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Argentina's Macri prepares for showdown with unions

"Don't twist the lion's tail." This warning was issued by one of Argentina's most powerful trade union leaders, Luis Barrionuevo, this week. It was directed at the government led by President Mauricio Macri. "Those who attacked the unions – the military, [Raúl] Alfonsín [1983-1989] and [Fernando] de la Rúa [1999-2001] didn't finish their terms," Barrionuevo added in case the message was lost on Macri. Barrionuevo spoke out in the wake of an unprecedented surge in arrests of union leaders accused of corruption as battle lines are drawn ahead of a congressional debate of the most important piece of legislation the government wants to see approved in 2018: a sweeping labour reform designed to improve Argentina's competitiveness, and diminish the power and influence of the unions.

Barrionuevo, the leader of the union of tourism, hotel, and restaurant workers (UTHGRA in the Spanish acronym), has moved from being a tactical ally of President Macri to the hard wing of Argentina's largest trade union movement Confederación General del Trabajo (CGT). Barrionuevo argued that while "nobody pisses holy water", Macri was making a mistake he could live to regret by stigmatising all union leaders as corrupt mafia bosses.

The labour minister, Jorge Triaca, described Barrionuevo's comments as "unfortunate", while claiming that "they don't affect us in the slightest". Triaca insisted that there was no "witch-hunt" against trade union leaders being led by the Macri administration. "Not all the trade union leadership is the same...the majority carry out their work within the framework of the law," Triaca said. "We want a relationship with the unions based on transparency, frankness in negotiations, without mafia rackets and extortion schemes," he added.

While Alfonsín sought to sever the symbiotic relationship between the Partido Justicialista (PJ, Peronists) and Argentina's unions, the most powerful in Latin America, Macri has deftly exploited divisions within both the PJ and CGT. Macri has publicly shown a willingness to work with the unions, and made several gestures, especially repaying debt incurred by the *obras sociales*, the social insurance healthcare plan which works through the unions.

Macri has reaped the benefits for this conciliatory approach. The CGT has only organised two general strikes against his government since he took office in December 2015, very few by Argentina's standards. But Macri emerged strengthened from the mid-term federal legislative elections in October and better able to absorb a collision with the unions without serious harm. This as the annual haggling with the unions over wages is poised to get underway, along with a debate of his government's labour reform bill (which seeks, among other things, to reduce labour costs to attract foreign investors) in congress, where his ruling centre-right coalition Cambiemos still lacks a majority in either chamber. Triaca has said wage increases should

Breaking power of union bosses

Moves are afoot to limit the terms of trade union leaders. Soledad Carrizo, a federal deputy for Unión Cívica Radical (UCR), part of the ruling Cambiemos coalition, said this week that she would seek to revive a bill she first presented in 2014, and again in 2016, to this effect. "Democracy implies alternation of power," Carrizo said. She added that there was a crisis of representation in the country's unions which needed to be addressed urgently. Carrizo conceded, however, that it would be difficult as the congressional labour commission is composed of deputies of trade union extraction who have previously blocked any discussion of the matter.

be in the region of 15% but Barrionuevo refused to accept this as a ceiling given inflation hit 25% in 2017 (see page 11).

In the meantime, the public image of the unions is taking a battering as a steady stream of leaders are being arrested for corruption, several taken into custody in houses with wads of cash and, in one case, a fleet of luxury cars. Juan Carlos Schmid, a member of the CGT's ruling triumvirate, claimed that the arrested union bosses make up "a few rotten apples", but as their number grows it becomes more difficult to sustain the argument that they are not spoiling the barrel.

Humberto Monteros, the secretary general of the construction workers' union (Uocra) in Bahía Blanca in Buenos Aires province, was the most recent union leader to be arrested, on 11 January, accused of extortion and illicit association, along with nine other members of his local branch of the union. Three cases containing Ar\$5.25m (US\$280,000) of cash in pesos and US\$100,000 in dollars were found in Monteros's house when it was raided, as well as small quantities of cocaine and marijuana.

