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History-making Morales secures third straight term in Bolivia

President Evo Morales became Bolivia's longest serving head of state with a resounding victory on 12 October. Morales secured re-election with a margin of victory of more than 30 percentage points over his closest rival, Samuel Doria Medina of Unidad Demócrata (UD). His ruling left-wing Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) strengthened its presence across Bolivia, winning eight of the nine departments, up from six in 2009. With the electoral authorities (TSE) due to announce the final results on 22 October - a delay which, along with other procedural problems, has been widely criticised (see sidebar) - the one uncertainty is whether Morales will achieve his goal of a two-thirds majority in the 166-member bicameral legislature.

With 90.1% of ballots counted, President Morales took 59.9% of the vote, followed by Doria Medina on 25.1%. Third, with 9.4% was former president Jorge 'Tuto' Quiroga (2001-2002), of the centre-right Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC), followed by the former La Paz mayor Juan Del Granado (2000-2010), of the former MAS ally, Movimiento Sin Miedo (MSM), on 2.8%, just ahead of the indigenous resistance leader Fernando Vargas, of the environmentalist Partido Verde de Bolivia (PVB). The TSE has yet to release figures for participation but turnout was high as in previous contests.

Ultimately none of the opposition candidates were able to present a viable alternative to the MAS government and its poverty-reduction programmes which Morales began implementing when he took office in 2006. Financed with nationalised hydrocarbons revenues, these programmes have ensured continued high approval ratings for Morales. Claiming to have reduced extreme poverty and general poverty to 18% and 38.4% of the population respectively in 2013 (down from 38% and 60% in 2005), the MAS is proposing to continue these programmes for the 2015-2020 term with the aim of reducing extreme and general poverty rates to 9% and 26% respectively by 2020.

Also bolstering Morales's support, particularly among the wealthier formerly opposition departments (see below), is his government's effective management of the economy which grew by 6.8% in 2013, winning it accolades from the likes of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In its World Economic Outlook report published on 7 October, the IMF forecast 5.2% real annual GDP growth for Bolivia - the second highest forecast in the whole of Latin America & the Caribbean after Panama (6.6%), and well above the 1.3% average for the region.

Morales won more than the 54% of the vote which clinched his first victory in 2005. While less than the 2009 result - when he won 64% - the result nonetheless points to the MAS's strengthening control across the country. This suggests that there may be some justice to Morales's claims to have healed the traditional divisions between the western highlands—his traditional support

Electoral concerns

With the electoral authorities yet to release final results on participation, turnout is expected to be high. The Organization of American States (OAS), which sent a 62-member delegation led by Guatemala's former president Alvaro Colom (2008-2012), praised the high level of peaceful participation, but was critical of "the tabulation, transmission, and dissemination of results" which it said was "extremely slow, stemming from a series of technical and procedural difficulties". It added that it "emphatically recommends the implementation of an effective system for transmitting and disseminating preliminary results".

base—and the eastern "Media Luna" where opposition to Morales came to a head in 2008 over his government's efforts to pass a new constitution.

While in 2009, the MAS won all but the departments of Santa Cruz, Beni and Pando, in the 2014 contest, it managed to win all but Beni where the UD – whose vice presidential candidate was Ernesto Suárez, the ejected former departmental governor – took 50.9% of the vote to 42% for the MAS (see box). The result in Santa Cruz – the country's economic powerhouse, where previously racial tensions between 'cambas' (mestizo Cruceños) and 'collas' (the Andean indigenous community) ran high – was a reward for Morales's concerted efforts to court the department, not just during the latter stages of the campaign [WR-14-39] but also more generally since 2009.

Yet, it is worth pointing out that the result for Doria Medina was nearly twice that suggested by pre-electoral polls [WR-14-40] and significantly up from the 5.6% he won in 2009. This suggests that he has emerged as a real opposition contender. This influence is also reflected in a significantly strengthened legislative presence for the cement magnate, whose UD comprises his Unidad Nacional (UN) party along with the Movimiento Demócrata Social (MDS) – comprising the rump of the former regional opposition governors' bloc, Consejo Nacional Democrático (Conalde). Meanwhile the result for Quiroga, who did not compete in 2009, also suggests that he remains influential. Undoubtedly the big loser was Del Granado, whose MSM broke with the MAS in 2010 ahead of regional elections. He came last in La Paz – his supposed stronghold – and has since announced his withdrawal from politics. The next test for the Morales government will come in municipal and regional elections in 2015.

Legislative results – uncertain

The results for the 130 seats in the lower chamber and the 36 seats in the senate are less certain. With four seats yet to be defined (two in each house), preliminary results give the MAS at least 80 seats in the lower chamber and 24 in the senate. This is down from 88 and 26 won in the 2009 election although a handful of MASistas broke with the ruling party over the government's controversial plan in 2011 to build a road through the indigenous territory and national park, Isiboro Sécore Tipnis.

This gives the MAS at least 104 congressional seats overall – seven short of the two-thirds overall majority required for key appointments including that of the comptroller general and the electoral authorities and, crucially, for the approval of constitutional amendments. Meanwhile the UD looks set to get 35 seats in the lower chamber (well above the three won by the UN in the 2009 vote); the PDC, 11; and the MSM, one. In the senate, the UD looks to have nine seats and the PDC one.

Department % vote in favour of Morales			
	2014*	2009	2005
Chuquisaca	60.87	56.05	54.17
La Paz	67.9	80.28	66.63
Cochabamba	65.86	68.82	64.84
Oruro	65.88	79.46	62.58
Potosí	62.94	78.22	57.8
Tarija	51.19	51.09	31.55
Santa Cruz	48.55	40.91	33.17
Beni	42	37.66	16.5
Pando	49.89	44.51	20.9
Votes abroad	72	69	-
*preliminary results			

Getting fired up over the peace process

There is no imminent prospect of a bilateral ceasefire in Colombia's peace process – that is between President Juan Manuel Santos and his predecessor Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010). While the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc) are inching towards the stage where a bilateral ceasefire could be implemented, the exchange of fire between Santos and Uribe has increased in tempo. Santos does not strictly need Senator Uribe and his Centro Democrático (CD) to be on the same page as far as approving peace-related legislation is concerned as he has sufficient support in congress without them but the constant sniping will not help his cause when it comes to securing the requisite public support for an eventual peace deal.

The latest escalation in the presidential war of words came on 6 October when President Santos criticised Uribe for double standards over the peace process. Santos was responding to the publication of a column in the news magazine *Semana* a day earlier which cited three documents revealing that his predecessor had endeavoured to implement a peace process with the Farc but to no avail. The author of the article, Daniel Coronell, said the documents he had obtained demonstrated that Uribe had offered the Farc a demilitarized zone (DMZ) for peace talks, something Uribe has always vehemently opposed in public on the grounds that it would grant the Farc respite to regroup.

