to the need for dialogue and his commitment to transparency in government. There is still a place for traditional political horse-trading, however, and Solís has already deftly exploited it. Days after naming two more politicians from the opposition Partido de Unidad Social Cristiana (PUSC) in his cabinet team, support from the eight PUSC deputies in the legislative assembly played a key role in securing the presidency of the body for the PAC.

President Solís said he was acutely aware of "a public clamour demanding a profound change in the way the country is governed and administrated". He said: "I want government – especially the presidential office – to function like a great glass house, which allows people to examine and scrutinise the way we are running things [...] to censure our omissions and to demand rectifications when appropriate". He went on: "Corruption is rotting our democracy and bankrupting our public finances". This has contributed, he argued, to "the country's principal contradiction: a model that generates growth but, at the same time, concentrates wealth in the hands of a few".

To assist in his bid for greater transparency and accountability, Solís expressed his determination to harness modern technological resources and cyberspace as "an instrument of transparency, not of manipulation or propaganda" but as "a sort of modern Agora", a virtual gathering place where political life can play out in public. He said this new form of political participation and public oversight would be a way of rendering the decision-making process more transparent and "to move from formal democracy to real democracy".

Solís promised to open doors and hold "permanent dialogue" with each sector of society and every political party with "no sectarianism or any kind of party revanchism". If he is committed to ensuring transparency from now on rather than rooting out past corruption, he will have unanimous support from the country's political parties, but the outgoing Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) could feel targeted if he sets up investigations into corruption during the last two administrations, costing him valuable support in the legislative assembly (see sidebar). With a speech focused so heavily on transparency and accountability, if Solís does go after previous administrations for corruption, he will also need to be unimpeachable to retain credibility or his 'glass house' metaphor will look ill-chosen: people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

**Cutting a deal with opposition**

Solís said the composition of the legislative assembly was also indicative of a public call for the political class to talk and construct accords. Despite all the talk of a new way of governing, however, Solís is clearly still prepared to fall back on the old ways of getting things done, notably horse-trading. The PAC succeeded in gaining the presidency of the legislative assembly, under Henry Mora, on 1 May courtesy of a deal with the PUSC and the left-wing Frente Amplio (FA).

The PAC signed a long legislative accord with the FA, an informal arrangement to subordinate party interests to the national interest, which focused mainly on accountability and transparency, and plural and democratic debate. The PAC's legislative accord with the PUSC included some more specific objectives: reform the political system; reform public administration; improve economic equity, fiscal order and social solidarity; protect the

## Fiscal consensus

President Solís stressed that within two years Costa Rica's political parties should be capable of finding a solution to the country's "delicate public finances", a fiscal deficit that is nearly 6% of GDP and which "puts at serious risk the stability of public finances". Solís was careful to add, however, that there was no threat of "an imminent collapse of the State".

national productive sector; and strengthen the state social security fund, Caja Costarricense de Seguro Social (CCSS).

Four days earlier Solís had appointed two PUSC politicians to his cabinet team: Manuel González Sanz as foreign minister; and María del Rocío Sáenz Madrigal, as the new head of the CCSS. González Sanz served as foreign trade minister from 2004-2006 in the PUSC administration of former president Abel Pacheco (2002-2006). Sáenz Madrigal is a doctor who served as health minister under Pacheco.

Solís insisted that the appointments were not part of any formal deal with the PUSC, although he admitted it looked that way, and the subsequent PUSC legislative support for the PAC's Mora as president of the legislative assembly looks like a quid pro quo. Solís had already named two other former PUSC politicians in his cabinet, Helio Fallas Venegas, his Vice-President, is the new finance minister; Víctor Morales Mora, the labour minister.

## Boosting China ties

The appointment of González Sanz is indicative of Solís's determination to make foreign trade the centre of his government's diplomatic strategy. Solís has highlighted his commitment to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) to Costa Rica, especially top-end investment, after Intel, the US chipmaker, closed its assembly operations in the country, resulting in the loss of 1,500 jobs.