Monteros stands accused by local businesses of demanding kickbacks, and insisting they contract specific services from transport, catering and clothing firms, all satellite businesses of the Uocra, according to prosecutors; if they refused, the work was stopped. Upon visiting Bahía Blanca in October, shortly before the mid-term legislative elections, the governor of Buenos Aires province, María Eugenia Vidal, denounced the Uocra operating in the city as "a mafia" using extortion and violence as its modus operandi. Juan Pablo 'Pata' Medina, leader of the Uocra in La Plata, the capital of the province of Buenos Aires, was arrested last October on similar grounds after an investigation by the national tax agency (Afip). He was accused of extortion and illicit association and his bank account, containing Ar\$7m, was embargoed by the federal judiciary. He resisted arrest for eight hours holed up in his union headquarters.

The national press revelled in the lurid details of the arrest of Marcelo Balcedo, head of the minors and education workers' union (Soeme). Balcedo was the scion of a family dynasty, inheriting the position in 2012 upon the death of his father, a local PJ potentate in La Plata who founded *Hoy*, the provincial daily with the second highest circulation, and the most popular local radio station. Balcedo was arrested for money laundering by Interpol on 4 January in Uruguay's exclusive seaside resort Punta del Este, on the orders of an Argentine judge. Cases containing US\$500,000 in cash, automatic weapons, and 14 luxury cars, including a Ferrari, Mercedes Benz, and Porsche, were found on his ranch.

Politicising the judiciary?

Triaca insisted that the government had nothing to do with the legal cases against the union leaders still less their arrest. But La C mpora, the youth wing of Kirchnerismo which includes Deputy M ximo Kirchner, the son of former president Cristina Fern ndez (2007-2015), issued a statement accusing the government of having set in motion "a defamation campaign against trade union leaders". Omar 'Caballo' Su rez, untouchable at the helm of the dockworkers' union (Somu) for 30 years, and reputedly Fern ndez's favourite union leader, was arrested last September for alleged illicit association, extortion, and fraud.

La C mpora also singled out Hugo Moyano, the former CGT leader whose son Pablo recently inherited control of the powerful truckers' union. On 12 January the office of the prosecutor for economic crime and money laundering (Procelac) accused the Moyanos of money laundering based on reports from the country's top financial crimes watchdog Unidad de Informaci n Financiera (UIF), part of the justice ministry. If the Moyanos were to fall it would be a huge statement of intent from the government and a warning, more subtle but no less stark than that of Barrionuevo: the national, not just sectional, union leadership is not immune from legal action.

Opposition's stiff challenges

More than half of the Venezuelan population, according to an opinion survey by the pollster Venebarómetro, disapprove of the MUD. This is the lowest level of support the MUD has enjoyed since it was created in 2009. This despite the fact that 67% of respondents to the poll consider the government-controlled constituent assembly to be illegitimate. It is a moot point whether the moderate new president of the national assembly, Omar Barboza, will help the MUD's cause. Barboza, fresh from being blasted by more radical opposition parties, received a hostile welcome from President Maduro. "I'm going to confront you...things could end very badly for you," Maduro warned, describing Barboza as "perverse, corrupt, and a zombie".

ANDEAN COUNTRIES

VENEZUELA | POLITICS

Maduro bolstered by opposition rift

Divisions within Venezuela's political opposition are playing into the hands of President Nicolás Maduro. As a new round of the national dialogue process being held between the Maduro administration and representatives of the opposition coalition Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD) gets underway in the Dominican Republic, key opposition figures criticised the composition of the new MUD leadership committee in the national assembly as weak and ineffectual. They also slammed the dialogue process as pointless, granting time and space to the government just when it ought to be on the back foot, with spontaneous protests, and looting, erupting in different points around the country over shortages of food and basic goods.