The documents show that Uribe held several meetings in 2006 with Henry Acosta Patiño, an economist with “privileged access” to the Farc, and then-peace commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo (see sidebar). Acosta then had secret contacts with a senior Farc commander, ‘Pablo Catatumbo’ (Jorge Torres Victoria), over the next year, passing over documents including a proposal to create a 868km² DMZ in two municipalities in the south-western department of Valle del Cauca near Cali, Colombia's third largest city.

Santos seized on the piece to call on Uribe and the CD to stop trying to sabotage the peace process. “Yes, there were, not one, but many attempts to carry out a peace process like we are carrying out now,” Santos, who was defence minister under Uribe, said. He added that Frank Pearl, who succeeded Restrepo, had later established with Uribe that Brazil would be the location for peace talks. Pearl confirmed Santos's comments, saying that in March 2010 he had sent a letter to the Farc secretariat to hold a secret meeting in Brazil with a view to holding peace talks. As such, Santos went on, the accusations that his government was intent on “handing Colombia over to Castro-Chavismo” amounted to “a really regrettable contradiction”.

Uribe immediately took to *Twitter* to mount a defence to this assault on his credibility. Uribe accused Coronell of having been “contracted” by Santos to do his dirty work, and argued that the piece confirmed that his (Uribe's) government “did not wiretap but was wiretapped”. Uribe contended that any DMZ would have been exclusively for a humanitarian exchange (prisoner swap) with the Farc. He added that possible peace talks foundered on the Farc's refusal to accept his condition that the guerrilla group “cease all criminal activity”.

Uribe turned defence into attack after the defence minister, Juan Carlos Pinzón, revealed early on 9 October that he had been informed by military intelligence that the leader of the Farc, ‘Timochenko’ (Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri), had travelled to Cuba twice on a Venezuelan government plane to meet the Farc negotiating team. Later in the day during an international

Peace talks

The *Semana*

journalist Daniel

Coronell penned

another article, days

after the first,

claiming that former

president Alvaro

Uribe had signed off

on at least 10 social

development projects

in Farc-controlled

areas of Colombia in

2006 as a gesture to

the guerrilla group to

smooth the way to

peace talks. Coronell

said that some

Col\$1.65bn

(US\$800,000) was

channelled to entities

set up by Henry

Acosta.

Infrastructure investment

Investment in infrastructure is critical for the region, according to a new report from the United Nations Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (Eclac), which says that countries need to spend 6.2% of GDP annually (some US\$320bn) between 2012 and 2020 to meet regional infrastructure needs. The report marks the launch of ECLAC's new Economic Infrastructure Investment in Latin America and the Caribbean Database 1980-2012 (EII-LAC-DB).

insurance convention in the coastal city of Cartagena, Santos said that he had personally authorised the trips to expedite the talks, adding that this was "normal" for negotiations and did not mean that the government had "dropped its guard one millimetre".

Several members of Santos's ruling coalition rallied to his side, arguing that Timochenko's involvement confirmed the seriousness of the talks. Uribe, however, latched on to the apparent rift between Santos and Pinzón, seemingly kept in the dark over the trips. He accused Santos on Twitter of "lying to the country, deceiving the armed forces and handing Colombia over to the Farc" by allowing Timochenko to fly to Havana.

Santos recently published the full texts of the partial accords struck with the Farc in Cuba in an effort to convince the public that his government is not concealing anything [WR-14-38], but this sort of revelation could be damaging, especially as it was swiftly followed by another one. The president of the NGO Fundación Paz y Reconciliación, León Valencia, said that the government had given its consent to a delegation led by 'Antonio García' (Eliécer Erlinto Chamorro Acosta) a member of the central command (Coce) of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) to meet the Farc negotiating team in Havana two months ago.

Valencia, a former ELN guerrilla, said that the ELN delegation had met for several days with the Farc team to discuss how the peace process was going and the difficulties that had been encountered during the talks. Valencia also said he thought that both Timochenko and the leader of the ELN, 'Gabino' (Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista) might have been present. Santos indirectly responded to Valencia's remarks by saying that he would maintain "absolute confidentiality" with regard to all contacts with the ELN, as the government is only at the stage of preliminary talks with the country's second guerrilla group.

PERU-REGION | DEFENCE

Soldiers first, tanks second, says Humala

President Ollanta Humala this week hosted in Peru's southern city of Arequipa the XI Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas (CDMA), attended by 34 Western Hemisphere defence ministers, including the US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel.

President Humala was keen to emphasise that modern armies in Latin America should focus on better-educated and more professional soldiers fit for increasingly regionalised tasks like the fight against climate change/global warming and natural disasters, as well as drug-trafficking and organised crime. He stressed that the traditional military doctrine of "winning wars" was no longer applicable in the region, where sovereign states are at peace with each other, and that, as such, there is no need for an arms race mentality, typically at the cost of social welfare, health and education and national infrastructure budgets.

Investment should be in human capital, not in the "the most modern helicopter or tank", Humala declared, calling for increased defence cooperation policies to boost confidence between countries in the region. He noted that the next cohort of Peruvian soldiers will come out speaking two languages.

The final 'Arequipa Declaration' committed the CDMA to the formation of working groups tasked with establishing mechanisms for the exchange of information on search and rescue operations, as well as humanitarian assistance; facilitating communications between the CDMA and other regional defence forums like the Conference of American Armies and the Inter-American Naval Conference; improving information-sharing on practical

Cost of living in Venezuela

On 14 October the Venezuelan NGO, Centro de Documentación y Análisis Social (Cendas), released a new report that found that the cost of the basic basket of goods in Venezuela is currently equivalent to 5.7 times the national minimum wage. Back in May President Nicolás Maduro increased the minimum wage by 30% to BF4,251.78 in a bid to boost purchasing power, which has been severely eroded by the country's rampant inflation rate (63.4% year-on-year in August according to the latest official figures). However, Cendas found that the current price of the basic basket of goods stands at BF24,541.63. According to Cendas this means that 60% of Venezuelan workers, or 8m people, cannot currently afford the basic basket of goods.

responses to climate change; and, finally, seeking further ways to strengthen the fight against drug-trafficking and organised crime.

The declaration also made special mention of the growing role of women in the armed forces. As the next conference host in 2015, Trinidad & Tobago will liaise with Peru in setting up the various groups.

