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Ecuador's Correa turns protests on their head

Ecuador's President Rafael Correa dropped a bombshell this week by suggesting that the constitutional reform to allow indefinite presidential and legislative re-election which is about to be debated by the national assembly could include a special provision barring him from running again in February 2017. Correa made the announcement against the backdrop of national protests, the sixth against his government so far this year, and with the prospect of at least two more to come, including a general strike, before the year is out. There is no shortage of detractors convinced that this is a tactical move by Correa calculated to distract attention from and undercut support for the disparate protest movement (the unifying theme behind which is opposition to re-election reform). But Correa could be prepared to take a brief break from politics and return in 2021 when the global economic scenario is more favourable.

President Correa dropped the first hint of what he had in mind during an interview with *Telesur* on 10 November when he said that he could not see a single opposition presidential candidate who could win in 2017 and that the ruling Alianza País (AP) could run with someone other than him. Correa had said after his electoral triumph in February 2013 that he would retire from political life in 2017 only to push for a constitutional reform a year later to permit indefinite re-election for all elected posts, citing a "resurgence of the Right" in municipal elections. "The big battle [in 2017]," Correa told *Telesur* would be to preserve a majority in the national assembly to ensure the opposition could not "block and blackmail" the government. He added that "with great relief I say that there will be no need for my presence, I never wanted it, for me [the presidency] has been an effort."

Days later Correa reiterated that he was reluctantly shouldering the burden of governing, insisting that he had "never been interested in being a candidate in 2017," and that the opposition was accusing him of seeking re-election "for my own benefit because I want to perpetuate myself in power but believe me nothing could be further from the truth". Correa said he was "ready to sacrifice even my healthy vanity" by stepping aside because "we will win with another candidate in 2017." He named Vice-President Jorge Glas, former vice-president Lenin Moreno and the interior minister, José Serrano, as viable presidential candidates in his stead.

"I think that the need [for me to stand] is ever more distant because of the fragmentation of the opposition..." Correa said. What has changed to convince Correa that the Right is no longer "resurgent"? There have been more protest marches against his government in 2015 than any year since Correa took power in 2007. But Correa is right that the opposition is composed of discrete political, indigenous, labour and social organisations, and the municipal elections have not served as a springboard for a prospec-

Oil prices

President Correa was keen to attack local economic analysts who have accused his government of squandering a fortune when oil prices were at an all-time high before the recent steep decline. “At the start of the 1980s oil prices were US\$40 [per barrel], which would now be worth some US\$200,” Correa said. “You cannot compare prices now with prices before. You have to take into account the current costs of oil production.”

tive presidential candidate to emerge to challenge the AP’s dominance. The turnout for the latest national protest march, organised on 12 November by the Colectivo Nacional Unitario de Organizaciones Sociales, Indígenas y de Trabajadores, a loose amalgam of labour, indigenous and social organisations, was not on a par with August’s general strike when hostility to the government’s proposed reform of the inheritance-tax threshold helped to swell the size of the national marches, leading to 67 police officers being injured and 47 arrests made.

Jorge Herrera, the president of the indigenous organisation Conaie, said the latest march was just “a warm-up” for the main event in early December when a general strike is being organised to coincide with the national assembly’s debate of 15 constitutional amendments, including re-election. Another protest march, to the national assembly in Quito, is also planned for 26 November. “The country is going to rise up,” Herrera said. These hyperbolic claims have been made frequently over the last few months. Correa, for all his outward insouciance, might feel that by mooted the insertion of a clause that would prevent him from running again in 2017, he could strip the protesters of their unifying banner. He would also cement his legacy as a servant of his ‘Citizen’s Revolution’, becoming the first ‘progressive leftist’ head of state in the region to enact a constitutional reform on re-election from which they cannot directly benefit.

Aside from throwing the opposition off-guard, Correa could be weighing up the adverse global and domestic economic scenario which is likely to prevail in the 15 months remaining until the next presidential elections. While the latest opposition marches were taking place Correa was in Saudi Arabia attending the fourth Summit of South American countries and the Arab League (Aspa in the Spanish acronym) since the bi-regional forum was formed in 2005. Correa sought to persuade attendant members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) of the virtues of member states cutting production by just 1.6%, the equivalent of some 2m barrels per day, which he said would mean “the price would go up substantially”. Continued low oil prices will seriously constrain public spending in the run-up to the 2017 elections, complicating the task of any AP presidential candidate.

Opponents are not convinced of the sincerity of Correa’s intentions. “President Correa’s proposed provision could be a trick,” Carlos Pérez, the leader of the indigenous organisation Ecuarrunari, said. Meanwhile, Deputy Diego Salgado of the opposition Movimiento Creo said the proposal was no more than “a trial balloon”. “I find it very difficult to believe that President Rafael Correa has suddenly decided now that it was not moral or ethical to propose indefinite re-election,” he said, arguing that fully cognizant of the economic crisis facing Ecuador in 2016 Correa was conscious that his popularity would take a big hit.

There are precedents for Correa mooted standing aside in order to elicit an outpouring of support that strengthens him in the public’s eyes and ‘persuades’ him to stay on. Speaking during his weekend broadcast ‘Enlace Ciudadano’ on 14 November Correa asked those attending “Is it time for me to retire and for others to take over, yes or no?” to which he received a resounding “no”. The president of the national assembly, Gabriela Rivadeneira, meanwhile, said that while she respected his honesty “the complex global and regional context [means] President Correa’s leadership must continue”. It is worth noting that the re-election provision proposed by Correa would also preclude deputies who have served two consecutive terms from standing in 2017, affecting 40 AP deputies.

Keeping the opposition second guessing looks like the main motive for Correa’s announcement. He also said that if the opposition sought to make the country ungovernable for his successor he would stand again in 2021: “the terror of Correa returning again should mean they behave well enough.”

US relations under pressure again

A testy week involving US applause for the searing review of Venezuela's current political and electoral scene by the secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS), and an embarrassing incident involving the arrest (or 'kidnapping') in Haiti of two close relatives of Venezuela's First Lady for conspiring to traffic drugs to the US, came to a head with allegations of US government spying on senior Venezuelan state oil-sector executives.

It was all too much for President Nicolás Maduro, who on 18 November said he had ordered Foreign Minister Delcy Rodríguez to begin "a full review" of Venezuela's relations with the US following the newly publicised allegations, via the whistleblower Edward Snowden, that the US National Security Agency (NSA) had spied on the state oil company Petróleos de Venezuela (Pdvsa) for over a decade. Calling the alleged espionage "a violation of international law", Maduro declared, "I have ordered an investigation. I have ordered the foreign minister...to deliver a protest note to the US chargé d'affaires and...to begin a full review of relations with the government of the United States".

