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Moreno secures future of Ecuador's Citizens' Revolution

The 'progressive' Left will retain power in Ecuador, bucking a recent trend rightwards in the region, after a closely contested second round of presidential elections on 2 April. Despite a name appearing to proclaim his revolutionary credentials, Lenín Boltaire Moreno, the victorious candidate of the ruling Alianza País (AP), is more of a cool reconciler than a firebrand in the mould of President Rafael Correa, the polarising figurehead of the Citizens' Revolution he will succeed in May. This has its advantages. Although the AP will supply Moreno with a (reduced) majority in the national assembly, there is a clamour for more consensual politics: his rival Guillermo Lasso of the centre-right Movimiento Creó won in more than half of Ecuador's 24 provinces, and its most populous cities – Guayaquil and Quito. But it also has its drawbacks. Without Correa's force of personality, Moreno will be hard-pressed to preserve political unity through challenging economic times.

The national electoral council (CNE) declared that Moreno had secured 51.14% of the vote to 48.86% for Lasso, a slim margin of victory of some 225,000 votes in some 10m cast. Lasso did not take defeat lying down. He demanded a full recount and promised to file a challenge as soon as the CNE published the official results. Lasso took issue with the disparity between the CNE result and an exit poll by the national pollster Cedatos (which had called the first round accurately) giving him victory by six percentage points. For days the only corroborating 'evidence' for his claims of electoral fraud was the photo of one tally sheet on Twitter. Lasso impugned the integrity of the electoral judges who he accused of having "produced the fraud". He also went as far as to denounce a future Moreno government as "illegitimate", calling for "firm" protests, one of which he joined in Guayaquil.

The reaction of regional heads of state, the electoral observation mission (EOM) sent by the Organization of American States (OAS), and even the opposition mayor of Guayaquil, Jaime Nebot, suggested an overriding sense that Lasso's response was that of a sore loser. The EOM released a statement on 3 April in which it "[took] note of the complaints made public by [Lasso]" but ruled out any intervention by the OAS. It instructed Lasso, who claims to be the victim of an authoritarian left-wing government, to "go through institutional channels" in Ecuador. The crux of the statement was that the EOM had detected "no discrepancies between the statements of poll observed and the official data".

If the EOM statement was not evidence enough that the OAS sees no need to offer Lasso the kind of support extended to Venezuela's opposition in the face of undemocratic developments to buttress the administration of President Nicolás Maduro (see pages 3-5), the secretary general of the OAS,

Provinces	Moreno	Lasso	Size of electorate
Guayas	52	48	3,073,271
Pichincha	47.8	52.2	2,255,000
Manabí	66.8	33.2	1,193,000
Azuay	53.7	46.3	646,000
Los Rios	59	41	637,000
El Oro	53.8	46.2	521,000
Tungurahua	39.1	60.9	449,000
Chimborazo	40	60	410,000
Loja	41.1	58.9	392,000
Esmeraldas	53.8	46.2	391,000
Cotopaxi	41.1	58.9	353,000
Santo Domingo Tsáchilas	52.4	47.6	362,000
Imbabura	55.4	44.6	360,000
Santa Elena	60.8	39.2	239,000
Expats Europe & Asia	54	46	236,000
Cañar	48.1	51.9	226,000
Bolívar	34.5	65.5	165,000
Carchi	51.3	48.7	144,000
Sucumbios	50.5	49.5	137,000
Morona Santiago	34.8	65.2	121,000
Expats North America	43.3	56.7	110,000
Orellana	44.3	55.7	109,000
Napo	33.3	66.7	82,000
Zamora Chinchipe	37.3	62.7	80,000
Pastaza	36.4	63.6	70,000
Galápagos	39.3	60.7	20,000
Provinces won	12*	14*	

*The large expat communities in Europe & Asia, and North America are considered 'provinces' for the purpose of this table.



Luis Almagro, the most vocal regional critic of the Maduro government, tweeted his “congratulations to the president-elect of Ecuador, Lenín Moreno, and the people of this country”.

For his part, Maduro was quick to congratulate Moreno, as was Bolivia’s President Evo Morales. But governments with ideological affinity to Lasso wasted no time in recognising Moreno’s victory either. In the case of Colombia’s President Juan Manuel Santos this was not surprising given that Ecuador is hosting talks between his government and Colombia’s second-largest guerrilla group Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and he has struck up a good working relationship with President Correa and his Citizens’ Revolution despite inauspicious beginnings. But Lasso might have hoped that Argentina’s President Mauricio Macri would withhold his congratulations. Instead, Macri wished Moreno success on *Twitter*, and the Argentine foreign ministry praised the “democratic maturity and civic spirit of the Ecuadorean people” as if to underscore that the centre-right Macri administration has no problem with left-wing governments just governments that behave undemocratically.

Meanwhile Nebot responded to Lasso’s cry of electoral fraud by stressing that “accusations must be backed up with evidence”. On 5 April Lasso finally sought to provide this, denouncing irregularities in 1,795 tally sheets affecting 592,350 votes, more than twice Moreno’s margin of victory. The AP agreed to a revision of these tally sheets, on condition that the national and international media be present, so that there could be “no shadow of doubt” about the electoral result.

Moreno objected to the suggestion in a press conference that he needed to gain legitimacy after a divided vote. Lasso won 13 of the country’s 24 provinces, although he only managed to pick up two more from his first round haul when the opposition vote was split among seven candidates. He overturned five-point deficits in Pichincha, the country’s second largest province, and Cañar. Lasso lost by 52%-48% in the largest province of Guayas, however, and although he took the provincial capital Guayaquil it was close, demonstrating that Nebot’s lukewarm endorsement denied him crucial votes. Moreno’s performance in the coastal provinces, especially his emphatic win in the country’s third-largest province of Manabí (66.8%-33.2%, a victory margin in excess of 320,000 votes) was decisive.

TSJ retracts, but not completely

In 'clarifying' its controversial Sentences 155 & 156, the Venezuelan supreme court scrubbed its move to impose limits on parliamentary immunity. It reversed its decision to assign itself parliamentary competencies. It also rescinded an order permitting the president to take whatever measures necessary to prevent 'a state of commotion' in the country. Finally, it revoked its ruling allowing the president to modify the organic hydrocarbons law without national assembly purview. In all cases, the TSJ stressed, its measures had been "precautionary". The court acquiesced to the intense pressure to backtrack, but at the same time, it left itself room for manoeuvre. By their very nature, precautionary measures can be re-imposed at any time.