President Humala's sentiment is all well and good but in reality defence cooperation in the region remains fairly marginal. In Mexico and Central America, militaries are heavily involved in the fight against drug-trafficking, with the support of the US military, navy and coast guard, and are also called upon for regular civilian policing duties. Further south, there has been something of an arms race in the Andean region as oil-flush left-wing governments, led by Venezuela, turned to Russia and China to upgrade outdated equipment.

Colombia's defence priorities in the past 15 years have been decided (and budgeted) in close cooperation with Washington under the counter-narcotics and counter-insurgency initiative Plan Colombia. Brazil, whose US\$35bn annual defence budget dwarfs the rest of the region, is still heavily focused on the defence of its massive land and sea borders, where much of its natural resource wealth lies, although it is now more closely cooperating with the likes of Peru and Bolivia on counter-narcotics efforts.

TRACKING TRENDS

COLOMBIA | Overheating? On 13 October Colombia's central bank (Banrep) released the minutes of its September monetary policy committee meeting in which some participants expressed concerns that the domestic economy was currently growing at the top of its current potential, and perhaps even above it.

Although Latin America is experiencing low growth this year with the majority of the countries in the region going through a marked economic slowdown, Colombia has managed to maintain a solid level of economic activity with its domestic economy projected to post growth of around 4.8%-5.0% this year. In fact Colombia's first half GDP result was stronger than expected, surprising even local analysts [WR-14-37]. This also led to speculation that Banrep would move to increase its benchmark interest rate at the monetary policy meeting in order to moderate the high level of domestic consumption and keep inflation in check.

In the end the committee voted against increasing the benchmark interest rate, leaving it at 4.5%, but some committee members believe it is necessary to increase it to ward off inflationary pressures. "Aggregate demand is still showing strong growth in a context of close to full use of productive capacity," argued one of the advocates of increasing the rate. Yet the prevailing view in the committee was that domestic economic growth will be less dynamic in the second half of the year due to expected lower international demand for Colombian goods as a result of the continued global economic slowdown.

Local analysts are divided over whether Banrep's decision represented the best option. Juan Pablo Espinosa, the head of economic investigation at Grupo Bancolombia, has warned of "significant" risks of the economy overheating pointing out that "growth has been driven by [domestic] demand, which in turn is driven by the high level of consumer confidence". However Julián Cárdenas of pension fund, Protección, has said that "the expectation of lower global growth and the fall in the prices of basic goods has worsened the outlook of some of Colombia's main trade partners, which could affect the country's balance of trade".

Such concerns contrast with the view held by Finance Minister Mauricio Cárdenas, who at a recent meeting of regional finance ministers at the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), said that Colombia's economy can grow "at a rate of 7% a year in the next few years", if the government signs a peace deal with the country's guerrillas and completes its infrastructure development programmes.

Too close to call

It has been a good week for Aécio Neves, the presidential candidate of the main opposition Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB). On 12 October, Marina Silva, the third-placed presidential candidate from the Partido Socialista Brasileiro (PSB), finally came out in support of Neves. The latest opinion polls, published three days later put him just a whisker ahead of President Dilma Rousseff, of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), on 45% to her 43% of valid votes, although they are still locked in a technical tie.

Silva factor

Following the PT's brutal assault on Silva in its extensive campaign airtime ahead of the 5 October first round, it looked seriously unlikely that the PSB candidate could reconcile herself to supporting President Rousseff. And so it proved, although Silva took a long time to announce her support for Neves. Several days after both the PSB voted overwhelmingly to back him, and the Rede Sustentabilidade, Silva's own political organisation, advised supporters to vote for anyone but Rousseff, the former senator and environment minister had yet to make a public decision

On 9 October Silva pulled out of an event in which she was expected to offer her endorsement. Instead, she sent a letter to Neves in which she requested that he incorporate a number of her policy proposals in his manifesto. Though she had tacked Right during much of her campaign, seemingly under pressure from both the economic liberals and social conservatives in her team, Silva's demands to Neves were more conventionally left-wing.

Silva's requests included: land reform; executive responsibility over the demarcation of indigenous territories; full-time education; an end to presidential re-election; and a commitment to rule out reducing the age of criminal responsibility from 18 to 16. Neves rapidly accepted almost all of her proposals, with the notable exception of her request on the age of criminal responsibility. Reducing the age limit is indubitably a popular move, albeit one of questionable efficacy if other Latin American countries are a guide.

In her speech endorsing Neves, Silva claimed Brazilians had shown a desire for change at the ballot box. She said that it was time for power to alternate, and she compared Neves to former PT president Lula da Silva in 2002, when he won election after eight years of rule by Fernando Henrique Cardoso and the PSDB. While Silva's personal endorsement was long anticipated, many of her supporters had already migrated to the Neves camp. In the first round, Silva won 21.6%, some 22m votes. A recent survey showed around 60% of Silva's voters were planning on voting for Neves on 26 October; only around 18% planned on voting for Rousseff.

Arguably, even more significant than Silva's backing was that of the Campos family. Eduardo Campos, the original PSB candidate and a former governor of Pernambuco, died in a plane crash on 13 August. It was, at least in part, the wave of sympathy generated by his death, and the sudden dominance of the PSB on evening news bulletins, that projected Silva up the opinion polls into contention with Rousseff. Since 5 October, Campos's widow and sons have quickly moved to offer their support to Neves. PT campaign staffers fear that their backing will help Neves establish a foothold in the north-east, a traditional stronghold for the party. Neves's slick election campaign films have made extensive use of the endorsements from both Silva and the Campos family.

Getting ugly

The PT has been trying very hard to persuade the electorate that a vote for Neves is a vote for the return of Cardoso. Despite Cardoso's achievements at

Governorships

In the race for the governorship in Rio de Janeiro, Luiz Fernando Pezão, of the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB) has opened up a 12-point lead on his rival Marcelo Crivella (Partido Republicano Brasileiro). In the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, José Ivo Sartori of the PMDB is 17 points ahead of his PT rival, Tarso Genro. In the north-eastern state of Ceará, Camilo Santana (PT) is tied with Eunício Oliveira (PMDB). In Brasília, Rodrigo Rollemberg (Partido Socialista Brasileiro) is 14 points ahead of Jofran Frejat (Partido da República).