The source report, co-written for the website *The Intercept* by the Brazil-based US author, journalist and lawyer Glenn Greenwald, a close associate of Snowden's, makes the point that the NSA information gathering on Pdvsa was part and parcel of its vast operations worldwide and that the NSA "unbeknownst to itself, was collecting sensitive communications of top Venezuelan oil officials". However, the article goes on to ask if the fact that from about 2010 the NSA had obtained, apparently in a more targeted manner (and by ratcheting up warrantless surveillance), access to the electronic communications networks of senior Pdvsa officials such as the former president of the firm and energy minister Rafael Ramírez, for a decade (2004-2014) Venezuela's 'oil czar', "raises the question of whether the agency's spying has secretly aided the criminal investigations into corruption as well as other [US] government actions targeting the company".

Certainly, this is the understanding of the Maduro government, which believes that recent 'unfriendly' actions – including sanctions in 2011 against Pdvsa, President Barack Obama's controversial March 2015 executive order against Venezuela (which, while targeting specific government-linked officials for human-rights abuses, declared Venezuela a threat to US national security), a same-month money laundering finding by the US Treasury Department also implicating Venezuelan officials, an October *Wall Street Journal* report alleging that a major US investigation is underway into corruption at Pdvsa, and the arrest (last week) of two alleged nephews of the First Lady Cilia Flores on conspiracy to traffic cocaine into the US – are all deliberately targeted actions aimed at undermining the Socialist government ahead of the critical legislative elections on 6 December. (Venezuela latterly has also accused the US coastguard of invading its airspace, a charge immediately refuted.)

The espionage report – also carried by the pro-government Venezuelan news outlet *Telesur* – suits Maduro's narrative of Venezuelan sovereignty being under sustained attack by an imperial US keen on controlling the country's huge oil reserves. "This is a massive attack on the oil industry, a vertebral column of the homeland. It is unacceptable...The US government wants to control our oil, to bring Venezuela to its knees...it will never happen," he continued.

Syria

Condemning the Paris attacks on his weekly TV show, the head of the national assembly, Diosdado Cabello, expressed support for the Russian government's strategy of bombing, along with Syrian government forces, rebel camps in Syria. "It seems that they [Western governments] are realising that they should have been doing that for a while now, instead of bombing the Syrian government. The enemy is not the Syrian government," Cabello stated.

Oil

The Venezuelan oil basket this week hit a new low of US\$34.55/barrel. Central bank international reserves also fell to a new low, at US\$14.7bn as of 17 November.

While in September 2013 the director of US National Intelligence, James Clapper, admitted in the wake of the NSA scandal in Brazil (in which Brazil's oil company Petrobras apparently also was targeted) that the US does conduct economic espionage, he insisted that, "What we do not do, as we have said many times, is use our foreign intelligence capabilities to steal the trade secrets of foreign companies on behalf of — or give intelligence we collect to — US companies to enhance their international competitiveness or increase their bottom line".

That does not wash with many critical observers. For instance, the US-based Venezuela expert Professor Miguel Tinker Salas, who took a benign view of the Bolivarian Revolution in its early days, only to turn slightly more critical in recent years, told *The Intercept*, "It is difficult to imagine that the [US] sanctions [against Pdvs] and the ongoing dispute with Exxon [over the nationalisation of its operations in Venezuela] are not connected." Mark Weisbrot, co-director of the left-leaning Washington-based Center for Economic and Policy Research and a well-known supporter of the Caracas government, was more frank, saying that US actions against the Venezuelan government ahead of the elections have amounted to "a full-court press".

Neither the US embassy nor the State Department have commented on the espionage reports. A State Department spokesman, Mark Toner, on 13 November said that the case involving the First Lady's nephews was "strictly a law enforcement matter" and that the Venezuelan consul general had been in touch with US law enforcement officials.

Efraín Antonio Campo Flores, 29, and Franqui Flores de Freitas, 30, were charged with one count of drug trafficking on 12 November following their arrest by local anti-narcotics officers in Haiti and subsequent removal to New York by officials from the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The indictment, as per the Southern District Court of New York (Manhattan), accuses the men of conspiring to import "five kilograms [11lb] and more of mixtures and substances containing a detectable amount of cocaine" to the US, albeit it had been reported that the pair had contacted an undercover US agent in Honduras about shipping 800kgs to the US. They arrived in Haiti on 10 November on a plane with four others, none of whom were detained. It has since been reported that the pilot was a Venezuelan air force official. The two were travelling on diplomatic passports, although Toner said, "We don't believe these individuals have diplomatic immunity". Venezuela's consul general in New York said it would lodge a protest note, alleging irregularities in the DEA-led operation.

While Maduro and Flores have remained tight-lipped about the case, the head of the national assembly, Diosdado Cabello, has not, accusing the US of kidnapping the pair and suggesting that the sting forms part and parcel of the US 'conspiracy' against Venezuela. While not denying that the two were related to Flores, Cabello quipped that they "are grown men who can do what they want in life". How they got diplomatic passports, however, has not been answered. For many years, Flores, a powerful figure in the ruling Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) who preceded Cabello as president of the legislature and is seeking to take up a seat in the house again in the 6 December elections, has been accused of nepotism, allegedly placing dozens of family members and associates in cushy positions throughout the government.

The latest events will be used for political purposes by both sides in Venezuela ahead of the elections. While Maduro spouts the usual nationalist rhetoric about US designs on Venezuela, the opposition Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD) was quick to call for a congressional commission of enquiry into the case of the First Lady's relatives.

Colorados, and Cartes, big losers in elections

“The best government in Asunción’s history.” That is what journalist Mario Ferreiro promised after inflicting a resounding defeat on the ruling Asociación Nacional Republicana–Partido Colorado (ANR-PC) in the municipal elections in the Paraguayan capital on 15 November. The ANR-PC has held the mayoralty of Asunción, the country’s second most important elected post, since 2001, but its loss was not only a serious setback for the party (which was also defeated in other populous mayoralties). The ANR-PC’s incumbent mayor of Asunción, Arnaldo Samaniego, had received rhetorical and financial backing from President Horacio Cartes in his re-election bid. As such, Samaniego’s defeat constitutes a heavy blow to Cartes’s own re-election ambitions in 2018.