González Sanz had highlighted the "enormous potential" of ties with China. Currently Costa Rica is the only country in the sub-region to have switched allegiance from Taiwan to mainland China, which it did in 2007. It was very intriguing, in the light of his comments and the government's need to fill the vacuum left by Intel, that the Chinese development bank (CDB) representative, Guo Lian, should have presented a study last week showing that Costa Rica meets the conditions for becoming China's first exclusive economic zone in Latin America. The CDB said in a statement that the study proposed "a model with a long-term vision" which, after 20 years of construction and development, would become "a key area of foreign trade for Costa Rica and a new motor for sustainable economic development".

The study proposes creating a main industrial park in the central Pacific province of Puntarenas and five smaller industrial parks in Guanacaste (North Pacific); San Carlos (north); Limón (Caribbean); and Cartago (centre). These parks would be dedicated to advanced technology; manufacturing; finance; trade; ports and logistics; agricultural products; and cultural tourism.

Cabinet list	
<i>Presidency</i>	Melvin Jiménez Marín
<i>Finance (coordinator of economic team)</i>	Vice-president Helio Fallas Venegas
<i>Economy, industry and commerce</i>	Welmer Ramos González
<i>Foreign trade</i>	Alexander Mora Delgado
<i>Foreign affairs</i>	Manuel González Sanz
<i>Public works and transport</i>	Carlos Segnini Villalobos
<i>Public security, interior and police</i>	Celso Gamboa Sánchez
<i>Environment and energy</i>	Edgar Gutiérrez Espeleta
<i>Education</i>	Sonia Marta Mora Escalante
<i>Health</i>	Dr María Elena López Núñez
<i>Planning</i>	Olga Marta Sánchez Oviedo
<i>Labour</i>	Víctor Morales Mora
<i>Tourism</i>	Wilhelm von Breymann
<i>Agriculture and livestock</i>	Luis Felipe Aráuz Cavallini
<i>Housing</i>	Rosendo Pujol Mesalles
<i>Social development</i>	Carlos Alvarado Quesada
<i>Justice and peace</i>	Cristina Ramírez Chavarría
<i>Science, technology and telecommunications</i>	Gisella Kooper Arguedas
<i>Culture and youth</i>	Elizabeth Fonseca

## Tantrums and tear gas in congress

### Tears, taxes and abuses

Complaining about an armed attack on Libre district councillor and its former Tegucigalpa mayoral candidate, Rafael Barahona, one of the party's founding members, Deputy Zelaya declared that the first 100 days of the Hernández government were "of mourning, of pain, of tears, taxes and abuses". "We are profoundly concerned with what is happening in our country," he stated. On official figures, however, the violence is falling, amid strongly militarised security.

Dramatic images - broadcast worldwide - of former president Manuel (Mel) Zelaya (2006-2009) clutching a handkerchief over his mouth while clouds of tear gas poured out of the national congress building were suggestive of a terrorist attack of some kind. In fact, Honduran security forces were acting on orders from the congress president, Mauricio Oliva, to remove Zelaya and fellow deputies for failing to adhere to new security measures in the building and for disorderly conduct inside the legislature. All in a day's work, an unrepentant Oliva intimated the following day.

Zelaya and members of his new political vehicle, Libertad y Refundación (Libre), objected to new rules for entry into the legislature that apparently force them to use the side stairs rather than the main lift and restrict public access to the gallery. Libre deputies, along with dozens of supporters, caused a scene both inside and outside the building, with considerable vandalism reported by the authorities. Congress resumed ordinary sessions a day later, with Libre legislators back in their seats. As Libre supporters continued to protest loudly outside, Oliva said he was "the first to lament what happened", but he stressed that he knew well it was going to happen and accused Libre of not knowing how to behave and of acting seditiously.

Zelaya, who says that Oliva has refused Libre its voice since its deputies took their seats in late January making it the second biggest party in congress, replied that he and Libre would not give in to "repression". "You are not the first to repress me, president. I remind you that before, they attacked me in the Brazilian embassy. You don't have the honour of being the first," he drawled, referencing his long stint holed up in the Brazilian embassy in Tegucigalpa after his ouster in June 2009.