Dry São Paulo

Over 13m people in 70 cities across São Paulo state are now affected by drought. Of these 70 cities, 38 have started rationing water, three are in a state of emergency, and one has declared a “public calamity”. Water levels at the Cantareira dam, the main reservoir for the São Paulo metropolitan area and the source of water for 6.5m people, are down to an all-time low of 4.5%.

bringing inflation under control, many poorer Brazilians remember his presidency as a time of economic uncertainty with little thought given to social justice. So frequent have been the comparisons that Cardoso has taken to complaining that he is “not on the ballot list”. But a recent comment that only “poor and ill-informed voters” support Rousseff has been added to the long list of his elitist gaffes which have stuck in the public imagination.

The PT is working hard to portray Neves, the grandson of former president-elect Tancredo Neves, as an out-of-touch elitist born into unimaginable wealth and privilege. Meanwhile red t-shirts, printed with the striking gaze of the young left-wing Rousseff, prior to her arrest and torture by the military dictatorship, are commonplace at PT rallies, highlighting the contrast between the two candidates’ back stories.

Presidential debate

The first of the second round presidential debates was a particularly ugly affair, with neither of the candidates offering much in the way of policy and both flinging a lot of mud, in terms of allegations of corruption, nepotism and lies. Were the contest to be judged on debating points alone, Rousseff certainly had the better of the confrontation. She had more grasp on detail, and more specific criticism of Neves’s record in government. Neves, however, had more Reaganite optimism. Though he was vague on many issues, and failed to effectively counter many of Rousseff’s points, he offered a more positive vision of Brazil under a PSDB government.

The president and the opposition candidate exchanged numerous barbs over corruption, with Neves repeatedly referring to the scandal at Petrobras, the state-owned oil company. Petrobras executives are currently under investigation for using bribes from suppliers to buy the support of the PT’s political allies. Rousseff promised that the guilty would be punished and questioned what exactly Neves had done to tackle the corruption scandals for which the PSDB was responsible, such as the price-fixing cartel involved in the construction of the São Paulo metro.

Rousseff was also much more personal in her attacks. She questioned the transparency of a deal to build an airport on land owned by one of Neves’s relatives. But the only moment when Neves briefly lost his cool was when Rousseff asked him why he employed so many relatives when he was governor of Minas Gerais. Neves’s sister, Andrea, has played a vital, though unpaid and unofficial, role in the candidate’s political career. Rousseff’s attacks may prove much more damaging for Neves as they question his personal probity. For all of the slew of corruption scandals engulfing the PT, no one has been able to claim that Rousseff or her family have personally benefited.

Opinion polls

The latest polls, published on 15 October, showed Neves had a small numerical advantage over Rousseff, but still within the margin of error. Interestingly, both Datafolha and Ibope showed around 6% of the electorate plan on voting blank and around 6% are undecided. Undecideds, however, who are in the main poorer, less well-educated women, are more likely to vote for Rousseff rather than Neves.

The polls had some other encouraging data for Rousseff. Over the past few weeks, the government’s approval rating has slowly risen. Whereas the percentage of those who assessed the government’s performance as “good” was around 35% at the start of September, it is now 40%. The government’s negative ratings have also fallen slightly.

At the same time, Neves’s rejection rate is on the rise. Over the past few weeks the percentage of voters who say they would never vote for him has increased by four points to 38%. Rousseff’s rejection rate has fallen by one percentage point over the same period, from 43% to 42%.

ILO statistics

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), a UN agency, the informal labour market now employs 46.8% of the Argentine workforce. Official government statistics claim it is only 33.1%, which the government argues is the lowest level in the last few decades in Argentina. President Cristina Fernández described the latest ILO statistics as “total nonsense”.

The closeness of the campaign means it is unlikely to get any more civil. After the bad-tempered debate on Tuesday night, both candidates have been exchanging further accusations. On 15 October, the PSDB accused the PT of “pure terrorism” in its electoral campaign. Rousseff, on the other hand, said that Neves was not used to criticism as he had been “shielded” from the press during his eight years as governor of Minas Gerais.

There are three more presidential debates before the final round on 26 October. On current trends, Rousseff will be relishing the confrontations much more than Neves.

ARGENTINA | JUSTICE

Government and opposition square up over supreme court

The death, on 12 October, of the supreme court justice Enrique Petracchi had no judicial significance in itself. It followed the death of Carmen María Argibay, another supreme court justice, in May this year and reduced the number of judges on Argentina’s highest judicial body from seven to five, as envisaged by a law passed in December 2006 by the government of former president Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007). But the news that Raúl Zaffaroni, the judge most sympathetic to the *Kirchnerista* cause, would step down at the end of this year has prompted a flurry of speculation about who might be nominated to take his place in an election year.

Zaffaroni is obliged to step down as he turns 75 in January 2015, the age limit set by the constitution. Though he could attempt to fight the rule, as Carlos Fayt, the 96-year old supreme court justice successfully did, Zaffaroni has indicated he wants to retire. At Petracchi’s funeral, the remaining supreme court judges were clear that the court could operate just as well with four members. In that case, the supreme court president, Ricardo Lorenzetti, would appoint an additional judge from a senate-approved list when decisions end in deadlock. The extra judge would be chosen by lot.

Of the remaining justices, Lorenzetti is considered an independent; Fayt an implacable opponent of Kirchnerismo; Juan Carlos Maqueda and Elena Highton de Nolasco only occasional government sympathisers. With the departure of Zaffaroni the government will lose its one sure vote. As potential replacements, government allies have put forward a number of names, among them Alejandra Gils Carbó, the attorney general; León Arslanián, the former justice and security minister for the province of Buenos Aires; and Ricardo Gil Lavedra, a former human rights minister from the opposition Unión Cívica Radical (UCR).

In a radio interview on 15 October, Aníbal Fernández, a senator for the ruling Frente para la Victoria (FPV) faction of the Partido Justicialista (PJ, Peronists) and former justice minister (2007-2009), indicated that there were a few other names being considered. “I don’t think the court should be left with four members...the government will present a consensus candidate,” he said. Fernández was not put off by the suggestion that the government may struggle to ensure its candidate is approved by the two-thirds majority needed in the senate. “We have the numbers to approve our choice,” he said.

But to win the 48 votes necessary, the Kirchneristas will have to reach agreement with some other parties. On 14 October the chairman of the UCR, and presidential hopeful, Ernesto Sanz, said that his party was not going to endorse any nomination proposed by the kirchneristas. “The government wants to take over the judiciary appointing judges and prosecutors aligned with the administration,” Sanz said. “They do not want an independent judiciary. We will not back any nomination that will help reach that goal,” he added.

Electoral forecast

It is many months now since any opinion pollster in Uruguay has predicted that the FA could win in the first round and all of them now point towards a technical tie between the FA presidential candidate Tabaré Vázquez and his PN rival Luis Alberto Lacalle Pou in a run-off at the end of November.