“Help me to change Asunción,” Ferreiro said during a victory speech which saw him promise greater accountability, a crackdown on tax evasion and a focus on neglected poor neighbourhoods in the capital. Ferreiro, who ran for Juntos Podemos, a left-leaning coalition of some 14 parties and the main opposition Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico (PLRA), defeated Samaniego comfortably by 51% to 41%. Samaniego’s sister, Lilian, is president of the ANR-PC and the family is closely associated with President Cartes.

Painful losses

The elections were not an unmitigated disaster for the ANR-PC. The party actually won more of Paraguay’s 250 municipalities than in 2010, and will control nearly 60% of these (145) until 2020, but it lost the more densely populated ones including five departmental capitals (*see sidebar*). The results (which are yet to be made official as formal challenges have to be resolved by the electoral authorities) suggest that the party was subject to a “punishment vote” by its own supporters as individual candidates from the party tarnished by corruption allegations were punished at the polls.

By contrast, although the main opposition PLRA will now control 80 municipalities, eight fewer than before, it won a higher proportion of votes at the national level than in 2010 after taking six departmental capitals and practically sweeping the board in Central department, the country’s most populous with six of the country’s 10 largest cities that make up the Greater Asunción metropolitan area, home to the single largest mass of voters (1.07m). The PLRA won in 13 of Central’s 19 municipalities with the ANR-PC retaining only six. Similarly, smaller opposition parties also made some gains with the main leftist coalition, Frente Guasú, winning two more municipalities than the single one it won in 2010 and the right-wing opposition Unión Nacional de Ciudadanos Éticos (Unace) adding one more municipality to the two it won in 2010. Indeed, 25 municipalities were won by smaller parties, higher than the 17 they held in 2010.

While the gains made by the smaller parties came at the expense of both the ANR-PC and the PLRA, the former suffered the most painful losses (and more often than not at the hands of its traditional rival). Among these are the losses in some traditional ANR-PC strongholds such as Ypacaraí (Central department), which has long been under the control of prominent party figurehead Senator Juan Carlos ‘Calé’ Galaverna, whose son Juan Carlos ‘Nano’ Galaverna, was defeated by a PLRA candidate. Similarly, the ANR-PC lost control of Caacupé, the capital of Cordillera department, to the PLRA, for the first time. The surprise win of Luis Yd Sánchez of the small centre-right Partido Patria Querida in the traditional ANR-PC stronghold of Encarnación, the capital of Itapúa department and national tourism centre, was another heavy blow for the ruling party.

Departmental capitals

It is interesting to note that of the five departmental capitals lost by the ANR-PC only one, Caacupé, went to the main opposition PLRA. Others such as Encarnación (Itapúa department) Salto del Guairá (Canindeyú) and Villa Hayes (Presidente Hayes) went to smaller parties and alliances.

Opposition success

The better-than-expected results for the opposition – in particular the PLRA – in the municipal elections should provide food for thought for opposition leaders ahead of the 2018 general elections. Indeed, as PLRA Senator Luis Alberto Wagner said, the success of the PLRA's alliance with the Left in Asunción could lead the two sides to join forces once again and present a single presidential candidate in the 2018 elections as they did in 2008, when the ANR-PC was defeated for the first time since the return to democracy with the victory of Fernando Lugo (2008-2012).

The ANR-PC did manage to hang on to some key seats although there are questions over some of these. Albino Ferrer, the controversial ANR-PC mayor of San Lorenzo (Central department), the country's third largest city, won re-election. But he faces serious accusations of misuse of public funds, illicit enrichment and influence trafficking. The presentation of formal charges failed to prevent Ferrer from standing for re-election but the opposition hopes that if he is found guilty he may be stripped of the mayoralty. Sandra McLeod also secured re-election in Ciudad del Este, the capital of Alto Paraná department and the country's second largest city. However, her rival from the PLRA, Oscar González Drakeford, has denounced irregularities in the vote count and formally challenged the results on the grounds that there was electoral fraud.

Given these results it is not surprising that the ANR-PC party leadership, in particular from the dissident anti-*Cartista* factions, have called for a serious post-mortem. Senator Mario Abdo Benítez, the president of congress and leader of the anti-*Cartistas*, has said that results were "painful" for the party and that "we are all responsible". But in an indirect swipe at Cartes and the *Cartista* party leadership, Benítez added that, "The ANR-PC needs to have proposals attractive to all...people are stricter now and the ANR-PC must improve the electoral process by presenting candidates that can inspire trust in people". Fellow anti-*Cartista* Senator Galaverna was more blunt. He called on the party leadership to resign in the face of the electoral "failure". When asked about the party's prospects for 2018, Galaverna said "The Colorado party is evidently in crisis and we need to get back on course".

Cartes had actively participated in, and personally bankrolled, the campaigns of not only Samaniego in Asunción but also several other party candidates who suffered defeats. This prompted local political analyst Gustavo Bécker to suggest that "Cartes and his allies will now have to review their electoral projects ahead of 2018. The political landscape has changed...Cartes will now have to set aside his arrogant attitude and engage in dialogue with dissidents. He can no longer assume the attitude that 'I have the money, I call the shots'."

But while this message will resound in the corridors of power, lending weight to anti-*Cartistas* opposed to a constitutional amendment to enable Cartes to stand for re-election, this was not just a referendum on the President. These were local elections often fought on local concerns, and there was a sense that voters have become more prepared to discriminate between candidates and parties. It was noteworthy, for instance, that this was the first time that re-election had been permitted. Many voters might have been prepared to back the ANR-PC in Asunción but did not want Samaniego to remain as mayor for another term.

Guerrilla group wiped out

The pain of the electoral setback for President Cartes was partially offset by a significant security breakthrough the very next day. On 16 November the leader of the small guerrilla group Agrupación Campesina Armada (ACA), Alfredo Jara Larrea, was killed along with three comrades in an operation carried out by the joint military and police task force (FTC) in the district of Yby Yaú in the north-eastern department of Concepción.

Paraguay's interior minister, Francisco de Vargas, hailed the operation as "the most important ever against terrorism [in Paraguay]" as it had resulted in the "decapitation" of the ACA. Mariano López Velázquez, the ACA's deputy leader, and Antonio Ovelar González, third in the line of command, were among the four guerrillas killed.

The ACA only formed last year as a splinter group from the Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo (EPP), against which the Cartes administration has had more modest success. The EPP released a video the day after the successful FTC operation against the ACA to show that it is still very much alive and kicking.