Assembly appointments provoke controversy

Omar Barboza, a member of the Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT) party, was sworn in as president of the MUD-controlled national assembly on 5 January. The UNT is the most conciliatory party within the MUD and the only one of the big four parties to take part in last month's municipal elections. As such, unlike Primero Justicia (PJ), Acción Democrática (AD), and Voluntad Popular (VP), the UNT has not been forced to go through the party registration process again, in accordance with a new directive approved by the government-controlled constituent assembly, in order to compete in this year's presidential elections [[WR-17-50](#)].

The UNT was awarded the presidency of the national assembly as part of an accord stipulating that each of the MUD constituent parties would rotate the position annually. Vente Venezuela, Soy Venezuela, and Fracción 16 de Julio, a 13-strong faction which broke away from the MUD in November last year, decried as "inconceivable" the fact that the national assembly leadership committee had been "handed over to members of parties that recognise the constituent assembly [which most of the political opposition and international community dismiss as illegitimate and as having usurped the power of the national assembly]".

Former deputy María Corina Machado, of Soy Venezuela, described the legislative leadership appointments as "a very serious mistake". Along with her party colleague Antonio Ledezma, the former metropolitan mayor of Caracas, currently in exile in Spain, Machado also expressed her astonishment that Barboza could ask what the reasons might be for the country's current plight "after nearly 18 years of a corrupt dictatorship...totalitarian narco-socialism is the root cause of the destruction and chaos...or is it [the UNT] trying to hide or manipulate this tragedy to facilitate the soap opera of talks with the dictatorship?"

The more hard-line MUD parties had wanted the legislative leadership committee to provide much tougher opposition to the Maduro administration and to oppose the latest in a long line of dialogue processes taking place in the Dominican Republic. Soy Venezuela described the forthcoming round of talks with the government on 18 January as "madness". Ledezma quoted Einstein on Twitter: "insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results". Machado said the dialogue process simply served the government by "giving it what it most wants: time".

Glas impeachment shelved

A legislative commission voted on 7 January to archive an impeachment process against Ecuador's former vice-president Jorge Glas. It argued that the national assembly was not empowered under the constitution to impeach a former vice-president, deputies having voted to appoint María Alejandra Vicuña to the position the previous day. Glas was convicted for receiving some US\$13.5m in bribes out of a total of US\$35.5m which the Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht had admitted paying to Ecuadorean officials during the Correa administration in exchange for the award of state public works contracts. Correa insisted that Glas was a political prisoner.

Violent unrest

On 13 January the governor of the central state of Guárico, José Vásquez, of the ruling Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV), said that 22 shops had been "looted" in the city of Calabozo, 10 of them food stores. Vásquez also said that a state food depot was attacked with Molotov cocktails. The Bolivarian national guard (GNB) fired tear gas and rubber-coated metal pellets to disperse the looters.

Since Christmas there has been a series of lootings nationwide because of the shortages of food and other products and basic services. This is why a humanitarian corridor is the principal demand of the MUD in the national dialogue process, although the government (as so often in the past) blamed the opposition for fomenting the unrest.

Somewhat surprisingly, given that the government has flatly refused to entertain the establishment of a humanitarian corridor, Maduro claimed on 16 January while delivering his annual message to the constituent assembly (rather than the national assembly as customary), that agreement had been reached on all seven points under discussion with the MUD in the Dominican Republic. He provided no further details.

Fugitive Pérez gunned down

Oscar Pérez, a rogue officer from the investigative police (CICPC), and a small group of fellow dissidents, was killed in a bloody clash with security forces this week. Pérez famously stole a police helicopter last June and flew it over the headquarters of the supreme court and interior ministry attacking them with grenades and gunfire, and made surprise appearances in various anti-government protests subsequently. He transmitted the attack on his hideout in the mountainous area of El Junquito, Libertador municipality, in western Caracas live on social networks as it came under assault.

"They don't want us to surrender, they literally want to kill us," Pérez said in his last recording posted on Instagram, his face covered in blood. A statement issued by the interior, justice, and peace ministry claimed that "the heavily armed terrorists... opened fire on officials negotiating their surrender and tried to detonate a vehicle full of explosives".