ANDEAN COUNTRIES

VENEZUELA | POLITICS

Politics on a cliff edge

After a dramatic week in Venezuela that saw the international community declare a constitutional rupture, there appears no end in sight to the brinkmanship between the supreme court (TSJ) and the opposition-controlled national assembly. Now that regional attention is on Venezuela, some radical opposition factions may be determined to prod the government led by President Nicolás Maduro into violent overreach – thereby triggering a stronger external reaction. For Maduro, it continues to suit him politically to rail at an external conspiracy against his administration. In this zero-sum standoff, the prospect of dialogue and compromise appears almost impossible, and the risk of violence acute.

On 5 April, Venezuela's opposition coalition, Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD), which presides over the national assembly, launched a process seeking the removal of the TSJ's constitutional chamber. The MUD bench approved two motions, one declaring a TSJ 'coup' against the 1999 constitution, and another seeking the removal of seven magistrates (Maikel Moreno, Calixto Ortega, Juan Mendoza, Arcadio Delgado, Carmen Zuleta, Luis Damiani and Lourdes Suárez) for having signed the now-infamous Sentences 155 and 156 which, among other things, sought to remove parliamentary immunity and assign to the TSJ's constitutional chamber the legislative powers of the national assembly.

After a public complaint by Venezuela's attorney general, the hard-line *Chavista* Luisa Ortega Díaz, who – in a momentous moment in the life of the Bolivarian Revolution – declared the sentences to be in breach of the constitution, President Maduro leaned on the TSJ to amend them and declared the crisis resolved. Neither the MUD nor much of the regional community agree with that. The MUD maintains that the 'self-coup' perpetrated by the TSJ remains very much alive, not least because despite its 'clarifications' of Sentences 155 & 156, published on 4 April (*see sidebar*), the TSJ failed to lift its contempt order against the national assembly, which was formally imposed in a sentence dated 1 August 2016 (albeit the TSJ had first declared it in contempt in January 2016).

Moreover, the MUD argues, several TSJ magistrates, including Moreno, were appointed irregularly in December 2015, fast-tracked into their posts by the outgoing government-controlled legislature contrary to proper procedure. At the time, the-then minority MUD bench – backed by independent legal experts – loudly protested both the lack of process and the suitability of the judges promoted to the TSJ. Moreno, for example, was promoted from a lower Caracas court, after he had levied a hefty 14-year jail sentence on opposition leader Leopoldo López a few months prior, in September 2015.

Nevertheless, this high-profile MUD effort to remove the TSJ magistrates for the 'self coup' is largely symbolic. Firstly, the national assembly remains in contempt, with all its activities 'null and void', and thus without any legal force. The TSJ has reinforced its contempt ruling by regularly scratching assembly sessions off the official register. It will likely do the same for the 5 April session, which was rejected as 'irregular' by the ruling Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV).

Secondly, under the 1999 constitution, the national assembly requires the support of the so-called 'Poder Ciudadano' (Citizen Power) to remove TSJ

MUD protests

The MUD has called for nationwide protests on 6 April, in the name of defending freedom in Venezuela. With tempers at boiling point, fresh violence appears a strong risk. The Maduro government, however, appears oblivious to international condemnation, lashing out at 'external interference'.

judges. Article 265 states that justices may be removed "by a qualified two-thirds majority [by the assembly], after granting the interested party a hearing in cases involving serious misconduct already characterised as such by the Citizen Power, on such terms as may be established by law". The Citizen Power is led by the 'Republican Moral Council' (Consejo Moral de la República, CMR), comprising the public ombudsman, the attorney general and the comptroller general.

The MUD has now asked the CMR, led by public ombudsman Tarek William Saab, to qualify the judges' conduct. It simultaneously asked the attorney general to process a request it submitted last week for a criminal investigation into the constitutional chamber for the crime of prevarication.

Deputy Héctor Rodríguez, the PSUV's parliamentary spokesman, accused the MUD of carrying out "a parliamentary coup", accusations later loudly repeated by officials including the PSUV's powerful number two, Diosdado Cabello. Judge Moreno himself had previously made clear that the assembly, in contempt, had no legal grounds to do anything, least of all seek to remove TSJ magistrates. There may be method in this, with some concerns that the TSJ could yet seize upon the MUD's 'coup-mongering' and 'illegal' behaviour to re-impose last week's measures, effectively shuttering the assembly all over again. Whether the Maduro executive would dare make such a polemical move a second time round is a moot point – but at this point in the Venezuelan crisis, anything seems possible.

The OAS doubles down

The Venezuelan crisis continues to cause chaos at the Organization of American States (OAS). On 3 April, Venezuela's unconditional ally Bolivia, which that day took charge of the permanent council, created a furore in deciding to suspend the latest 'extraordinary' council meeting, which had been urgently scheduled to discuss the actions of Venezuela's TSJ. The 20 OAS members to request the meeting, which was approved by the prior chair of the council, Belize, in its final act on 31 March, protested vociferously.

Eventually, the senior legal councillor for the OAS decided that the already-approved session could go ahead, assuming quorum. The councillor was critical of Bolivia's "unilateral" decision. In the absence of the Bolivian chair, and also the Haitian deputy chair (Haiti being another close Venezuela ally), the Honduran representative led the session – over furious Venezuelan objections. Venezuela's OAS ambassador, Samuel Moncada, accused the OAS of "a coup d'état" against its own regulations and of seeking a ruse for a continuing assault on Venezuela. "You're imagining something that no longer exists, so that you can promote intervention," Moncada declared, in reference to the TSJ's decision to retract rulings 155 & 156.

Regardless of Moncada's objections, the OAS issued a fairly strongly worded resolution that some OAS officials signalled was a pretext to the formal activation of the 2001 Inter-American Democratic Charter against Venezuela (this, however, requires a two-thirds majority vote of the OAS plenary, which Venezuela and its allies can prevent). The 3 April resolution demanded "the full restoration of democratic order...in accordance with the Inter-American Democratic Charter", measures to safeguard the separation and independence of powers, and the return of "full constitutional authority" to Venezuela's national assembly.

Given the floor in advance of the council's decision, the OAS secretary general, Luis Almagro, insisted that the TSJ's behaviour, including its reversal of Articles 155 & 156 at the request of the executive, made a mockery of Venezuelan democracy. "That the judicial power attributes to itself the

Copei

Copei, one of the oldest parties in the country, with a history dating back to 1946, is among those at risk of losing its legal status as part of the latest party re-registration drive mandated by the national electoral council (CNE), after it apparently failed to secure significant signatures to remain on the register. Copei has said it will appeal, arguing that the CNE failed to make available sufficient resources for the nationwide registration process.

function of the national assembly, elected by the citizens, is to return to before Montesquieu," he declared.