Macri with the edge

Given how wide of the mark Argentina's pollsters were in the first round of the presidential election, it is worth taking their predictions with a pinch of salt. Nevertheless, there is a consensus among those who monitor public opinion that Mauricio Macri, the opposition candidate from the Cambiemos coalition, is likely to beat Daniel Scioli, from the ruling Frente para la Victoria (FPV, *Kirchneristas*) faction of the Partido Justicialista (PJ, Peronist) party on 22 November. Latest polls put Macri around eight percentage points ahead of Scioli.

Two very different visions of Argentina are at stake. Though both candidates began the second round seeking to claim the centre ground while accusing their opponent of extremism, there is a clear choice facing voters. At least, Macri has staked out some solid proposals, which Scioli has opposed vigorously. For instance, Macri has promised to lift all foreign currency controls and request the resignation of the central bank president, Alejandro Vanoli (*see box below*), as soon as he takes office. Scioli, who has flirted with the idea of a gradual lifting of the controls, has consequently accused Macri of planning a maxi currency devaluation.

Similarly, Scioli has also backtracked on his earlier suggestions that his economic team would consider phasing out subsidies, estimated to cost some 5% of GDP for the treasury, for those who could afford it. In recent weeks, he has emphasised that subsidies are here to stay should he win the presidency. "They will be maintained because we need to boost salaries, especially those of the middle classes, in order to keep consumption up," he said on 17 November. "Macri's austerity will start with the middle classes."

Macri has been increasingly assertive about his willingness to dismantle some of the key pillars of the *Kirchnerista*-era economic programme. On 17 November he said that he would bring to an end the 'Cuidados' price watch measures instigated by the government of President Cristina Fernández which fixed the prices of around 300 basic goods to ensure they went unaffected by the country's rampant levels of inflation. Macri insisted that the programme was a "lie" and that under his presidency such an arrangement would not be necessary as he would ensure inflation is under control.

On foreign policy, Macri has also been more outspoken than Scioli. Most notably, he has been highly critical of Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro who, Macri argues, "persecutes journalists". He was also sceptical about the transition underway in Cuba, saying that while he welcomes the apparent opening of the country to more democratic values, he would be critical of any backsliding.

Debate

In an unprecedented event for Argentina, the two candidates held a head-to-head televised debate on 15 November, which was watched by an estimated 5m viewers. Neither of the two candidates came seriously unstuck in the hour-long affair, leading many commentators to suggest that Macri had won, as Scioli failed to challenge his lead. While Scioli appeared more uptight, and resorted to fairly extreme language to criticise Macri, the Cambiemos candidate appeared more relaxed. An online poll by the Macri-supporting newspaper *Clarín* found that 65% of viewers believed the opposition candidate had won.

In one of the sharpest exchanges, Scioli accused Macri of planning a devaluation that would lower Argentines' living standards. Macri landed a blow by

Pope's message

At a press conference in the Vatican, the *DyN* news agency asked Pope Francis for a message for Argentines ahead of Sunday's vote. In response, the pontiff said, "You already know what I think. Vote with your conscience."

Government congressional victory

On 17 November congress narrowly failed to overturn a presidential veto which blocked an increase in salaries for the judiciary, which would have cost the treasury an extra R\$36.2bn (US\$9.4bn) between 2015 and 2019. Two hundred and fifty-one deputies voted to overturn the veto, but it needed a congressional majority of 257. Members of the ruling Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) celebrated the vote.

questioning the Fernández government's scarcely credible statistics. This forced Scioli to insist that if elected president he would be his own man, a tacit recognition of the widespread belief that Fernández would continue to pull the strings behind the scenes in any future FPV presidency.

Writing for *La Política Online*, journalist Ignacio Fidanza made a key point: although the debate was close, and could have been described as a draw, given that he was coming from behind, Scioli needed "to demolish his opponent...and he wasn't able to do that".

Macri picks a fight over central bank governor

Weeks of allegations and arguments over the central bank president, Alejandro Vanoli, finally culminated in a raid on the offices of Argentina's central bank (BCRA) on 17 November. Accused by the opposition of selling dollar reserves at below futures markets rates, Vanoli had given numerous interviews defending both his personal integrity and his right to continue in the position whoever wins the election on 22 November. But now it appears Vanoli has accepted that his hold on the governorship may become untenable in the event of a Macri victory.

Macri has made no bones about his desire to see Vanoli gone. The central bank president was appointed by President Cristina Fernández for a five-year term in 2014 and is considered a loyal *Kirchnerista*. Added to this, in recent weeks senior members of Macri's Cambiemos coalition have accused Vanoli of selling future dollars at higher than the official exchange rate but lower than the price for future dollars paid in international markets, potentially risking millions of dollars worth of the BCRA's already diminished stock of reserves.

On 18 November, Judge Claudio Bonadio, the judge who ordered the raid on the bank's offices, said he was analysing whether Vanoli "indiscriminately sold future dollars based on an exchange rate estimate that could not be attained...thereby defrauding the state". In response, the BCRA complained about the interruptions to its operations and insisted that the accusations were groundless and based only on a desire to gain political advantage.

Nevertheless, Vanoli appears to have accepted that despite his five-year appointment, he is unlikely to stay on under a President Macri. In an interview on 16 November, he said, "there cannot be a divorce between the policies promoted by the president of the republic and the central bank...so, if the proposal is to devalue by 50% and I don't agree, I will not cling onto the post."

BRAZIL | POLITICS & ENVIRONMENT

Counting the cost of the Mariana disaster

On her visit to the site of the dams that burst above the district of Bento Rodrigues, President Dilma Rousseff compared the scale of the tragedy to BP's Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. Eleven people are now confirmed dead and a further 12 are still missing, presumed dead, after 50m cubic metres of toxic sludge broke through the dam on 5 November. With the residue from the iron-ore mine connected to the dams oozing down the Rio Doce, hundreds of thousands of Brazilians have lost their main water supply. Only now is the scale of the environmental catastrophe coming into focus, and the pressure is growing on both the mining companies responsible and the regulators to respond adequately.

On 16 November, the dam owner, Samarco, a joint venture between the Anglo-Australian mining giant BHP Billiton, and Vale, the Brazilian mining firm, agreed with federal and state prosecutors to pay out R\$1bn in emergency mitigation actions, clean-up costs and compensations. Brazil's public ministry, however, was adamant that this represented only a preliminary payment, and was entirely separate from the R\$250m fine already levelled

Water supply

The mudslide continued down the Rio Piracicaba and entered the Rio Doce in Ipatinga. This mudslide affected the water supply systems of numerous cities along the way, including Governador Valadares in Minas Gerais and Colatina and Linhares in Espírito Santo, before reaching the Atlantic Ocean. Virtually all aquatic life was wiped out along a 500km stretch of the river.

on the company by Ibama, the federal environmental agency. Technical specialists sent to the area estimate the total cost of the disaster may run to R\$14bn (US\$3.6bn). Already, the deputy attorney general of the republic, Sandra Cureau, said the firm must face “exemplary punishment” due to their “negligence” over the disaster.