The justice secretary, Julián Alvarez, said that the discussion over Zaffaroni's successor would be postponed until next year, but he indicated that the composition of the supreme court could also be up for debate. "As soon as we start discussing names, we will also be able to start discussing the number of members of the court," Alvarez said. Almost immediately, he was slapped down by the cabinet chief, Jorge Capitanich, who said the law which reduced the number of justices would not be altered.

One murder every three hours

Statistics released by the health ministry on 15 October showed that 31,992 people were victims of homicide in Argentina between 2002 and 2012. The figure corresponds to a murder rate of one person every three hours. According to a statement accompanying the report, there appears to be a correlation between Argentina's periodic economic crises and spikes in the murder rate. The homicide rate during this period was 7.3 per 100,000, on average, one of the lowest relative to other countries in the region. Brazil has a rate of 22 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. The highest in Latin America is 81.5, registered in Honduras, while the lowest is in Chile, with 3.5.

URUGUAY | POLITICS

Mujica drops regal pretensions

"You know I don't duck decisions that have to be made but a president is not a king," President José Mujica said this week while announcing that he would take no decision on whether to accept six detainees from the US detention camp at Guantánamo, Cuba, until he had consulted with the victor in the upcoming elections. How far this complete change of tack owed to the party hierarchy of the ruling left-wing Frente Amplio (FA) pressuring him to back down on an issue which does not have public support, and could sway an election which is balanced on a knife-edge away from the FA, is a moot point.

"We'll have to see the opinion of the next government," President Mujica said in reference to Guantánamo. Mujica, who had previously asserted his right to make a unilateral decision on the matter, and savaged the main opposition Partido Nacional (PN) and its presidential candidate Luis Alberto Lacalle Pou for jeopardising trade with the US by criticising his gesture [WR-14-40], sounded a much more emollient tone on 9 October.

Mujica followed up on this dramatic U-turn by announcing that he will run for a seat in the senate in order to assist with obtaining consensus in a "difficult" post-electoral scenario. Mujica was responding to recent opinion polls which have suggested that not only will the FA have to fight a closely contested second round run-off to retain the presidency for a third straight term but it will also lose its tiny majority in both the lower chamber of congress and the senate, leaving a hung congress to complicate governance for the next head of state. Mujica will lead the senate list of the Movimiento de Participación Popular (MPP), the largest faction in the FA. He is barred from campaigning but his election is assured along with that of his wife, Senator Lucía Topolansky.

Mujica's sudden focus on the need for level heads to seek consensus comes after days of verbal asperity over Guantánamo. Lacalle Pou's running mate, Jorge Larrañaga, was unconvinced. He expressed his "perplexity" that Mujica was suddenly intent on dialogue to construct consensual majorities in the senate. "He will have to talk to rotten souls, with the nabos (pricks) and with all of those who think differently to him," Larrañaga said, pointedly selecting the insults flung at the PN party leadership by Mujica just days earlier.

Alas Uruguay

On 14 October Alas Uruguay, the airline created by the staff of Uruguay's recently bankrupted state-owned national carrier Pluna, was formally launched at an event in Montevideo's Carrasco international airport. Alas Uruguay was formed after a group of Pluna workers secured support and financial backing from the government led by President José Mujica to set up a national airline to service the domestic and regional markets ensuring Uruguay's air transport links. A company statement said that Alas Uruguay "arrives to cover the region's connectivity needs... and to contribute to the country's economic, touristic and social development". It added that the firm, which currently employs 225 people and owns four Boeing 737-300 planes, will shortly begin flying to destinations in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Paraguay.

Meanwhile, the FA presidential candidate, former president Tabaré Vázquez (2005-2010), was none too pleased with Mujica's bleak predictions of complex post-election scenarios. Vázquez was in Buenos Aires at the weekend urging Uruguayans living on the other side of the River Plate to assist him to get over the line in the first round on 26 October. More than 100,000 Uruguayans live in the Argentine capital, making it one of the most important and influential electoral districts.

Mujica waxes lyrical on free trade

"It is our fate to live in a world with 350 free trade treaties. In reality what there is least of in the world is free trade. This is paradoxical. The more treaties there are the more difficult it is to sell for those who are outside of these treaties, but when you are inside you don't have guarantees of free access to the markets with which you signed the treaty," President Mujica said during his weekly radio broadcast on 7 October.

"Brazil might be able to afford the luxury of being a fairly closed economy," Mujica went on "but Uruguay can in no way allow itself to become isolated." Mujica reiterated his commitment to the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) but also suggested that Uruguay could well seek greater flexibility to negotiate bilateral trade deals in the future rather than as a bloc.

TRACKING TRENDS

PARAGUAY | **The increasing relevance of tourism.** On 10 October the vice-president of Paraguay's association of travel agencies and tourism operators (Asatur), Osvaldo Morínigo, said that the local tourism sector now contributes some US\$350m a year to Paraguay's domestic economy, making it the country's seventh most important economic sector.

The rise in prominence of the tourism sector is encouraging news for the Paraguayan economy, which has traditionally been heavily dependent on the agricultural and energy generation sectors. This dependence means that the country's economic performance is very much dictated by these two sectors, which are liable to underperform from time to time. As it happens, last week Paraguay's central bank (BCP) decided to revise down its economic growth forecast for the year from 4.8% to 4% as a result of the weaker-than-expected performance in these two sectors on the back of lower projected energy production at the country's two main hydroelectric plants, Itaipú (shared with Brazil) and Yacretá (shared with Argentina); and lower international prices for soya, the country's main export commodity. This downwards revision brought the BCP's forecast in-line with that of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which also slashed its growth forecast for Paraguay last week in its World Economic Outlook (WEO) report.

However, at the opening of Paraguay's 2014 international tourism fair (Fitpar), Morínigo, who heads up the Fitpar organising committee, said that the tourism sector has been consistently growing in recent years, making it an increasingly important economic activity. According to Morínigo, currently some 600,000 tourists directly arrive in Paraguay each year, while an additional 2.5m visitors take a short "excursion" into Paraguay from neighbouring countries, choosing to remain there for one or two days.

Morínigo said that Asatur's goal is to carry on working with Paraguay's tourism secretariat (Sectur) to continue promoting the country as a tourism destination. This year Fitpar was attended by representatives of 10 different countries including the US, Mexico, Chile, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Uruguay. Uruguay's deputy tourism minister, Antonio Carámbula, attended Fitpar. Pointing out that some 45,000 Paraguayans now visit Uruguay every year, Carámbula said that the Paraguayan market is "a growing one and this fair is important for us".