Alluding to the fact that the TSJ is still holding the assembly in contempt, Almagro pointed out that Venezuela's constitution "makes no mention of contempt, nor that the judicial power can exercise parliamentary functions". He added: "The backwards step taken by the TSJ demonstrates not only the absurdity of the original ruling, but also that it is governed by the executive power...the alteration of the constitutional order has been profound and devastating."

The resolution, which also pledged "further diplomatic initiatives to foster the restoration of the democratic institutional system, was backed by 17 OAS member states, with four abstentions (there were 13 absentees from the meeting, mostly Venezuelan allies). Almagro said the resolution was "a very important step to restoring democracy in Venezuela". The Maduro government reacted with fury, accusing the OAS of seeking "a dark regression to the interventionist past", and of seeking to use Venezuela to "justify the re-imposition of a new hegemonic fascism".

On 4 April, Almagro condemned "in the strongest terms" what he described as "the brutal repression" of the MUD and other demonstrators in Caracas that same day. "It is absolutely unacceptable that the authoritarian lawlessness that has led the Venezuelan government to abandon democracy through a self-imposed coup d'etat, and to place itself outside the Inter-American constitutional legality, has once again turned itself against its own people in repression," he said. "As Secretary General of the OAS, I am once again obliged to demand that the Venezuelan government immediately stop violating the rule of law, re-establish democracy, recognize the civil and political liberties of the people, and immediately end this repression."

Roberto Enríquez seeks refuge in Chilean embassy

The president of the traditional opposition party Copei, Roberto Enríquez, entered the Chilean embassy in Caracas on 5 April and was received as "a guest", according to a press communiqué from the Chilean foreign affairs ministry. The communiqué noted that Enríquez had sought the protection of Chile based on "a variety of political circumstances" and that Chile could act in accordance with the judicial and humanitarian principals that its external policy rests upon.

Days earlier, Copei had reported that Enríquez, along with another party member, Eduardo Vetancourt, had been detained over the weekend of 1-2 April by members of Venezuela's military intelligence agency (DGCIM), apparently on the grounds of 'treason, instigation, conspiracy, rebellion and association to commit a crime'.

On some reports, Enríquez was detained at the DGCIM HQ in Caracas; it is unclear how he managed to get to the Chilean embassy. Vetancourt's whereabouts are unclear, but he is believed to be detained at the Ramo Verde military prison outside Caracas, home also to the opposition leader Leopoldo López, who is kept in solitary confinement. Two military officials, identified as Colonel Ricardo Somascal and Captain Angelo Heredia, were also reportedly detained.

On his television show on 5 April, the PSUV hardliner Diosdado Cabello played alleged audio recordings of supposed conversations between Vetancourt and an undercover Venezuelan agent, in which the Copei official spoke about explosives and armed attacks in Caracas, so as to generate chaos and precipitate a "US invasion" of Venezuela. On Cabello's telling, the conservative Cuban-American senator, Marco Rubio (Rep, FLA), was backing this violent conspiracy. Government-leaning media also reported that a raid on two apartments in Caracas found high-powered military firearms. Cabello also appeared to suggest the involvement of dissident military officers.

The Maduro government routinely makes these accusations, which the opposition always denies as deliberate measures to distract attention from its own failings.

Criminal responsibility

The prosecutor general's office has opened an investigation into possible criminal responsibility in relation to the fatal Mocoa mudslide. The mayor of Mocoa, José Antonio Castro, and governor of Putumayo, Zorrel Aroca, and their respective predecessors, Elver Cerón and Jimmy Harold Díaz, have all been required to provide testimony. The environmental authority Corpoamazonas had provided local authorities with a risk assessment in 2014 warning about such a tragedy. Local authorities are being investigated to see why they failed to take corresponding action, especially whether the budget earmarked for environmental management was actually used for this purpose.

Mocoa mudslide eclipses anti-corruption march

Senator Alvaro Uribe (former president 2002-2010) orchestrated an anti-corruption march on 1 April against the government led by President Juan Manuel Santos after revelations surfaced that the disgraced Brazilian construction and engineering firm Odebrecht provided finance for his 2014 re-election campaign. The march, which took place in 25 towns and cities across Colombia, was reasonably well-attended but it did not get the media coverage Uribe sought as it was overshadowed by a fatal natural disaster earlier in the day: a massive mudslide in Mocoa, the capital of the southern department of Putumayo, claimed the lives of at least 263 people.

Although Uribe organised the anti-corruption march to denounce government corruption, this was merely the rallying call and it served as an unofficial campaign launch ahead of presidential elections in just over one year from now for his right-wing opposition Centro Democrático (CD). In a long address to thousands of people who had meandered through the streets of the country's second-largest city of Medellín to the Parque de las Luces, Uribe incanted the catchphrase "No more Santos".

Uribe promised that he had handled money that passed through his hands "honestly and with austerity" when in government, and accused the Santos administration of "protecting" officials guilty of corruption. However, not only are prosecutors investigating the 2014 campaign of the CD's presidential candidate Óscar Iván Zuluaga for illegal financing by Odebrecht but former health minister Diego Palacio admitted two days after the march to bribing a former deputy in the lower chamber of congress, Yidis Medina, to change her mind in 2004 and vote in favour of a constitutional amendment allowing Uribe to seek a second straight term in office. And Palacio is just one of many former Uribe aides found guilty of crimes ranging from embezzlement to links to paramilitary groups.

Although the anti-corruption march was largest in Medellín, Uribe's bastion, where some 50,000 people took part, it also attracted large numbers in Cali, the country's third-largest city and capital of the south-western department of Valle del Cauca; Santa Marta, capital of the northern department of Magdalena; Villavicencio, capital of the central department of Meta; and, particularly, Cúcuta, capital of Norte de Santander department bordering Venezuela. Uribe did not stick to the issue of corruption. He compared Santos to Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro, bringing Colombia "to the verge of economic and social collapse". Uribe also called for the construction of a "great coalition" for presidential elections next year, and for protests "to annul in the streets" the fast track mechanism validated by the constitutional court to expedite the passage of reforms linked to the peace accord with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc).

Mocoa disaster

Uribe also declared a minute's silence for those who died in Mocoa (pop. 70,000). The natural disaster gained the bulk of the media coverage in Colombia and also allowed Santos to ignore the march. The mudslide which swept away entire neighbourhoods in Mocoa came after heavy rain caused the Mocoa river and two tributaries to burst their banks. Santos promised Col\$40bn (US\$13.9m) in aid for the town during a visit to oversee the rescue efforts. He also declared an economic, social and ecological emergency in Mocoa, and designated the defence minister, Luis Carlos Villegas, as head of reconstruction efforts. These will include the construction of an aqueduct, a hospital and hundreds of new homes.