No siren alarm system existed and the only warnings came by cell phones to residents. The principal of the small public school was warned by her husband when the dam broke and she and her colleagues were able to get all 57 students to leave the school building and run to high ground just in time. Prosecutors are trying to ascertain what caused the two dams to break.

The seismological laboratory at the Universidade de Brasília has stated that there were some small scale earth quakes recorded prior to the dams bursting. But there are doubts whether this was the real cause. Rumours persist that Vale may have diverted dangerously excessive amounts of water into the tailings pond, used for the collection of iron-ore residue and kept in check by the dams.

There are also now serious concerns over the other dams in Brazil. On 16 November Samarco’s head of structural projects, Germano Lopes, said there was a risk of other dams in the complex breaking. “We are taking the necessary emergency action,” he said. A report in *O Globo* this week found that there are 389 dams which block reservoirs filled with mining run-off and 19 of them are considered “high risk”. The dam that burst in Minas Gerais was considered “medium-risk” and Brazil has a further 168 barriers in this category. *O Folha de São Paulo* revealed that the national mineral production department had only spent 13.2% of its funds in the 2015 budget for “inspections” of mining activities, including disaster prevention.

Questions are now being raised about the mining bill currently making its way through congress. The bill’s main sponsor, Leonardo Quintão, a deputy from the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB), told the local media that he would monitor Samarco closely to ensure the company paid its fine in a timely fashion. Quintão also insisted that there would now be changes to the bill, which has been awaiting congressional approval since 2013, to deal specifically with safety measures and what to do with iron ore residue.

However, environmental activists in Brazil have been pointing out that the close relationship between mining companies and political parties mean any reform is likely to be cosmetic. Quintão received over R\$1.8m in campaign donations from mining companies in his 2014 election campaign. Vale was also one of the biggest campaign donors to both President Rousseff and her main rival, Aécio Neves, in last year’s presidential elections. Meanwhile, the mayor of Mariana says the town relies on mining revenue for 80% of its tax take.

Impeachment threat recedes, until next year

Eduardo Cunha, the speaker of the federal lower chamber of congress, has admitted that the chances of initiating an impeachment process against President Dilma Rousseff this year are extremely low.

Following the decision of the main opposition party, the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), to publicly criticise and break with Cunha over numerous allegations of corruption, the house speaker has softened his tone towards the ruling left-wing Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), much to the dismay of the more militant members of the anti-PT protest movement. Conscious that his best chance of not losing his mandate for lying to congress over his secret Swiss bank accounts now rests with the government and its allies, rather than the opposition, Cunha used the occasion of the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB) congress in Brasília this week to downplay the probability of impeachment.

Bachelet bounces

President Michelle Bachelet's supporters may be getting themselves over-excited. Writing for the national daily *La Tercera*, blogger Andrés Benítez makes the simple point that Bachelet still has plenty more disapprovers than approvers. "Despite the change in trend, most people still think this is a bad government," he says.

At a dinner with PMDB deputies, Cunha told his fellow party members that the will to impeach Rousseff, both among the public and in congress had lost its force, according to Hildo Rocha, one of the deputies present. Although the desire for impeachment might return if congress votes to endorse the financial ombudsman's rejection of the government's 2014 accounts, such a vote is not likely to happen in 2016. Meanwhile Cunha will find out if congress' ethics committee is to move ahead with charges against him on 24 November.

Many political analysts believe that if Rousseff can survive until 2016, she is likely to last the rest of her mandate. Municipal elections are due next year, and the preparations for them are likely to occupy most of the country's politicians.

CHILE | POLITICS

Is Bachelet getting her mojo back?

Opinion polls rarely tell the full story, but the latest could denote an important turning point for President Michelle Bachelet. A survey by Plaza Pública Cadem released this week showed Bachelet's approval rating had climbed two percentage points to 27% on the previous week. On 4 November Adimark published the results of its regular monthly opinion poll, showing that for the first time since January Bachelet's approval rating had improved in a statistically significant way. In October, Adimark said, Bachelet's approval rating rose four percentage points to 29%.

Needless to say there is divided counsel on how to interpret these numbers. Another opinion poll, by Universidad Diego Portales (UDP), shows President Bachelet still losing popularity. However there are good reasons to take the Adimark numbers in particular seriously: its surveys are regarded as credible; the UDP survey is a once-a-year affair.

Bachelet's disapproval rating in the Adimark survey dropped by three percentage points on the preceding month to 67%. It now looks like Bachelet's worst month, with the lowest approval rate (24%) and the highest disapproval rate (72%) was in August.

The detail of the Adimark survey offered some tantalising hints as to what may be happening. There were pronounced increases in Bachelet's ratings for "dealing with a crisis", "being active and energetic" and "inviting trust". Her approval ratings increased among those defining themselves as left-wing (rising to 50%) or independent (to 24%), while they fell among those defining themselves as right-wing (to 12%). Some say Bachelet is finally emerging from under the shadow of the various corruption scandals that have dogged her, and that her image was helped by the government's response to the earthquake in September.

Writing for the national daily *La Tercera*, blogger Andrés Benítez suggested the numbers showed Bachelet was rebuilding her appeal to her natural constituency of those on the Left, low income earners, and women. Sociologist Eugenio Trioni argued that Bachelet is re-establishing a leadership role with which she feels comfortable. He cited her cabinet reshuffle, her decision not to attend the annual dinner with business lobby Sofofa and her success, against opposition, in imposing her chosen candidate, Jorge Abbott, as the new national prosecutor, as signs that she is now more "empowered".

Government officials say they are stepping up Bachelet's "field visits" around the country so as to get the message out. But Bachelet's reforms, particularly in education, still face an uphill struggle. Her challenge is to consolidate her core supporters but reach out more to independents and those in the political centre. That remains a difficult task.

Prospecting for oil in Paraguayan Chaco

On 16 November Paraguay's deputy mining & energy minister, Mauricio Bejarano, said that Peruvian oil company Olympic Perú INC, which operates under the name Zeus OL SA in Paraguay, plans to drill two oil wells in the country's western Chaco region in 2016. According to Bejarano, after concluding a 2D seismic study on a surface area of 1,200 hectares in the departments of Boquerón and Alto Paraguay, Olympic Perú "intends to start drilling next year.... They will drill two wells and evaluate shortly after whether they are able to continue or not". Olympic will thus join other firms such as Britain's President Energy, and the US's Crescent Global Oil, which have been prospecting for oil in Paraguay's Chaco, and made some minor oil discoveries in the last few years.