Damaging impact of Iguala ignominy

“These events tarnish the collective and national effort to genuinely make Mexico a country of greater progress and development,” President Enrique Peña Nieto said last week as tens of thousands of demonstrators marched through Mexico City to protest against the disappearance of 43 students in Iguala, a town in the southern state of Guerrero, and the complicity of the municipal police and local officialdom with a local drug gang. Peña Nieto has met with reasonable success since coming to power in December 2012 at knocking security issues off the top of Mexico’s agenda and focusing on deep-rooted reforms to transform the country’s education, energy and telecommunications sectors, but his comments revealed just how damaging events in Guerrero could be for the national psyche not to mention his government’s efforts to alter the perception of Mexico abroad.

President Peña Nieto’s words possibly struck the wrong chord, sounding rather too like a frustrated lament for his personal efforts to propel Mexico’s reform. The raw emotion generated by the abduction and presumed massacre of the students has gripped Mexico, and the outside world. On 13 October some 500 classmates of the missing students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos rural teacher training college went on the rampage in Chilpancingo, the state capital. After their demands to see the governor of Guerrero, Ángel Aguirre, were not met, events turned violent as they began hurling rocks, burning parked cars and even set parts of the gubernatorial palace ablaze. Other groups of protesters, including the Guerrero teachers’ union (Ceteg), clashed with riot police after gaining admittance to the state congress, and set fire to the city hall.

Protesters were venting their frustration with Aguirre for dragging his feet over investigating the disappearance of the students who were arrested by municipal police in Iguala on 26 September and allegedly turned over to a local drug trafficking organisation (DTO), Guerreros Unidos. They are demanding that Aguirre resign. Arrest warrants have been issued for the mayor of Iguala, José Luis Abarca, and his wife, María de los Ángeles Pineda, whose connivance with the DTO has been the subject of detailed local press reports. They have gone into hiding.

Aguirre, meanwhile, is tenaciously clinging on to power despite rapidly eroding support. The coordinator of the federal senate bloc of the right-wing opposition Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), Jorge Luis Preciado, called on the senate on 14 October to apply Article 76 of the constitution which empowers the federal senate to remove state governors by declaring “whenever the constitutional powers of a State have disappeared, that the condition has arisen for appointing a provisional governor, who shall call elections in accordance with the constitutional laws of the said state”. Since 1954 there have only been three cases of the federal senate removing state governors and no cases since 1975.

Aguirre insisted he was not going to be pushed out by “*opino-tecnócratas*” in Mexico City “unaware of our reality [in Guerrero]”. He sent to the Guerrero state congress an initiative to create the provision for a recall referendum, which he claimed would mark “a watershed moment in the country’s history”, allowing the people of Guerrero to decide on his fate. It is difficult to imagine how, even if this initiative were approved, Aguirre would obtain sufficient public support in the recall referendum to continue.

The PAN proposal in the senate, which also won the full approval of the PAN leadership committee (CEN), could well prosper in spite of the senate president, Miguel Barbosa, belonging to Aguirre’s left-wing Partido de la

The ‘disappeared’

It is far from certain that the 43 missing students will be found. There are more than 13,000 cases of ‘disappeared’ Mexicans officially recognised, including 300 residents kidnapped in broad daylight by the drug-trafficking organisation (DTO) Los Zetas in 2011 from the town of Allende in the northern border state of Coahuila, whose whereabouts have never been ascertained.

IACHR responds

The Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IACHR) released a statement on 10 October expressing its “profound concern regarding the alleged serious acts of violence that occurred in Mexico, in which several students between the ages of 15 and 25 were killed, injured, or disappeared. The IACHR urges the Mexican State to locate the students that are still missing; to protect the life and personal integrity of the survivors, their families and representatives; to promptly, diligently, and impartially investigate these crimes; and to adopt the necessary measures to prevent similar acts in the future.” The executive secretary of the IACHR, Mexico’s Emilio Alvarez Icaza, added that “The fact that public servants intervened in a situation and then young students ended up dead is an extraordinarily grave sign”.

Revolución Democrática (PRD). The new president of the PRD, Carlos Navarrete, acutely conscious of the damage the scandal is doing to the party [WR-14-40], seems disinclined to offer support to a politician whose position is becoming untenable and who, after all, only adopted the PRD as his party after failing to win the gubernatorial nomination for the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). “This is an evaluation that the governor himself should be making now... He knows perfectly well what is happening in the state and I hope at this time he is evaluating the circumstances in his government,” Navarrete said. Hardly a ringing endorsement.

Appearing before a commission of federal deputies following the investigations on 15 October, Aguirre said the whole matter had been “politicised” and that the Guerrero state institutions were functioning perfectly adequately, meaning there was absolutely no cause for the PAN to throw the constitutional book at him.

The PAN has also called for the resignation of the federal attorney general, Jesús Murillo Karam, who is leading the investigation into the student disappearances. Murillo revealed this week that none of the bodies found in a mass grave near Iguala matched the DNA of relatives of the missing trainee teachers, but nine further mass graves have also been found. Two hired assassins apprehended by the authorities confessed that 17 students had been arrested by municipal police and handed over to Guerreros Unidos. Murillo confirmed that an additional 14 municipal police officers had been arrested, bringing the total number of detainees to 50.

TRACKING TRENDS

MEXICO | Tourism sector continues to thrive. On 12 October Mexico’s tourism ministry (Sectur) revealed that foreign tourism had generated US\$11.13m in revenues for the country in the first eight months of the year, 18.1% more than in the same period of 2013.

Although the overall level of economic activity in Mexico remains low, it appears that the tourism sector is set to have a stellar year. Citing data from Mexico’s central bank (Banxico), Sectur said that the total number of international tourists that visited the country between January and August stood at 19.3m, a “significant” 19% increase over the comparable period last year.

The figures show that the number of visitors landing in Mexico’s airports increased by 10.3% year-on-year from 8.4m to 9.3m. Meanwhile, the number of visitors crossing the land border increased by an even higher 32.6% from 6.4m to 8.5m. Of these, 81% entered Mexico driving their own cars, suggesting that the majority of visitors came from neighbouring countries.

Taking Banxico’s figures, Sectur calculates that the average amount of money spent by tourists in Mexico during the first half of the year was US\$861.4, 10.4% more than the average of US\$780 registered in the same period last year.

The solid performance of Mexico’s tourism sector helps to explain why President Enrique Peña Nieto is so keen to further promote its development by heavily investing in the country’s transport infrastructure, including his plans to build a major new international airport to serve Mexico City [WR-14-39].