Pérez was killed along with six comrades-in-arms after a 10-hour operation carried out by around 100 members of the security forces, including the GNB, the police special action force (Faes), and military counterintelligence (DGCIM). Two officers were killed and five injured. Heiker Vásquez, the leader of the pro-government armed group, or 'colectivo', Las Tres Raíces del 23 de Enero, who was (irregularly) present in the armed attack, was also killed.

In his annual message delivered to the constituent assembly, President Maduro made passing reference to the armed clash in El Junquito, saying that Pérez had "terrorifying" plans to destabilise the government this year.

ECUADOR | POLITICS

Ruling party succumbs to schism

The rupture within the ruling left-wing Alianza País (AP) was formalised this week when former president Rafael Correa (2007-2017) confirmed that he and 28 legislative deputies were abandoning the AP to set up a new party. Any hopes President Lenín Moreno might have had of resolving the conflict within the AP now seem dead in the water. Correa and the RC will provide more vigorous opposition to Moreno's upcoming national referendum than the formal opposition, which is broadly in favour of it. The AP splinter group also leaves Moreno without a majority in the 137-seat national assembly.

Growth recovering
President Moreno expressed confidence this week that Ecuador's economy was picking up. His comments followed the publication of figures by the country's central bank showing that GDP grew by 3.8% year-on-year in the third quarter of 2017.

The new party, Revolución Ciudadana (RC), which carries Correa's initials, has been in the pipeline for several weeks [WR-17-48], but the catalyst for the definitive split within the AP was a ruling by the litigious electoral court (TCE) on 15 January. The TCE ruled in favour of the AP faction loyal to President Moreno in the bitter internal battle for control of the party leadership. It rejected an appeal by Deputy Gabriela Rivadeneira, the former executive secretary of AP, against a resolution by the national electoral council (CNE) last November registering the party leadership committee proposed by Moreno with Ricardo Zambrano as executive secretary.

Rivadeneira, one of Correa's staunchest allies, responded combatively to the TCE ruling by refusing to recognise "those who have stolen and usurped political leadership [of the AP]". Flanked by other Correístas outside AP headquarters in Quito, she said that while Morenistas could "keep control of the material trappings of power [such as the party headquarters around the country]," Correa would "take popular support [for the AP] with him".

Rivadeneira vowed that the RC would provide firm support for the 'No' campaign ahead of the national referendum on 4 February, which seeks, inter alia, to end indefinite presidential re-election (thus barring Correa from making a re-election bid in 2021) and to restructure the Consejo de Participación Ciudadana y Control Social (CPCCS), the fourth branch of government which is responsible for appointing constitutional court magistrates, the attorney general, the comptroller general, and CNE and TCE members. Correístas have denounced the proposed reform of the CPCCS, ostensibly to depoliticise the body, as a naked power grab by Moreno.

Correa, who is back in Ecuador rallying nationwide support to reject the referendum, took time out to visit a CNE centre in the central province of Los Ríos to disenroll as a member of the AP, appealing to his supporters to leave the AP en masse. Launching the RC, however, might not be as straightforward as Correa had hoped. The CNE refused to issue it with the formal documentation required to register as a party this week. The CNE said that the breakaway faction would have to "get its documents in order" if it wanted to be considered for registration. The CNE denied it was being wilfully obstructive, arguing that there were 500 parties in Ecuador seeking registration but only 160 had obtained recognition from the electoral body.

Moreno's difficulties

Moreno faces problems of his own. The departure of 28 of the 74 AP legislative deputies, along with allied local movements, leaves him without a majority in the 137-seat national assembly. The immediate difficulty for the Moreno administration is that several of the deputies in question head important legislative commissions on the economy, justice, workers' rights, international relations, and education. The Morenista faction is calling on them to resign these positions but they are refusing to budge. They could block the government's legislative agenda, especially in key areas such as economic reform.

Given his loss of support within the AP, Moreno will have been buoyed by having managed to muster a majority in the national assembly on 6 January for the acting vice-president María Alejandra Vicuña to be appointed in a permanent capacity to replace Jorge Glas, who was sentenced to six years in prison for corruption last month.