CHILE | Seeking a trade agreement with the Philippines. On 16 November the Chilean government led by President Michelle Bachelet released a statement announcing that it had signed a letter of intent (LOI) with the Philippines' government led by President Benigno Aquino III concerning the start of "negotiations over a free trade agreement [FTA]" between the two countries in 2016, the year which will mark the 70th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations in July 1946.

Although Chile has in place some 60 FTA's with its trading partners and as one of the original proponents of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) Pacific Rim area FTA it is seen as one of the leading promoters of the establishment of closer trade ties between Latin America and the Asia-Pacific area, the Philippines is one of the few Asia-Pacific countries with which it currently does not have an FTA. Nevertheless, bilateral Chile-Philippines trade reached US\$182m last year according to official figures. In particular, Chile's foreign ministry has noted that, with a population of 94m, the Philippines is an attractive market for Chilean food and agricultural exports.

The signing of the letter coincided with President Bachelet's official two-day State visit to the Philippines, the first by a Chilean head of state in 17 years. Commenting on the LOI, following a meeting she held with Aquino in Manila, Bachelet said that her government's objective was to continue to deepen trade ties with the Asia-Pacific region by signing an FTA with the Philippines. "We want to start this process to see if we can reach an agreement," Bachelet said, adding that "We will work really hard for this to see if we can start the negotiations next year".

Bachelet highlighted that there is also space to develop bilateral cooperation in various areas including public policy, natural disasters, mining, agriculture and environmental issues, revealing that she had signed a memorandum of understanding over natural disaster and emergency relief cooperation with Aquino.

Later, during a business conference Bachelet organised ahead of the start of the XXIII Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec)'s Economic Leaders Meeting, held in Manila on 18-19, Bachelet said that her government would continue to push for closer relations with Asia, noting that following the signing of the TPP, Chile has now applied to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), the first non-Asian nation to do so. "We would like to count on its support, listen to its experience and receive its advice," Bachelet said.

Bachelet also noted that, along with her, the presidents of the three other Pacific Alliance countries (Mexico, Peru and Colombia) would for the first time all attend the Apec meeting after Chile, Mexico and Peru convinced the Philippines to extend an invitation to non-Apec member Colombia, in another sign of the efforts to shore up Latin American-Asia-Pacific trade ties. According to figures presented by the Pacific Alliance leaders at the Apec meeting, 25% of Apec fruit imports come from the Pacific Alliance, as well as 23% of its copper imports and 13% of its automobile imports. This as Apec countries currently account for 58.4% of Colombian exports, 43% of Peruvian exports and 65% of Chilean exports.

BRAZIL | Brazil and Norway aim to deepen economic relations. On 16 November, Norway's Crown Prince Haakon met Brazil's Vice-President Michel Temer in Brasilia at the start of a six-day official visit to Brazil, and the two expressed a willingness to deepen bilateral trade relations, particularly in the oil sector and environmental protection. In a joint press conference, Temer affirmed that "Brazil considers the strengthening of economic ties with Norway as a priority". The heir to the Norwegian throne said that both countries are "important oil producers" and that there are other economic sectors that can be exploited jointly by Brazil and Norway.

According to Temer, in the last decade, trade between Norway and Brazil increased by 145%, reaching US\$1.8bn in 2014. There are currently 150 Norwegian companies present in Brazil. Following his meeting with Temer, on 17 November, the Norwegian prince went to Rio de Janeiro, where he delivered a speech to business owners, and paid a visit to the centre of investigations of Brazil's state-owned oil firm, Petrobras. He travelled on to Belém, Pará state, to visit the sites of various development projects funded by the Amazon Fund, a Brazilian governmental campaign raising donations to invest in efforts preventing, monitoring and combating deforestation, to which Norway has contributed approximately US\$1bn, equivalent to 96% of the Fund.

Standing firm in overhaul of education system

The federal government moved one step closer to the implementation of its far-reaching education reform last weekend when some 45,000 teachers undertook performance appraisals in the form of tests in 26 of Mexico's 32 federal entities. The results of the tests will be announced on 15 February 2016 when high-flying teachers can expect to receive a significant salary boost and perks as part of a wholesale change of the education system from a system based on patronage to a merit-based incentive system. The combative teachers' union Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (CNTE), resistant to this challenge to its power, had scant success in disrupting the day but the real test for the government will come when it attempts to stage the exams in the remaining states where the CNTE's influence is greatest over the coming weekends.

The federal education minister, Aurelio Nuño, said the day had been a "success" with 98% of registered teachers sitting the exam. Nuño said that those teachers who were registered to take the exam at the weekend but failed to do so would be separated from their posts. Nuño provided them with a ready excuse, however, by stressing that if their failure to attend was down to external pressure being brought to bear on them by the CNTE they would be able to apply to take the test at an "extraordinary date" in the near future. He added that they should come directly to the education ministry and reveal the intimidation suffered at the hands of the CNTE.

Nuño revealed details of the incentives which would be provided for those teachers who excel in the tests. An 'excellent' grade would see a teacher's salary jump by 35% and they would receive credits from the Instituto de Seguridad y Servicios Sociales de los Trabajadores del Estado (ISSSTE), the State social security provider, for housing and personal support, as well as a guaranteed job for four years.

A 'good' result would also provide a teacher with job security for four years as well as access to professional teacher training in order to improve and receive more benefits. There will also be a 'sufficient' result. Those who fail the exam three times in a row will be taken out of the classroom but will not lose their job. Instead, they will have to undergo training to reach the minimum requisite standard.

Nuño said that the government would be "firm" with all those challenging the process, insisting that there was no going back on the reform. The CNTE had limited success in obstructing the staging of the exams last weekend, despite Sección 9 of the teachers' union attempting to disrupt them by protesting outside one of the centres in the Distrito Federal (DF), but the next two weekends will provide a much sterner test of the federal government's resolve.

For logistical reasons the exams in the states of Michoacán, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Guerrero, Nuevo León and Querétaro, where the CNTE can exert the greatest influence, were postponed. This is to enable the federal police to surround the buildings where they are due to be held to prevent interference from protest action planned by the CNTE, especially the union's most militant wing, Sección 22 in Oaxaca, led by Rubén Núñez.