Visa

Further stoking tensions, Bolivia's defence minister, Reymi Ferreira, has complained that the Chilean authorities have denied him a visa to enter Chile in order to visit the Bolivian nationals. This led his Chilean counterpart, José Antonio Gómez, to issue a statement on 27 March claiming that the Bolivian government had not informed Chilean officials of Ferreira's proposed visit, via official channels. In his statement Gómez said that "when there is a visit of this kind" it is "normal" that the "ministers communicate with each other" but this "had not been the case with Ferreira's proposed visit". The Bachelet government announced last year that visas would be a requirement following a bilateral spat over Chile's initial refusal to allow a Bolivian delegation to inspect the northern port of Arica [\[WR-16-24\]](#).

A new source of bilateral tension

Bolivia's foreign minister, Fernando Huanacuni, has travelled to Geneva, Switzerland to make a formal complaint against Chile before the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) over the detention by Chilean authorities of nine Bolivian nationals. The incident is serving as the latest source of tension between the two governments which have a case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) with regard to Bolivia's historic claim of access to the Pacific, which it lost in the 1879-1883 War of the Pacific.

The latest spat erupted after the Bolivians (two members of the military and seven customs officials) were arrested by Chile's militarised police, Carabineros, on 19 March. The Chilean government led by President Michelle Bachelet claims that the Bolivians – who are currently being held on a preventative basis in Chile's Alto Hospicio prison in the Tarapacá Region – were on Chilean territory, 400m from the border, and accuses them of attempting to steal a truck carrying contraband. The Bolivian government led by President Evo Morales, however, maintains that while the officials were close to the border, they had seized the truck carrying contraband in Bolivian territory. The Morales government has consequently accused the Carabineros of illegally entering Bolivian national territory bearing arms to 'kidnap' the Bolivian officials.

The Morales government has been quick to ratchet up the rhetoric. As well as Huanacuni's intervention, on 22 March Bolivia's defence minister, Reymi Ferreira, announced that the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) government would fight the cause of the Bolivian nationals via three channels – legal, diplomatic, and international. As part of this Ferreira, who has also called for a boycott of Chilean products, said that the government intended to present a formal complaint against Chile before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) on the basis that the Bolivians were mistreated and abused by Carabineros.

The timing of the flare-up is not a surprise. It comes as the Morales government presented its case against Chile before the ICJ on 21 March. The case rests on the argument that Chile has an obligation to grant Bolivia access to the Pacific. Bolivia claims that Chile has failed to fulfil certain pledges made in the 1904 peace treaty that ended the War of the Pacific, maintaining that "the sole subject-matter of the dispute is the existence of an obligation incumbent upon Chile to negotiate in good faith Bolivia's sovereign access to the Pacific Ocean, and the breach of that obligation". Bolivia argues that this obligation derives from "agreements, diplomatic practice and...declarations attributable to [Chile] extending over more than a century, [that] exist independently of the 1904 peace treaty". Chile has until 21 September to file its response.

Chilebol

Against this backdrop of renewed animosity, it is worth pointing out that channels of cooperation do persist. Following the ninth meeting of the binational mixed commission on drugs which took place on 26 January in Santa Cruz city, the capital of Bolivia's eponymous eastern department [\[WR-17-04\]](#), on 27 March business groups from both countries established the Chilean-Bolivian chamber of trade, industry, services and tourism (Chilebol) which seeks to promote business links, trade and investment for companies operating in the respective countries.

A report released on 30 January by a Bolivian private sector lobby, IBCE, notes that Bolivia's exports to Chile reached just US\$88m in 2016, out of a total of US\$7.2bn. This is down from US\$91m in 2015 (out of a total of US\$8.9bn). Imports from Chile to Bolivia reached US\$348m in 2016 (out of Bolivia's total of US\$8.4bn) – down from US\$446m in 2015 (out of US\$9.8bn).

Government gains points in the ratings

Normal politics appears to have been temporarily suspended in Peru, as heavy rains and mudslides (known as huaicos) sweep through the country. By early this week the toll had grown to 98 dead, with some 125,000 being left homeless in 12 of the country's 25 regions. The national emergency has triggered improved ratings for President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski and his administration.

National emergencies are a double-edged sword for sitting governments: one misstep can generate real public anger; an efficient and humane response on the other hand can build support. In Peru's case, there has already been a misstep, but it seems that it has not been bad enough to turn the public mood against the eight-month-old government.

As emergency teams struggled to rescue thousands trapped in mud and water in the centre and north of the country, a local TV channel, Panamericana Televisión, produced photographs of the deputy agriculture minister, Eufrosina Santa María, sunning herself in a bikini by a swimming pool at a private club in Lima. There were also photographs of her cycling and roller-skating – taken during office hours.

Santa María later announced she had presented her resignation, as she did not want to harm the reputation of the agriculture ministry (Minagri) at a time of national emergency. In her defence, she argued that ministers are permanently on call, so it is reasonable for them to grab a few moments of recreation when they can. President Kuczynski, nevertheless, took a hard line, saying, "You have to work, if you are in government you have to work. She has been sacked." Minagri later filed a suit against Santa María, accusing her of embezzlement of public funds and misrepresentation.

The big headline from the first opinion poll carried out since the floods began, by GfK for the national daily *La República*, is that the government as a whole has gained popularity for its response to the emergency. The approval rating for the council of ministers in particular rose by seven percentage points to 30%, with Prime Minister Fernando Zavala experiencing a four-point gain to 34%.

Kuczynski, meanwhile, benefited from a smaller two-point gain, edging up his approval rating to 31% from 29% the preceding month. In Kuczynski's case the important point may be that the almost inevitable slump in the popularity curve that follows the inauguration of most new presidents – and which has been quite acute since he took office in Peru in late July 2016 – might now be bottoming out.

On the other hand, not all politicians did well. Luis Castañeda, the mayor of Lima, saw his approval rating plummet by 13 points, down to 34%, in no small part because of the collapse of the Talavera bridge, which was built during his first term in office. Public comments Castañeda made refusing to accept responsibility for any design faults did not help his standing in the eyes of the voters. While there is no specific data on other mayors, analysts think some may also have suffered falling ratings because of inadequate responses to the natural disaster.

Respite for Kuczynski

In the short term the floods may have rescued Kuczynski from a tight spot. His transport minister, Martín Vizcarra, had been summoned to congress and faced a possible vote of censure over his role in writing an addendum to the concession contract for the new Chinchero airport in Cusco, which is to be

Emergency response

The prime minister, Fernando Zavala, said the second stage of the emergency response was underway, which includes restoring drinking water to the cities of Piura, Trujillo and Huarmey; relocating some 31,000 affected homes; and ensuring all hospitals and medical posts are well-equipped and fully functioning. He also said school classes could resume on 17 April.