In total 70 deputies voted in favour of Vicuña's appointment. This in spite of 31 AP deputies loyal to Correa boycotting the vote. To win the day, however, Moreno was reliant on votes from the political opposition. These could be much more difficult to win in the future and will require the Moreno administration to demonstrate an aptitude for consensus-building.

UNSC

disappointment

Speaking at the 10 January UNSC special session on the Colombia peace process, the United Kingdom's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Matthew Rycroft, who is the main UNSC rapporteur on the peace process, expressed his disappointment and concern at the breakdown of the ceasefire between the ELN and the Colombian government. "I hoped that today we would be able to talk about a renewed ceasefire between the government and the ELN. Instead I'm disappointed and concerned by the news that the ELN has broken the ceasefire and wasted an opportunity to establish a sustained peace," Rycroft said. He went on to urge the government and the ELN to "work together to find a way to avoid further civilian suffering".

UN expresses concern over peace process progress

Recent setbacks to the Colombian peace process have produced deep concern in the international community. The level of concern is such that at the United Nations (UN) Secretary General, António Guterres, decided to conduct a two-day visit to Colombia to offer his full support for the peace process and urge the government led by President Juan Manuel Santos to strive to conclude a process that has helped to reduce violence and improve public security in Colombia and across the region.

The UN Security Council (UNSC) held a special session on 10 January to analyse the progress being made in the peace process. The main aim of the session was to discuss the reports by the head of the UN special mission to Colombia, Jean Arnault, on the implementation of the peace deal that the government signed with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc) in 2016. However, in the wake of the breakdown of the bilateral ceasefire that the government agreed with the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), and President Santos's subsequent decision to suspend talks [[WR-18-01](#)], the focus turned to salvaging the peace negotiations with the guerrilla group.

During the special session, the UNSC members lamented the breakdown of the ceasefire with the ELN and called for this to be renewed, and for the two sides to return to the dialogue table (*see sidebar*). Colombia's Vice President Oscar Naranjo, who attended the special session, said that the Santos government remained fully committed to negotiating peace with the ELN but that the talks could not continue amid a resumption of hostilities by the guerrilla group. Despite Naranjo's assurances, the UNSC was sufficiently concerned about the future of the dialogue with the ELN, and the prospect of a sudden upsurge in violence in the country after the ceasefire helped to bring homicide levels to record low levels, to take significant action.

This involved Guterres announcing that he would visit Colombia on 13 and 14 January to oversee the progress being made in the implementation of the peace deal with the Farc personally and to urge the ELN and the government to set their negotiations back on track. After meeting Santos, Guterres expressed the UN's continued support for the peace process (*see below*) and publicly called on both the government and the ELN to refrain from further violence, agree to a new ceasefire, and resume the peace dialogue. Arguing that there is no "justification for violence", Guterres called on both sides to "cease all military actions and re-establish a serious and constructive dialogue as quickly as possible". Guterres added that he had instructed Arnault to take all necessary steps to help re-establish talks.

But Guterres's calls fell on deaf ELN ears. While he was still in Colombia, ELN guerrillas launched a series of armed attacks targeting oil infrastructure and the security forces. Colombia's state-owned oil firm Ecopetrol reported that its Transandino oil pipeline, which links Colombia to Ecuador, had been targeted by a bomb attack by suspected ELN fighters, producing an oil spill that contaminated the River Güiza in Colombia's south-western border department of Nariño. This was the sixth attack on oil infrastructure attributed to the ELN since the expiry of the ceasefire. Meanwhile that same day the attorney general's office reported that an Ecopetrol contractor had been abducted and taken hostage by suspected ELN guerrillas in the municipality of Saravena, located in the eastern department of Arauca close to the border with Venezuela.