IMF cuts**growth forecast**

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has cut its economic growth forecast for Mexico for 2015 from 2.3% to 2.2% citing low national oil production and weaker US demand which it said would adversely affect the manufacturing sector. The IMF also cut its forecast for 2016 domestic GDP growth by three decimals to 2.5%. The IMF's previous forecasts were only made last month during its annual assembly, held in Lima.

Unemployment
Unemployment in the third quarter stood at 4.6%, the national statistics institute (Inegi) reported this week. This is down from 5.2% in the same period in 2014. Underemployment increased from 8.1% to 8.5% over the same period.

Authorities hit CJNG

The second-in-command of the *Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG), along with three other members of the drug-trafficking organisation (DTO), was arrested on 18 November by federal security forces, the commissioner of the federal police, Enrique Galindo, reported.

Iván Casarín Molina or Víctor Hugo Delgado Renetría (the CJNG's number two is known by both names) was arrested in the municipality of Tlajomulco de Zúñiga in the western state of Jalisco. Galindo said the arrests were the culmination of six months of intelligence work. A week earlier, a CJNG leader in the state of Guanajuato, Martín 'El Cebollón' Navarro Escutia, was arrested.

TRACKING TRENDS

MEXICO | Industrial production increases. National industrial production increased by 1.4% year-on-year in September, Mexico's national institute of statistics (Inegi) said in a report published last week.

According to the Inegi report the increase came on the back of a solid 3.9% jump in activity in the electrical energy generation, transmission & distribution and water and gas provision sub-sector. Meanwhile, activity in the construction sub-sector increased by 3.7% and activity in the manufacturing sub-sector increased by 2.6%. By contrast, activity in Mexico's mining sub-sector fell by 5.2%.

The increase in industrial production in September provides a timely boost for Mexico's domestic economy, which is registering lacklustre growth, albeit more impressive than many of the other large economies in the region.

Inegi reported that industrial production has been slowing down in general in 2015. From January to September, industrial production increased by 1.2%, compared to a 2.4% increase during the same period last year. Indeed, Inegi's seasonally adjusted figures for September paint a less encouraging picture as they show that industrial production in the month increased by only a marginal 0.4%.

MEXICO | Price of Mexican crude hits record low. On 18 November Mexico's state-owned oil company, Pemex, calculated that the price paid for Mexican crude abroad had fallen to US\$33.28 per barrel (/b). This represents the lowest price for Mexican crude since 30 December 2008, when its price was estimated at US\$33.38/b. The average price paid so far this year for Mexican crude is US\$46.17/b, according to Pemex.

Luis Miguel Labardini, a partner at financial and business development company Marcos y Asociados, told the Mexican daily *El Universal* that the decline in the price of Mexican crude was partly due to the US market which "continues to produce a volume of oil generating an excessive supply". Labardini added that the lower demand for oil from China and other Asian countries was also a factor behind the falling price.

Last month, Mexico's deputy finance minister, Fernando Aportela, stated that the low oil production stemming from lower oil export prices has had a negative impact of -0.4 percentage points on the country's GDP.

MEXICO | ICA contracted to modernise Tula refinery. On 18 November Mexican construction company Ingenieros Civiles Asociados (ICA) confirmed that it has signed a US\$1.1bn contract with Mexico's state-owned oil company, Pemex, to carry out the modernisation of the Tula oil refinery, located in Hidalgo state.

"The project is an important step to improve Pemex's competitiveness. We are proud to be able to support the company in the development of strategic projects that the country needs," Juan Carlos Santos Fernández, ICA's general director, said.

Once the modernisation plans, slated for the second quarter of 2018, are concluded, the Tula refinery is expected to increase its oil processing capacity from 315,000 barrels per day (bpd) to 340,000 bpd.

Solís trumpets first fruits of new security strategy**Boosting international cooperation**

The Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC) government is also seeking to strengthen international cooperation vis-à-vis anti-crime efforts. On 21 October Costa Rican officials met Paul Zukunft, Commandant Admiral of the US Coast Guard, and representatives of the US Interdiction Committee (TIC) to discuss the role of inter-governmental partnerships in combating drug trafficking and related violence. The parties agreed to strengthen bilateral communication regarding anti-trafficking efforts and discussed further US technical and economic assistance for Costa Rica's operations.

Since President Luis Guillermo Solís called last month for a change in security strategy in order to address organised crime and its associated violence [WR-15-42], a flurry of high-level meetings has taken place and the ruling centre-left Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC) government has already been able to point to signs of progress.

President Solís made his call on 15 October citing security ministry figures indicating that 426 homicides were registered between 1 January and 9 October this year [WR-15-42], most of which are believed to be linked to organised crime as rival gangs compete for the same territory. This figure suggests that the total number of homicides registered in Costa Rica in 2014 (477 – a rate of 10 per 100,000 inhabitants) is set to be surpassed.

Following Solís's call, the first meeting took place on 21 October. Solís attended along with (among others) the president of the legislative assembly, Rafael Ortiz Fábregas; the public security minister, Gustavo Mata; and the vice-president of the supreme court (CSJ), José Manuel Arroyo Gutiérrez. A week later another meeting took place which was headed up by the justice minister, Cecilia Sánchez, and attended by representatives from the ministries of justice; public security; culture & youth; health and public education; the First Lady's office; the national women's institute (Inamu); and the Costa Rican Drug Institute (ICD) (the government agency that oversees drug prevention programs). A third meeting took place on 13 November with representatives from 18 security-related institutions. Those present included: Solís; Mata; CSJ president Zarela Villanueva; state prosecutor Jorge Chavarría; representatives from the ministries for the presidency, health and justice; and representatives from the judicial investigations agency (OIJ) and institute for alcoholism and drug dependence (IAFA).

Indicative of the gravity of the situation facing the Solís government, this string of high-level meetings has resulted in various agreements and objectives. The first yielded the pledge to improve the OIJ's police unit; increase intervention by the police's drug control unit (PCD) in areas with a high incidence of drug trafficking; and reinvigorate inter-institutional cooperation and community-level crime prevention. The second meeting saw the announcement of plans to re-launch the national commission for the prevention of violence and the promotion of social peace (Conapaz) which, created by executive decree in 2006, is tasked with planning, coordinating, and evaluating crime prevention policies. Those present at the third meeting agreed to set up inter-institutional teams to work on areas such as prevention of drug consumption, drug trafficking and money laundering; police intervention; and the national prison system (*see sidebar*).