Bolivia 2016 growth

On 29 March Bolivia's national statistics institute (INE) reported that GDP growth reached 4.36% up to September 2016. The figure is lower than the year-end 2015 growth figure of 4.86% and it is not clear if 2016 year-end growth will reach 4.5% in which case, under local law, workers will be entitled to a double Christmas bonus. According to the INE report GDP growth up to September 2016 was broad-based with all economic sectors posting positive figures, except the key oil and gas sector, in which activity contracted by 3.71%. This marked the third consecutive quarter of negative growth for Bolivia's oil and gas sector, which is the main source of government revenue.

built and operated by the private Kuntur Wasi consortium. The Fuerza Popular (FP, Fujimoristas) opposition majority in congress has been suggesting impropriety. It says some of the clauses in the addendum are prejudicial to the public interest. FP has already demonstrated its power by censuring and forcing the replacement of Kuczynski's education minister in December. However, in the light of the floods, this time FP deputies stayed away from congress, leaving it without the necessary quorum to cross-examine Vizcarra.

With this threat lifted, for the moment at least, Kuczynski was able to concentrate on travelling to some of the worst-affected areas in the northern regions of Piura and La Libertad. The government announced special emergency measures, including PEN\$4bn (US\$1.23bn) in financial aid, on top of the PEN\$5.5bn (US\$1.69bn) in extra public works funding already announced for local and regional governments. It then declared a state of emergency in Piura, where eight people have died, 20,000 been left homeless and more than 200,000 affected in order to free up even more funds. On 30 March Columnist Mirko Lauer in *La República* noted "From one day to the next a previously invisible government suddenly became highly visible."

After wondering in public whether Peru needed a special emergency coordinator or "czar", Kuczynski accepted that the role belonged naturally to Prime Minister Zavala. The response to the floods therefore appears to have ended up giving the government something of a breathing space. However, when normal politics resume, there remain a number of question marks for the future. The most significant is whether the Kuczynski administration and the Fujimorista majority in congress will be able to hammer out some kind of medium-term working relationship.

TRACKING TRENDS

PERU | Export surge to be held up by rains. Peru's exports increased by 38.6% to reach US\$6.66bn during the first two months of 2017 compared to the same period last year, the country's foreign trade & tourism minister, Eduardo Ferreyros, reported on 4 April. The result was driven by a 56.7% increase in traditional exports, whereas non-traditional exports increased by 4.9%. The sectors that registered the most significant increase were the oil and gas sector, which saw exports jump by 140.4%, and the fishing sector, which saw exports increase by 134.3%. Meanwhile exports from other key sectors such as mining (44.2%) and agriculture (34.8%) also registered significant increases.

The growth in exports observed at the start of the year suggests that the severe disruption produced in northern and central coastal areas of Peru by the recent heavy rains and mudslides will damage the performance of Peru's domestic economy this year. The natural disaster has not only produced significant material damage but has effectively cut all transport links to some areas of the country, which will have a negative impact on production levels and lead to lower exports.

President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski recently said that he expects GDP to grow by 3%-3.5% this year in the wake of the natural disaster, below the previous government forecast of around 4.5%. Nevertheless, the Kuczynski government has put on a brave face announcing the launch of a major reconstruction programme that would not only generate hundreds of jobs but also help to improve the country's infrastructure.

Labour Minister Alfonso Grados has said that PEN65m (US\$20m) has been allocated to 335 reconstruction projects so far, which are due to begin this month. The government will launch a programme on 10 April entitled 'Trabaja Perú en Emergencia' to help create more than 20,000 temporary jobs in the worst-affected areas.

Meanwhile, Agriculture Minister José Manuel Hernández said that the government would launch a crop re-planting programme in some of the 8,000-10,000 hectares of affected agricultural lands to assist local producers.

Temer on trial**Electoral court rules to impeach Amazonian governor**

On 30 March, the electoral court for Brazil's Pará state (TRE) ruled in favour of impeaching Governor Simão Jatente and his deputy Zequinha Marinho. They have been accused of committing economic and political abuses in their 2014 re-election campaign. One of the alleged abuses includes a vote-buying scheme in which the duo allegedly offered to provide housing assistance in poorer areas in exchange for citizens' support. Both Jatente and Marinho deny violating electoral laws and will appeal the verdict.

President Michel Temer's trial, not unlike Kafka's, has no set beginning or end. Proceedings got off to a false start this week when Temer was summoned to Brazil's electoral court (TSE) over allegations of illegitimate campaign funding which could potentially invalidate his presidency. But just two hours into the session, the trial was postponed until further notice when defence lawyers asked for more time to prepare their case.

President Temer's trial is remarkable for several reasons. This is the first time a sitting head of state has been tried by the TSE. Moreover, it is the second time a president's mandate has come under scrutiny after former president Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) was impeached last August.

Temer was called into court over allegations he used dirty money to finance his 2014 campaign when he was Rousseff's running mate. So if the 2014 result is annulled, this could undermine Temer's claim to the presidency and bar Rousseff from running for political office again. However, a second presidential impeachment for Brazil now looks unlikely after the first session held on 4 April was called off prematurely. The majority of TSE justices, including Herman Benjamin, who presided over the case, ruled to give defence lawyers at least five more days to prepare their case and call on four more witnesses.

Benjamin's decision to postpone proceedings has generated some confusion. Up until this point, Benjamin had staunchly defended trying Temer as quickly as possible since this is a matter of public interest. Given the lawsuit on the 2014 elections was launched in 2015 by the centre-right Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), defence lawyers have arguably had plenty of time to prepare their case.

Allowing the defence to call on more witnesses also appears to contradict what Benjamin said at the start of the session. "We cannot turn this process into an endless universe.... We have to avoid procrastination. This process is not fit for hearing Adam, Eve and possibly, the serpent," quipped Benjamin in his opening remarks. When the defence asked if they could call on more witnesses, his initial response was equally sardonic. "If we need to listen to the black market dealers, why don't we listen to...the porter of the building, the boy at the gates of hell where the resources were handed over," he retorted. And yet, Benjamin acceded to the request of the defence.

Now that the case to postpone the trial has been accepted, no one knows when it will resume. Two main factors threaten to push back proceedings. Firstly, the court will need to wait for TSE president Gilmar Mendes (a friend of Temer's) to return from various trips to France, Portugal and the US which he has scheduled for April. Secondly, two of the TSE's seven justices are due to retire in the next few months. Their replacements will be chosen by Temer, raising eyebrows about whether the case will be judged impartially. This means sessions could resume in May at the earliest, although this is far from certain. When the trial will end is anyone's guess.