The high number of recorded border crossings over land helps explain why the Peña Nieto government is also looking for ways to improve Mexico’s border crossings by increasing cooperation with its neighbours (particularly the US) in order to help operate these more efficiently so as to tackle long delays.

MEXICO | Auto production soars. Mexico’s automobile production and exports reached historic highs in the first nine months of this year, increasing by 7.5% and 8.7% respectively, compared to the same period in the previous year, according to the Mexican automotive industry association (Amia).

From January to September 2014, automotive firms produced 2.39m vehicles, an increase of 167,989 units compared to the same months in 2013. Amia specified that 83% of these units were exported (1.95m vehicles). Of this total 70.9% went to the US, 20% to Canada, 9.9% to Latin American countries, and 4.7% to Asia and the rest of the world.

Arena faces electoral backlash

Abstruse corruption cases often leave voters feeling a bit cold and do not have the impact political commentators might anticipate. Not so the allegations against former president Francisco Flores (1999-2004), of the right-wing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Arena), who recently returned to El Salvador to face charges of embezzlement and illicit enrichment for irregularities surrounding multi-million-dollar donations from Taiwan.

The Taiwanese funds were meant for public causes such as reconstruction after the two devastating earthquakes to strike El Salvador in 2001. Evidence is emerging that the funds did not just line the pockets of Flores but also made their way to other party bigwigs and, above all, were used by Arena to fund the election campaign of former president Elías Antonio Saca (2004-2009), who would go on to succeed Flores.

More and more details will come out in the forthcoming trial of Flores, who is currently being held in pre-trial detention after protests erupted outside his luxury house where he had been under house arrest for three weeks. These revelations could have serious ramifications for Arena in legislative and municipal elections in March next year.

The online publication El Faro obtained access to copies of 156 cheques used in the investigation of Flores by the attorney general's office. In a detailed piece of investigative journalism published on 2 October, El Faro argues that while Flores was arrested for the missing millions, Arena was behind their misuse.

According to the attorney general's office almost exactly US\$10m, the sum received by Flores from Taiwan for earthquake relief and to help the national police (PNC) combat a gang of kidnappers, made its way from an account in Banco Cuscatlán in Costa Rica to a network of Arena accounts, to Saca and to about a dozen party officials in his inner circle working on his election campaign between the end of 2003 and the middle of 2004. The Costa Rican account, which was opened in October 2003 by senior Arena officials, was known as the 'special Coena account' (Coena is the Arena executive committee).

El Faro claims that some US\$5.9m of cheques from the account went into Arena accounts with titles such as 'Arena casa por casa', the name of a house-by-house campaign launched by Saca, and the rest to individuals, including US\$1.35m to Élmér Charlaix, who was Saca's campaign chief and later became his private secretary.

The fact that Arena financed its election campaign with foreign money (which would later be prohibited by law in 2013) is one thing but that it did so with funds meant to benefit the victims of devastating earthquakes in order to extend the party's long stay in power is quite another. Arena has sought to distance itself from Flores, but it is difficult to see how other senior party officials, including the now-estranged Saca, can avoid facing his fate.

Several of those implicated in the misuse of the funds who responded to El Faro insisted that they were unaware of the provenance of the funds but this might not cut any ice with voters, with repercussions for Arena in next March's legislative and municipal elections.

Quijano to step aside

As if all of this were not enough encouragement for the ruling left-wing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), internal divi-

Earthquake

An earthquake measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale struck just off the coast of eastern El Salvador on 13 October. One person was killed after electricity lines fell on him.

Emergency services reported that a dozen homes in the coastal department of Usulután had been slightly damaged.

Nayib Bukele

The FMLN mayoral candidate for San Salvador, Nayib Bukele, has donated his entire mayoral salary to scholarships (the only mayor in El Salvador to do so) and has established healthcare for low-income families to be paid for by the municipality. He has strengthened social programmes and maintained a low crime rate in Nuevo Cuscatlán with only one homicide in the town since he became mayor, very rare in El Salvador.

sions have emerged in Arena over its candidate for the plum post of mayor of San Salvador. The incumbent mayor, Norman Quijano, announced on 8 October that he would not seek re-election for a third term next March. At the time Quijano presented this surprise announcement as merely the conclusion of a political cycle but three days later he hinted strongly that he had been the victim of an internal struggle and that he did not feel he could run without the full support of the Arena party hierarchy. He expressed his “sadness” that he would not even be able to “give battle” to retain his position.

Quijano has been a popular mayor of San Salvador since coming to power in 2009 in what has traditionally been a bastion of support for the FMLN. He narrowly lost the presidential elections last March to the FMLN’s Salvador Sánchez Cerén, having taken leave of absence from his mayoral duties. He will be given the consolation prize of a position on the Arena slate of candidates for the legislative assembly.

Arena’s president, Jorge Velado, announced that Edwin Victor Alejandro Zamora David would be the party’s new candidate for mayor of San Salvador. Velado said that Zamora, 56, a congressional deputy for the department of San Salvador and prominent textiles businessman who has sat on the executive committee of Anep, the country’s powerful private sector business association with which Arena has close ties, was a “renovating” figure within the party. Zamora has been openly critical of members of Coena, which the party grassroots has been demanding needs reform, especially since the party’s defeat in this year’s presidential elections.

The FMLN chose all of its candidates for mayor in the country’s 262 municipalities and deputies for the 84-seat legislative assembly at its annual conference on 31 August. Nayib Bukele, who in 2012 was elected mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán, in the department of La Libertad, will run for mayor of San Salvador. Bukele, 33, is a businessman who also worked in advertising before entering politics. He has very high approval ratings in what is a historically right-wing municipality (*see sidebar*).

CUBA | FOREIGN RELATIONS

Castro and NYT sing from the same hymn sheet

The ‘Gray Lady’, as the struggling *New York Times* (NYT) was called in its heyday, could not have asked for better publicity this week after Cuba’s former leader Fidel Castro himself responded with open arms to its editorial on 12 October entitled simply, ‘Obama should end the embargo on Cuba’.

Ernesto Londoño, who sits on the NYT’s editorial board, mused in the wake of Castro’s unexpected (and almost immediate) response to the Sunday-edition editorial that Castro’s take “was remarkable for one main reason: by quoting nearly every paragraph in the editorial, he amplified the reach of an article that included significant criticism of the Cuban government”. “Hosts of state-run radio stations read Mr. Castro’s column and discussed its content, which was a rare instance of the government’s leaders allowing the state’s tightly controlled media to discuss sensitive subjects, including political prisoners and the suspicious death of a political activist,” Londoño noted, suggesting that “by presenting the argument to a wide audience, Mr. Castro seemed eager to telegraph the message that lower-level Cuban officials have been conveying to their American counterparts in recent years: let’s talk.”