Fruits

Since the meetings took place, the authorities have already been able to boast some achievements vis-à-vis cracking down on organised crime. On 9 November the state prosecutor's office announced 12 people had been arrested in relation to an organised-crime network responsible for smuggling migrants mainly from Cuba, but also from Asia and Africa, to the US. According to the local press, the network, which could move up to 40 people a day, allegedly charged Cubans between US\$7,000 and US\$15,000, increasing to US\$30,000 per person for migrants from Africa or Asia.

Two days later, the OIJ revealed that 21 people had been arrested in relation to 30 different cases of fraud carried out between January 2014 and

Prison overcrowding

On 9 November Costa Rica's justice ministry released a statement claiming that, through "extraordinary measures" the government had reduced the percentage of prison overcrowding by 5% between 15 September and 28 October – from 52.1% to 47%. The same statement notes that these "extraordinary measures" include reassigning 541 inmates from prisons to semi-institutional facilities. As of 15 September there were 13,889 inmates for 9,130 places, while by 28 October this had been reduced to 13,430.

November 2015 to the tune of some US\$1m. The local media reported that the arrests took place following raids on 15 houses and two commercial properties in various points of the country, including the capital, San José, the districts of Desamparados and Alajuelita city (San José province), Grecia (Alajuela province) and La Unión (Cartago province).

More generally, on 10 November the PCD issued a press release stating that so far this year the authorities had uncovered and disbanded a total of 115 narco-trafficking networks – 29 international and 86 local. The PCD statement notes that action has been taken against 1,026 illegal groups between 2006 and 2015. According to the most recent (2015) US State Department International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR), in 2014, Costa Rican law enforcement seized 26t of cocaine, up from 19.8t the previous year.

Cuban migrant crisis stokes tensions with Nicaragua

As well as the high-profile dismantling of the human-trafficking network, the situation regarding the transit of Cuban migrants through Costa Rica towards the US has made headlines for other reasons – not least its impact on relations with neighbouring Nicaragua.

With various territorial disputes before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague, including over the San Juan river area and Nicaragua's awarding of various offshore oil exploration concessions [WR-15-23], bilateral relations have long been strained. However, these have since taken a further turn for the worse after the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) government led by President Daniel Ortega accused the Solís administration on 15 November of "violating national territory", promoting the "entry of thousands of Cuban migrants" into Nicaragua and causing a "humanitarian crisis". The same day, the Ortega administration announced the closure of the border with Costa Rica, deploying the military in response to some 800 Cuban nationals who had arrived there seeking entry into Nicaragua.

Ortega's moves followed the 14 November announcement by the Costa Rican government that it was issuing Cuban migrants in Costa Rica with extraordinary travel visas, valid for seven days, in order to allow them to travel across the country and onto other nations. This came the day after Costa Rican authorities briefly closed the border with Panama, leaving over 1,000 Cuban migrants stranded there.

Both sides have since said that they will turn to international institutions in response. Costa Rica's foreign minister Manuel González – who explicitly attributed the surge in Cuban migrants seeking to enter Nicaragua to the dismantling of the people trafficking network – said that over the weekend (14-15 November) he had discussed the situation with the Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro, would not "rule out" taking the issue before the OAS. Meanwhile, Nicaragua's representative before the OAS, Dennis Moncada, has said that he will ask the Central America integration system (Sica) to discuss the issue.

Indicative of the difficulties facing the Central American governments in coping with the surge of Cuban migrants seeking entry into the US, the situation has been attributed to the US-Cuba diplomatic rapprochement in December 2014. This has fuelled rumours that the US government could end its current policy of granting residency to Cuban immigrants who make it to US territory under the so-called 'wet-foot, dry-foot' policy that permits those Cuban nationals who set foot on US soil to stay, while those detained at sea are sent back to Cuba.

The flow of Cubans northward through the Central America isthmus and then on to the US began in 2008, when the Ecuadorean government led by President Rafael Correa abandoned the requirement that Cubans must obtain visas before traveling there. Cubans now travel legally from Havana to Ecuador before moving on illegally via Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico.

On figures from the Costa Rican migration authorities cited in the local and international media, the number of undocumented Cuban arrivals in Costa Rica reached 12,166 in the first nine months of 2015, more than double the 5,114 registered in 2014 and up from 2,549 in 2013.

POSTSCRIPT

Quotes of the week

“The important thing is not that Rafael Correa is re-elected but that the Citizens’ Revolution is re-elected.”

Ecuador’s President Rafael Correa suggests he will step aside in 2017.

“I defend production while Macri defends speculation.”

Argentine presidential candidate Daniel Scioli on his rival Mauricio Macri.

“I don’t want to think that you’re a lesbian.”

Bolivia’s President Evo Morales, who describes himself as “a feminist who makes macho jokes”, gently upbraids his health minister, Ariana Campero, for speaking to another woman while he is giving a speech.

Uruguay’s Vázquez wrestles with union unrest

Uruguay’s President Tabaré Vázquez has now faced one general strike for every two months of his second term in power. Vázquez took office on 1 March, since when he has come under heavy pressure from the country’s umbrella trade union Plenario Intersindical de Trabajadores-Convención Nacional de Trabajadores (PIT-CNT), which staged its fourth general strike against his government on 12 November. The PIT-CNT opposes the Vázquez administration’s austerity-minded response to an adverse external scenario that has seen a rapid decline in economic growth. This decline has been mirrored by Vázquez’s popularity which has slipped from 52% during his 100-day honeymoon period to just 29% now.

The PIT-CNT staged a four-hour partial general strike primarily affecting the education and health sectors, not transport or retail. Thousands marched through central Montevideo to the stockmarket demanding better salaries and more public investment. They protested outside the headquarters of the national chamber of commerce and services (CNCS) whose vice-president Gustavo Licandro had publicly called for collective salary negotiations (between government, business and unions) re-introduced by the ruling left-wing Frente Amplio (FA) under Vázquez in 2005, to be scrapped.

The latest PIT-CNT strike follows a 24-hour strike in August, which was sandwiched between two partial four-hour strikes in June and September.

On 9 November, a survey by Opción Consultores put Vázquez’s approval rating on just 29%, confirming the findings of another poll by Equipos, which gave him 30%. Vázquez will be banking on the forthcoming holiday period and the congressional recess (from 15 December to 1 March) dampening protests, but he launched a response on 18 November with a programme entitled ‘Diálogo Social’, which was well-received by the PIT-CNT.

Vázquez said that the new programme would provide for a “broad and participative debate” between civil society and the public sector covering issues relevant for the “country’s future strategic development”. He said that the agenda would be predetermined with, inter alia, chambers of commerce, trade unions, universities, religious organisations and the media invited to participate and table proposals ahead of the first debate in April 2016.

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