The case's postponement will be welcomed by politicians from all major parties and brings greater stability to Brazil. If justices keep stalling, Temer can continue to lead the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB) and push ahead with his pro-business and investment agenda until he leaves office in 2018. Meanwhile, Rousseff, of the left-wing opposition Partido dos

Aécio Neves denies bribery allegations

Presidential hopeful for the 2018 elections Aécio Neves of the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB) has challenged claims leaked to the Brazilian weekly *Veja* on 31 March that he allegedly accepted R\$50m (US\$16m) of bribes from Odebrecht to win public contracts in 2007 while he was governor of Minas Gerais, as well as financing for his unsuccessful 2014 presidential campaign. According to three testimonies from Odebrecht officials heard by *Veja*, Neves channelled the illicit funds through a secret bank account in New York City under his sister's name. During a speech to the federal senate on 1 April, Neves said the allegations were false and called for the supreme court to lift confidentiality on the Odebrecht testimonies so he could clear his name.

Trabalhadores (PT), who is still smarting from her impeachment last year, will have more time to prepare before she faces yet another grilling in court.

Even the PSDB, which started the lawsuit, may benefit. Although the PSDB disputed the PT's win in the 2014 election, it did not intend for the electoral dispute to affect the PMDB, to whom it is now allied. Former (PSDB) president Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2003) told news site *O Globo* on 3 April that legal proceedings against Temer would be bad for Brazil. "[The ruling] brings more confusion.... Brazil has been turned on its head for a long time and it's just beginning to settle again," Cardoso said.

Nevertheless, Temer's government is not completely off the hook. In addition to the TSE court case, another set of allegations are currently pending in Brazil's supreme court (STF). The STF's ruling does not affect Temer but could implicate up to a third of his cabinet ministers. As with the other case, there is no timeline for STF proceedings, leaving legal question marks hanging in the air.

Temer tanks in popularity rankings

Thus far, Temer's economic policies have generally elicited a positive response from credit agencies and investors. During a speech at the Latin America Aerospace and Defence Fair on 4 April, Finance Minister Henrique Meirelles said he expected business confidence to keep growing as "economic and political stability" returns to Brazil. He added that the country would keep expanding economically as it moves to escape recession and investment in the country should increase by 30% in the next few months.

Outside of financial circles, however, the government has so far failed to convince most Brazilians that its fiscal policies are working as part of Temer's electoral promise to "put Brazil back on track." Instead, the latest 'political barometer' by international pollster Ipsos, published on 30 March, found 90% of Brazilians think the country is on the wrong track. The same survey stated that disapproval ratings for Temer's government rose from 59% in February to 62% in March. On an individual level, 78% of Brazilians disapprove of Temer, who was the third-most unpopular out of the 26 public figures featured in the survey after Eduardo Cunha, the former head of the federal lower chamber of congress, with 87% and the former senate president, Renan Calheiros, with 83%.

In an interview with *BBC Brasil*, Ipsos director for public affairs Danilo Cerocismo attributed the government's low approval ratings to the country's economic difficulties. "One explanation is the fact that [Temer] did not give the people the results they were hoping for in terms of unemployment and inflation. Most people don't understand this process [of economic recovery] takes time but according to other surveys, this is what most Brazilians most urgently want to see changed."

Recently, the government has been making headway on improving domestic inflation figures, which fell on 3 April for the fourth consecutive week, according to a statement from Brazil's central bank (BCB), to 4.1%. But unemployment rates continue to rise and reached 13.2% in February according to a survey by Brazil's national statistics institute (Ibge) released on 31 March. This means 13.5m people are currently out of work as unemployment reaches its lowest level in the last five years.

Temer's decision to sanction a law to legalise outsourcing this week has created more uncertainty for Brazil's employment market. The law paves the way for companies to hire temporary workers more easily. This could help businesses cut costs, but many fear it will result in more layoffs for permanent members of staff.

Hobbled from the start?

Mexico's long-awaited attack on corruption – a set of interlocking laws and institutions known as the national anti-corruption system (Sistema Nacional Anti-corrupción, SNA) has finally been launched. But the failure to appoint a key figure in the system – a new anti-corruption prosecutor – has led some to argue that the whole enterprise is getting off to a decidedly inauspicious start.

Doing something about corruption has been on Mexico's political agenda for many years. Action was promised during the 2012 general election campaign that brought Enrique Peña Nieto to power at the end of that year. Initially, however, other issues, such as reforming the energy and telecoms industries, and the education system, took precedence. Yet corruption moved back up the political agenda in 2014 when President Peña Nieto and First Lady Angélica Rivera were accused of conflicts of interest.

There then followed long-running cross-party negotiations on what a clampdown on corruption might look like. A large number of civil society groups also campaigned strongly to have their views taken into consideration. This year, with a number of state governors who have just left office facing major corruption charges, the issue remains near the top of the political agenda. Corruption is regularly identified in opinion surveys as one of the country's principal problems.

So the announcement on 4 April that the SNA had formally launched could be seen as a momentous day. Jacqueline Peschard Mariscal, president of the newly formed citizen's participation committee of the SNA (Comité de Participación Ciudadana), said corruption had "captured" Mexican institutions and become a structural problem. It was essential that the SNA should begin to deliver results quickly, at the risk of losing credibility.

Yet many wonder if the SNA will really be able to rise to the challenge. In theory at least it has great promise. In the long negotiations that led to its creation the political parties rejected the idea of creating a single anti-corruption agency or institution, opting instead for a multi-institutional system, based on checks and balances.

The main package of laws creating the SNA was passed in May 2015, with secondary enabling legislation approved later. All public servants are required to reveal their tax returns, make a statement of assets, and declare any commercial interests (this was introduced as a result of a strong civil society lobbying campaign, and is known as the 'Ley 3de3').

The SNA essentially pulls together a range of interlocking institutions. Three of them are pre-existing. They are the Secretaría de la Función Pública (a ministerial-level organisation responsible for standards in public administration); the public audit office that is responsible to the federal congress (Auditoría Superior de la Federación, ASF); and the semi-autonomous federal transparency and data protection agency (Instituto Federal de Acceso a la Información y Protección de Datos Personales – Ifai).

To these were added other newly created bodies including the citizen's participation committee; a new federal tribunal that will specialise in judging corruption cases (the Tribunal Federal de Justicia Fiscal y Administrativa);

López Obrador

Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the presidential candidate for the radical left-wing Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena) and early frontrunner in the polls, has made combating corruption in public life the focal point of his campaign. He argues that corruption is the principal cause of social and economic inequality in Mexico, and claims that his government could save M\$500bn (US\$24.3bn) through expunging it.