The attacks on oil infrastructure and the security forces have been interpreted as an attempt by the ELN to strengthen its position in the negotiations

Venezuela border humanitarian crisis

During his meeting with United Nations Secretary General António Guterres, Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos asked for United Nations assistance to deal with the humanitarian crisis resulting from the mass arrival of Venezuelan nationals to Colombian border towns in search of food and medicine as Venezuela continues to suffer from a deep economic crisis. Santos said that the arrival of "hundreds of thousands" of Venezuelans to Colombia (470,000 according to figures from the Colombian authorities) was putting a strain on the emergency services and communities in the border areas. Guterres responded by recognising that the mass arrival of Venezuelans seeking humanitarian assistance was "impacting" Colombia and promising UN support.

with the government by showing that it is still a force with which to be reckoned. But the abduction of the Ecopetrol contractors looks like a major act of defiance. One of the pre-conditions set by the Santos government for establishing peace negotiations with the ELN was for the guerrilla group to release all hostages and abandon the practice of kidnapping for ransom. As such, it is unsurprising that the government has insisted that while it remains committed to negotiating a peace with the ELN this will not happen until the guerrilla group makes "unequivocal acts in support of peace" and commits to renewing the ceasefire.

Improving security in Tumaco

During his visit to Colombia, Guterres said that while he was satisfied that the Colombian government was making progress in implementing all the aspects of the peace deal reached with the Farc, more needed to be done to increase state presence in areas previously controlled by the guerrilla group to improve public security and promote the social reintegration of demobilised fighters in these areas.

Guterres's remarks come amid efforts to crack down on drug trafficking and shore up public security in areas that were in Farc hands. On 8 January the government announced the deployment of 2,000 armed forces personnel to the Pacific port city of Tumaco, Nariño department. Tumaco has long been a hot spot of guerrilla and drug trafficking activity, in large part because it is one of the country's major coca-producing areas.

Since the withdrawal of the Farc from the area the security forces have moved in to try to prevent Tumaco from being overrun by other guerrilla or drug trafficking groups, and to conduct forceful eradication of coca crops. But this has produced some violent clashes with local coca farmers.

The government explained that the new military deployment formed part of its 'Exódo 2018' operation consisting of the mobilisation of 9,800 army, navy, air force, and police personnel, the largest of its kind in Colombia's history, that is to "provide security to Nariño and the south-west of the country, decisively attacking all threats affecting the local community".

TRACKING TRENDS

COLOMBIA | New minimum salary. President Juan Manuel Santos has confirmed that his government and representatives from trade unions and private sector lobbies have agreed to a 5.9% increase to the national minimum wage.

Santos's announcement that the new minimum salary has been set at Col\$781,242 (US\$268.16) came in the wake of the government's having to convene an emergency meeting to discuss the minimum salary after no agreement could be reached during a series of meetings of the permanent national minimum salary council. Reaching a consensus in the council proved difficult amid differences between the government and the unions over the appropriate level of increase.

The unions argued that the 2016 fiscal reform, which came into full effect last year, had eroded the purchasing power of workers by increasing the tax burden, and they called for a 7%-9% increase. However, the business sector lobbies and the government argued that since national inflation, which closed 2016 on 5.75%, had consistently fallen last year to finish on around 4%, a minimum salary increase of around 5% would be sufficient.

In the end the Santos government budged slightly and agreed to settle on a higher increase than it had initially been seeking. Santos hailed the agreement over the minimum salary for this year noting that it was only the third time that a consensus agreement on the matter had been reached between the unions, business leaders, and the government during his term. Consensus agreements over the minimum salary had previously been reached in 2011 and 2013, while in all other years no agreement could be reached, and the minimum salary was ultimately set by the government.

Reclaiming Brazil's middle ground

With nine months to go, a question mark hangs over who will represent the political centre in Brazil's presidential elections. Pressure is growing for a moderate to emerge between the extremes of far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro from the Partido Social Cristão (PSC) party and the leftist former president Lula da Silva (2003-2011) from the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT). But in an age of *Twitter* rants, fake news, and rising populism, centrist candidates are struggling to make their voices heard.