"This congress was born as the product of democracy as a state power. It cannot be a processing office for Juan Orlando [Hernández, the President]; neither can we be submitted to what the President of Honduras wants. That was in [the time of] the monarchies," Zelaya said, during a lengthy 20-minute intervention. No one knows better about the independence of state institutions than Zelaya. When he was president he fought - and lost - a fierce battle of brinkmanship with both the congress and the supreme court, which eventually joined forces to remove him (on still-contested legal grounds).

Libre has 37 of the 128 congressional seats and with the support of the other new opposition party, Partido Anti-Corrupción (13 seats), it can muster up a 50-strong opposition bloc. The ruling Partido Nacional (PN), with 48 seats, has managed, to date, to keep outside a majority of the other traditional party, Partido Liberal (PL), which has 27 seats, to give it a working majority. However, the PL happens to be Zelaya's former party and he still commands support among some of his former colleagues, meaning that the PN-PL alliance is fragile at best. For this reason, the executive has sent a string of legislative proposals down to congress in its first 100 days, with Oliva working fast to secure approval of all of them, with Libre unable to do much about it.

President Hernández, himself congress president for almost four years under his predecessor Porfirio Lobo (2010-2014), refused to be drawn on the latest fracas but said that he asked all deputies to get to work on behalf of the country. "Honduras is changing," Hernández said, his oft-repeated phrase, "everyone needs to fulfil their role and I expect that of deputies".

## Constituent assembly

According to Panama's 1972 constitution, a constituent assembly can be called by the executive (if ratified by an absolute majority in the legislature); the legislature (with a two-thirds vote); or local citizens backed by a document signed by 20% of the electorate as registered up to 31 December of the previous year. The electoral authorities then have between three and six months after receiving the formal request to convene the assembly which comprises 60 delegates who may be independents or members of political parties. The constituent assembly then has between six and nine months to draw up the constitutional changes which are then voted upon in a national referendum.

## Wheeling and dealing begins ahead of July

Following Vice-President Juan Carlos Varela's unexpected victory in the 4 May presidential election [WR-14-18] negotiations between his opposition Partido Panameñista (PPA) and the other main opposition party, Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD), are underway. A deal of some sort looks to be essential to Varela when he takes office on 1 July given that his PPA (as part of the El Pueblo Primero [EPP] alliance which includes the small Partido Popular) looks to have just 13 seats in the new 71-member unicameral legislature.

While the electoral authorities have yet to announce the final legislative results, on 7 May the local press reported that of the remaining seven seats being disputed (all in the San Miguelito district of Panamá province), three went to President Ricardo Martinelli's Unidos Por Más Cambios alliance (comprising his Cambio Democrático [CD] and the smaller party, Molirena) and one to the EPP. This means the UPMC will have 33 seats in the new legislature, just three short of controlling it, while the PRD will have 24 and the EPP, 13.

Given the hostile state of relations between Martinelli and Varela, following the break-up of the PPA-CD alliance in August 2011 [WR-11-35], Varela has reached out to the PPA's traditional rival, the PRD, phoning the party's defeated presidential candidate, Juan Carlos Navarro, on 9 May. The same day, Navarro, whose PRD remains weak (registering one of its worst-ever performances in the election, despite remaining Panama's biggest party), issued a statement confirming his willingness to enter talks with the new government regarding a national legislative agenda.

It remains to be seen whether these negotiations will translate into cabinet posts. So far Varela has confirmed his picks for three ministries – foreign affairs, interior and economy & finance, all of which have gone to allies. Continuing the tradition whereby the Vice-President doubles up as foreign minister (a post Varela held until the deal with the CD came unstuck), Vice-President-elect Isabel Saint Malo will take up the post. An independent and expert consultant to the UN development programme (UNDP), Saint Malo served as Panama's alternate ambassador before the Organization of American States (OAS) under the PPA government of Guillermo Endara (1989-1994) and is known as a consensus-building figure – for example she played a role in national dialogue in 2010 aimed at addressing the crisis caused by the approval (and subsequent repeal) of a law which would have weakened union and environmental legislation.