Remittances fall

On 3 April, Mexico's central bank (Banxico) reported that the country received remittances worth over US\$2.05bn in January and February 2017, down by 1.45% from the US\$2.1bn it received in the same period last year. While the number of remittances went down, the overall value of each transfer went up in the first two months to US\$299 per transaction in 2017 compared to US\$295 per transaction in 2016. The overall fall in remittances came after US President Donald Trump had just completed his first month in office. During Trump's electoral campaign, he threatened to levy taxes on remittances to Mexico as a way of making Mexico pay for his proposed border wall.

and, crucially, a new specialised anti-corruption prosecutor, the *Fiscalía Especializada en Combate a la Corrupción*.

A key idea is that these institutions should continue to report variously to the three powers of state (executive, legislature, and judiciary). But they should also work together within a common framework to provide a kind of anti-corruption ecosystem.

Yet the SNA is starting off incomplete. The key judges on the new federal tribunal have not yet been appointed. More importantly, the federal senate has yet to appoint the new specialised anti-corruption prosecutor. This is because of an ongoing political dispute. The right-wing opposition *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) is reported to be blocking the appointment until it gets assurances from the government that Raúl Cervantes, the existing attorney general (*Procurador General de la República* – PGR) will not be automatically appointed for a new nine-year term when a separate set of reforms are introduced to the functioning of his office, to make it more independent of the executive.

Some critics say this dispute shows that politics will continue to get in the way of anti-corruption efforts in Mexico. Others are less pessimistic, arguing that in the interim and until the anti-corruption prosecutor is put in place, the PGR will cover his or her responsibilities. Either way, a disenchanted public is only likely to support the SNA if the new system can show some initial successes. With some state-level elections due in the middle of this year, and the presidential elections looming in mid-2018, the risk is that Mexico's anti-corruption efforts will again get bogged down in party politics.

TRACKING TRENDS

MEXICO | Renewable energy. On 29 March, the Mexican subsidiary of Italian renewables company Enel, Enel Green Power Mexico (EGPM), began constructing the firm's largest solar-powered plant to date in Villanueva, in the northern state of Coahuila. Enel has pledged US\$650m towards the project, which is due for completion in 2018. The plant will have a total installed capacity of 754 megawatts (MW) and will generate around 1700 gigawatt hours (GWh) of electricity each year; enough to power 1.3m homes and save around 780,000 tonnes in CO₂ emissions.

In addition to the Villanueva project, on 3 April, Enel started building another smaller solar-powered plant, 'Don José' in the central state of Guanajuato, which is also due to be finished by 2018. Don José will have an installed capacity of 238MW and will generate 539GWh per year; enough to supply 410,000 houses with electricity and save 245,000 tonnes of CO₂ emissions.

Enel has been present in Mexico since 2007 but decided to increase its investments in the country after the government led by President Enrique Peña Nieto opened up the country's renewables sector to private investment under its sweeping 2014 energy sector reform. In an interview with Spanish newswire *EFE*, Paolo Romanacci, Enel's Head of Renewable Energy for Central America, said that the company's solar energy projects in Mexico would help "sustain the country's growing electricity sector with clean energy", and promote sustainable development.

While Mexico may be investing more in renewable energy sources, its foreign trade in non-renewable power has also risen. On 27 March, the national statistics institute (Inegi) reported that the country's exports totalled US\$3.1bn in February, up 8% compared to the same month last year. This was largely driven by a 69% year-on-year increase in oil exports, worth US\$1.9bn; while non-oil imports increased by 5.5%.

Mexico ended February with a trade surplus of US\$684m, whereas in February 2016 it posted a trade deficit of US\$780m.

PLN names its presidential candidate**Another corruption scandal**

Antonio Alvarez's victory comes despite a recent corruption scandal involving the national institute for the promotion of cooperatives (Infocoop), a public agency, in which one of his campaign advisers, Freddy González Rojas (who was promptly fired), was implicated. At the end of last month, the attorney general's office announced that six people had been arrested on suspicion of forming a criminal network to defraud Infocoop of Cr\$9.3bn (US\$16.9m). With a total of 17 people currently implicated in the network – which allegedly manipulated the elections of Infocoop's directorate for personal gain – those arrested face charges including embezzlement, influence trafficking, and illicit enrichment. González was Infocoop's former president and current secretary general of the national council of cooperatives (Conacoop), which is tasked with electing Infocoop's directorate.

The main opposition Partido Liberación Nacional (PLN) has become the first political party to confirm its presidential candidate ahead of general elections in February 2018 after the president of the legislative assembly, Antonio Alvarez Desanti, won the 2 April primaries. While opinion polls show that Alvarez is the overall frontrunner ahead of 2018, they also reveal continued widespread disillusionment with the political class which has been discredited by corruption scandals that emerged under the previous PLN government led by President Laura Chinchilla (2010-2014). This apathy has intensified under the current Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC) administration led by President Luis Guillermo Solís due to its perceived failure to implement its plan of governance, stemming from its weak legislative presence (with just 13 out of 57 seats in the national assembly). One recent sign of this was the fiscal reform proposal over which Solís had to admit defeat in February [[WR-17-05](#)].

Alvarez was crowned PLN presidential candidate on 3 April after his closest rival, former president José María Figueres Olsen (PLN, 1994-1998), conceded defeat with 28.8% of the vote counted from the contest (in which any citizen registered as a PLN member could vote). The results gave Alvarez 45% of the vote, to 39% for Figueres while the other two contenders – Rolando González, a national legislator and former deputy Sigifredo Aiza (1990-1994; 2002-2006) – trailed behind with 8% and 7%, respectively.

A lawyer by profession, Alvarez is a familiar face in Costa Rican politics and the PLN which, with 18 legislative seats, is the biggest bench in the national assembly. Alvarez first held a public post in 1985 as executive president of then-public fertilizer company Fertilizantes de Central America (Fertica) and went on to serve as agriculture minister (1987-1988) and interior minister (1988-1990) under the PLN administration led by former president Oscar Arias (1986-1990, 2006-2010).

Alvarez broke with the PLN in 2005, citing disputes with Arias, and set up his own political outfit, Unión Por El Cambio (UPC), for which he ran unsuccessfully for the presidency in 2006. However, he returned to the PLN in 2008 after dissolving UPC and was the campaign manager for the party's presidential candidate in 2014, former San José mayor Johnny Araya (1998-2001; 2003-2013).