As the NYT said in its original piece: “Scanning a map of the world must give President Obama a sinking feeling as he contemplates the dismal state of troubled bilateral relationships his administration has sought to turn around. He would be smart to take a hard look at Cuba, where a major policy shift

“Given the many crises around the world, the White House may want to avoid a major shift in Cuba policy. Yet engaging with Cuba and starting to unlock the potential of its citizens could end up being among the administration’s most consequential foreign-policy legacies.”

The New York Times,
12 October 2014.

could yield a significant foreign policy success”. In his response, Castro sternly noted, however, “that in no way is this society comparable to that which Harry S. Truman bequeathed to us when his ally and great public treasury looter Fulgencio Batista took power on March 10, 1952, only 50 days after the general election. This can never be forgotten,” he stressed. (He also criticised the *NYT*’s “slandorous and cheap accusation” that the Cuban government still harasses and detains dissidents and should explain the “suspicious circumstances” surrounding the death of the political activist Oswaldo Payá).

In other words, while praising the *NYT* for its call, Fidel was reiterating the point that Cuba must be accepted by the US – and the US government – as a sovereign and equal state, and one that cannot be dictated to. This is the line that is so often repeated by Fidel’s brother and successor Raúl – Cuba is willing and open to dialogue with the US, but on equal terms only. In that sense, the Cuban position has in fact been consistent for many years now, and it is the same line it takes with other actors like the European Union (EU), with which talks on a new bilateral agreement on political dialogue and cooperation began in April.

The former Cuban leader praised the article as “obviously written with great skill, seeking the greatest benefit for U.S. policy in a complex situation, in the midst of increasing political, economic, financial and commercial problems”, which he went on to list in detail, adding at the end, “the fight against Ebola, which is threatening the health of millions of people”. On this Cuba’s state media has taken great pride in detailing the worldwide recognition for the Cuban medical presence on the ground in West Africa, which has been noted in several global media pieces in the past week.

Most Cuba watchers, however, will interpret Fidel’s response as indicative not of Cuba’s strength but of its continued vulnerability (not least as a Caribbean island) as it struggles to reinsert itself into the region and the wider global community.

TRACKING TRENDS

GUATEMALA | Stamping out illiteracy. President Otto Pérez Molina boasted last week that Zacapa had become the country’s first department to be declared free of illiteracy. Speaking in a sports centre in Zacapa, Pérez Molina said illiteracy in the eastern department had fallen to 3.3%: the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) states that any region with illiteracy below 4% can declare itself to be ‘free of illiteracy’.

Pérez Molina said that Zacapa, which has 11 municipalities and some 208,000 inhabitants, was “an example” for the other 21 departments in the country to follow. He said that Retalhuleu, Santa Rosa, Suchitepéquez, Sacatepéquez and El Progreso were “very close” to achieving this goal.

At a national level, Guatemala has cut illiteracy by more than half (from 31.67% to 15.58%) in recent years, Unesco’s representative in Guatemala, Dr Julio Carranza, said.

HONDURAS | Transparency International. President Juan Orlando Hernández signed an accord with Huguette Labelle, the president of the Berlin-based NGO Transparency International (TI), in Tegucigalpa last week aimed at institutionalising transparency, accountability and fighting corruption. TI and its Honduran chapter, Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa (ASJ), will track and monitor the implementation of the commitments undertaken by the government in the accord. Hernández celebrated “a milestone” as Honduras becomes the first country in the world to sign such an accord. “We are going to work hand in hand with Transparency International,” he said. “We want to take a significant step in transparency and for the government to be an example, so that we can ask others to act like we do and change the culture”.

Quotes of the week

“The important thing is that this is the biggest political movement since the foundation of the Republic. What was not done in 180 years, we have done in nine.”

Bolivia's President Evo Morales celebrates re-election.

“In Mexico there is no democracy. There is a simulated dictatorship which is exercised and sustained with the almost complete control of the media.”

Mexico's perennial presidential candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the leader of the left-wing Movimiento para la Regeneración Nacional (Morena).

“With the information that I have I would refuse.”

Uruguay's opposition presidential candidate Luis Alberto Lacalle Pou leaves some wiggle room over whether he would accept six Guantánamo inmates in the country.

Dominican Republic convulsed by health scandal

Dominican President Danilo Medina has moved swiftly to dismiss his health minister, Freddy Hidalgo, in the midst of a scandal at a children's hospital in Santo Domingo. There was a public outcry in the Dominican Republic after the national daily *Listín Diario* revealed that 11 children had died in the Robert Reid Cabral children's hospital in the country's capital in the space of three days between 3 and 5 October. The hospital's director, Rosa Nieves, was also fired.

Medina appointed Altagracia Guzmán Marcelino, who had been serving as director of the state national health insurance programme (Senasa) and was health minister when Medina took office in August 2012, to replace Hidalgo. Guzmán led the official commission of inquiry into what went wrong at the hospital. The commission concluded that several of the deaths, which included three newborns, were the result of medical negligence.

Medina expressed his “indignation”, saying this should “never happen again”, but the incident could dent his stratospheric popularity. The media has focused on an apparent deterioration of the health system. The hospital was placed under military control as staff, wearing black, staged protests blaming the government for cutbacks. There was a breakdown of the central oxygen system over the fatal weekend with doctors on duty forced to use manual ventilators and resuscitation. It has since emerged that the hospital owed RD\$3m (US\$69,000) to Linde Gas, its oxygen suppliers. Meanwhile, the president of the Dominican medical college (CMD), Dr Pedro Sing, said the deaths were the result of the “overwhelming” number of referrals due to inadequate primary care, adding that the health budget of 1.28% of GDP was insufficient to sustain a quality health system.

The president of the lower chamber of congress, Abel Martínez Durán, of the ruling Partido de la Liberación Dominicana (PLD), announced on 14 October the elimination of the RD\$50,000 (US\$1,150) of ‘social assistance funds’ received every month by each deputy, with all of the funds assigned in the 2015 budget for this purpose, some RD\$100m (US\$2.3m), to be channelled to hospitals and health centres in the provinces in a transparent way. Dubbed the *barrilito* (‘pork barrel’), the funds have been misused by politicians and have long been a source of public vexation. The proposal was made by Luis Abinader, of the Partido Revolucionario Moderno (PRM), a splinter group from the main opposition Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD), led by former president Hipólito Mejía (2000-2004). Given the present public mood it won unanimous approval.

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