A leading PPA member, Dulcideo de la Guardia, will head up the economy & finance portfolio. He served as deputy finance minister under Martinelli until, like Varela, he was replaced following the unravelling of the PPA-CD deal. Varela also named as interior minister, PP president Milton Henríquez, brother of current minister of the presidency and vice-president of the ruling CD, Roberto Henríquez. One of the new interior minister's key tasks will be to oversee the process of convening a constituent assembly which Varela has declared necessary to boost transparency and strengthen the country's institutions (*see sidebar*). President Martinelli has notably given his backing to the process, which Varela has said will begin in July 2015.

### Another boost for Varela

President-elect Varela has been able to claim a further triumph in the 4 May general elections – the Panama City mayoralty – the country's second most important political post. (Of the 3.4m national population on the 2010 census, 1.7m is concentrated in the capital and its environs). After a close race, a PPA national deputy, José Isabel Blandón, defeated José Luis Fábrega, a PRD national deputy, by 35.69%-34.4%. The incumbent, Roxana Méndez, of the ruling CD, took third place, managing 29.2% of the vote. Blandón will not have an easy ride once in office, however, given that of the 23 local councillor seats, 10 went to the PRD, eight to the CD, and just five to the PPA.

## POSTSCRIPT

### Quotes of the week

“We’re living through extraordinary historical times: the disillusionment of many Costa Ricans with their presidents, with traditional politics and stratagems, has led to a resounding demand for change [...] the political Spring which has made the country blossom with excitement.”

*Costa Rica’s President Luis Guillermo Solís.*

“There are explicable coincidences and inexplicable coincidences and it is not for me to say if this is one or the other.”

*Colombia’s prosecutor general, Alejandro Ordóñez, on the council of state ruling in favour of the mayor of Bogotá, Gustavo Petro, on the same day that Petro’s party signed an accord effectively supporting President Juan Manuel Santos’s re-election bid.*

“I do what I can [...] if a door opens I try and sneak through, but I’m not God. I’m trying to take diplomacy as far as possible.”

*Uruguay’s President José Mujica.*

### Veteran guerrillas converge on Washington

The visit of Uruguay’s President José Mujica to the US might have grabbed most of the headlines this week but perhaps more significant was the trip to Washington by another former guerrilla from the region – El Salvador’s President-elect Salvador Sánchez Cerén.

If Mujica is an ascetic leftist internationally renowned for his political and economic pragmatism, Sánchez Cerén does not take office until 1 June and is a bit of an unknown quantity. Sánchez Cerén might have fought for the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) guerrillas during El Salvador’s 1980-1992 civil war, when the US was using its financial muscle to try and stop the spread of Communism in its “backyard”, but he has hailed Mujica as the model he will seek to emulate in power.

Sánchez Cerén’s pragmatic bent was on display in Washington when he promised to keep open the US drug monitoring base at the international airport in Comalapa, some 150km south of San Salvador, saying that it “truly has had some successes”. This stands in stark contrast, for instance, to radical leftist governments in the region, such as Venezuela, which noisily ended cooperation with the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in 2005. Sánchez Cerén met several senior US officials, including the US Secretary of State John Kerry, and the Assistant Secretary of State of the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs William Brownfield, while in the US. He described the (private) meetings as “very positive”.

Meanwhile, President Mujica, in his inimitable fashion, held a very frank and wide-ranging discussion with his US peer, Barack Obama, for nearly two hours in the Oval Office on 12 May. Mujica steered clear of discussing marijuana, an uncomfortable topic for Obama, given that his administration tolerates but does not support the decision by the states of Colorado and Washington to legalise marijuana as in Uruguay, but he did discuss the possibility of Uruguay receiving six ‘unlawful combatants’ held at the US naval base in Guantánamo, Cuba. He also took the liberty of advising Obama on how to improve US diplomacy with Brazil, Cuba and Venezuela, before urging support for Uruguay’s legal struggle with the tobacco giant, Philip Morris International.



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