During his pre-presidential campaign, Alvarez, along with other competitors, was quick to revive corruption-related doubts regarding Figueres. The former president had previously faced allegations of receiving US\$900,000 in bribes from the French telecoms firm Alcatel between 2000 and 2003 although the investigation was closed in 2011 due to insufficient evidence. However, Alvarez's victory had arguably been sealed months earlier after receiving the backing of Arias in January, who confirmed in September 2016 that he would not seek another bid. At the time Arias told reporters that "Only dictators cling on to power" – a pointed dig at Figueres, another PLN old-timer.

Disaffection

A survey released on 23 March by news site *El Mundo* showed Álvarez as the overall frontrunner, with 23.3% support, followed by former public security minister Juan Diego Castro (PLN 1994-1996) on 12.3% – who has yet to say for which party he will run. The poll showed Figueres on 9.2%, and Rodolfo Piza, a lawyer who ran for the the centre-right Partido de Unidad

Araya

It is worth recalling that the PLN's last presidential candidate, long-time San José mayor Johnny Araya, abandoned his campaign ahead of the March 2014 second round after opinion polls showed (in his words) "a popular will more inclined towards removing the ruling party", which had served two consecutive four-year terms in office.

Socialcristiana (PUSC) in 2014, on 8.6%. One key finding of the *El Mundo* poll, however, was the fact that 22.7% of the 980 respondents said that they would not vote for any of the candidates, while 14.7% were undecided/didn't reply – which some suggest points to apathy and frustration with the political class.

A subsequent poll released on 29 March by Costa Rica's Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR)'s centre for research and policy studies (Ciep) appeared to echo this finding, with 73.76% of respondents saying that they did not identify with a party. This is in line with the findings of Ciep's survey in August and November 2016. The same survey showed that of the 729 people polled, 17.4% said that they identified with the PLN, 3.9% with PUSC (which has seven legislative seats), while just 2.1% said that they identified with the PAC.

Other contenders

Of the other main parties, the PUSC is due to announce its choice on 4 June, with Piza expected to take the nomination. Meanwhile two PAC pre-presidential candidates have emerged in the form of Welmer Ramos, former economy minister (2014-2017), and Carlos Alvarado Quesada, former labour minister (2016-2017). PAC voters will choose their presidential nominee at the national convention on 9 July.

As regards the left-wing Frente Amplio (FA), whose 2014 presidential candidate, José María Villalta, performed surprisingly well in the 2014 presidential first round (taking third place with 17%), their presidential candidates ahead of their national convention on 7 May are national legislators Frank Camacho and Edgardo Araya. Neither candidate has appeared in polling data so far and there is speculation that the FA – which has eight seats in congress – might focus on the legislative rather than presidential contest.

TRACKING TRENDS

EL SALVADOR | **Metallic mining ban approved.** El Salvador's human rights ombudsman (PDDH) Raquel Caballero, the Catholic Church and local and international human rights organisations such as Oxfam are all hailing as a historic step the 29 March approval by El Salvador's legislature of a bill prohibiting all metallic mining activity in the country. This makes El Salvador the first country in the world to ban metallic mining nationwide.

Ratified by 69 votes in the 84-member national assembly – indicating cross-party support – the initiative bars all exploration, extraction, and processing of metals, whether in open pits or underground, on the grounds that the potential health and environmental risks of metallic mining outweigh the benefits.

There is currently no mining activity in El Salvador and the environment ministry has refused to authorise any metallic mining exploration or exploitation contracts since 2009. However, calls had been growing for the practice to be outlawed definitively following an October 2016 ruling by the World Bank's International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (Icsid) in favour of El Salvador in a protracted dispute with a Canadian mining firm, Pacific Rim (now owned by OceanaGold, a Canadian-Australian multinational).

Indicative of public support for the move, a 2015 survey by the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA) showed 77% of respondents calling on the government to take immediate measures to prohibit metallic mining. Meanwhile, a February 2017 communiqué issued by Caritas El Salvador, an agency of the Catholic Church, ahead of the bill's approval, showed that El Salvador suffers the worst degree of environmental degradation in the Americas after Haiti. The Caritas communiqué argues that, with just "3% of natural forests intact, more than 90% of surface water polluted" and "soil ruined by unsuitable agricultural practice", pursuing metallic mining would represent "collective suicide" for the country.

Quotes of the week

“As a democrat I would have liked to have recognised the results, but as a democrat I can not be an accomplice to [electoral] fraud.”

Ecuador's defeated opposition presidential candidate Guillermo Lasso.

“To be silent in the face of a dictatorship is the lowest indignity in politics. The question is between liberty or despotism.”

The secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro, on Venezuela.

“We condemn the concert of the regional right-wing to attack the Venezuelan democratic system.”

Venezuela's foreign minister Delcy Rodríguez.

POSTSCRIPT

Who controls the streets in Argentina?

A longstanding assumption in Argentine politics is that the (opposition) Peronist movement (Partido Justicialista – PJ) controls the streets. As this issue went to press on 6 April that was expected to be demonstrated once more during the first general strike against the government of President Mauricio Macri, called to back wage demands by the largely Peronist trade union movement Confederación General del Trabajo (CGT). But things may be changing. Days earlier, on 1 April, pro-Macri demonstrations in major cities surprised many with their strength. As a result, the government may be encouraged to take a tougher line against the opposition.

President Macri's ruling centre-right Cambiemos coalition had a tough time in March, with widespread strikes and roadblocks highlighting dissatisfaction with its economic management, and causing ill-humour all round. Earlier allegations of conflict of interest in the government's dealings with a company controlled by the Macri family had hurt his popularity, which fell in February, although it appeared to stabilise at 47% in March, according to polling agency Poliarquía. Faced with the first call for a 24-hour general strike on 6 April, the government went on the defensive. Despite signs of an emerging economic recovery, officials were aware that a majority of Argentines are not feeling it, and that Cambiemos could suffer a 'punishment vote' in October's mid-term congressional elections.

Such was the defensive mood that the government took distance from a range of citizen groups that had called for pro-Macri demonstrations to be held on 1 April. Officials feared a low turnout would be seen as a sign of weakness; opposition leaders were relishing just that. In the event the pro-Macri mobilisation surprised everyone with its strength. The Plaza de Mayo in the city of Buenos Aires and other rallying points in cities around the country were filled. There was a clear double message: firstly, the government has not entirely lost 'the street'; secondly, its core support may be stronger than previously thought.

These rallies changed Macri's tone in the run-up to the general strike. Macri welcomed the "spontaneous" demonstration which, he said, had been achieved without buses or *choripán* (a reference to the free transport and barbecued sausages usually laid on by Peronism to get supporters out). Macri also rallied his cabinet ministers, saying public opinion wanted the government "to do the difficult things" and not to let up. Macri used combative language: "either the mafias are imprisoned or our government will be overthrown," he warned.

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