There is no shortage of presidential hopefuls running on a centrist platform in Brazil. The most obvious is São Paulo governor Geraldo Alckmin from the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), who lost out to Lula in the 2006 presidential elections. Then there is market darling and finance minister Henrique Meirelles from the Partido Social Democrático (PSD), running on a pro-market reform agenda. A third alternative is the television star and businessman turned politician, João Doria Júnior. But, so far, none of these names has managed to gain traction and all are polling poorly.

This week, another two potential centrist contenders tossed their hats into the electoral ring, which could knock others out of the running: TV star Luciano Huck (not yet affiliated with any party), and head of the federal chamber of deputies Rodrigo Maia from Democratas (DEM). The latter is currently second in line to the presidency and would already be in power if the attempts to impeach President Michel Temer had succeeded.

Both Huck and Maia are unknown quantities, having been excluded from most electoral polls. Despite outwardly denying they wanted to run, they are both moving to shore up their support bases. Moreover, their advisers have reportedly asked for their names to be included in future polls. The deadline for them to decide is 7 April, six months before the election.

Battle of the reformists

Maia could displace Meirelles as the market-friendly choice to represent the centre in next year's elections. Maia has an edge over Meirelles because he is a smooth political operator where the finance minister is more of a technocrat. "If I am seen as an alternative [candidate], it is because there is an open door," Maia said.

But Meirelles and Maia share the same weaknesses – namely their proximity to the unpopular Temer. Moreover, they are both under pressure to explain why the pensions reform to correct the fiscal deficit has not gone through, especially after the international credit rating agency Standard & Poor's downgraded Brazil's credit rating (*see below*).

Doria vs Huck

Meanwhile, Huck has eclipsed Doria as the rising centrist star with a non-conventional background. The media personality has already been courted by various parties, including the Partido Popular Socialista (PPS), and appeals to both the Left and Right.

Huck is already a household name. Around 18m people tune into his weekly talk show, *Caldeirão do Huck*, double the audience of the Brazilian version of *The Apprentice*, in which Doria used to star. While Doria's approval ratings have been on a downwards trajectory since he became mayor of São Paulo,

Comparisons with the US

Rightly or wrongly, the US has become a reference point for observing the Brazilian elections. Last year, local journalists christened Geraldo Alckmin as Brazil's Hillary Clinton and Jair Bolsonaro as Donald Trump. Most recently, they likened Luciano Huck to Oprah Winfrey for blurring the lines between politics and entertainment and becoming a "trending topic".

Further setbacks for the PT

Besides putting Lula on trial, the judiciary has moved against his main allies. On 15 January, former São Paulo mayor Fernando Haddad (2013-2017) was accused of receiving irregular donations to fund his 2012 campaign. Meanwhile, PT president Gleisi Hoffmann is under investigation for money laundering by the supreme court. This will make it more difficult for the PT to find a replacement if Lula cannot run.

Huck has extremely high approval ratings of over 60%, according to an Ipsos poll from November. However, it is unclear whether his popularity would translate into electoral success or whether people just think he is a good presenter.

While Huck has repeatedly denied running for the presidency, not everyone is convinced. "It looks like a candidate, talks like a candidate, but says it is not a candidate?" mused Ricardo Noblat, columnist for weekly newspaper *Veja*. His comments came after Huck starred as a guest speaker on the Sunday night show *Domingão do Faustão* in which he delivered a diatribe against Brazil's corrupt establishment; spoke about the need to reclaim political spaces; and presented himself as a beacon of hope who could restore faith in the system and make life better for future generations.

Huck's impassioned speech certainly attracted attention, but not necessarily for the right reasons. The PT has since filed a lawsuit against Huck at the electoral court (TSE), for allegedly violating campaign rules by using the show to promote his own political platform while discrediting other candidates.

Under Brazil's electoral law, TV time for those running in the general election is tightly scripted. Candidates are only allowed radio and TV time in the designated electoral period, which starts in August and lasts between 35 and 45 days. The amount of radio and TV time individual candidates get is allocated proportionally based on the number of seats their party has in congress.

But again this method is not entirely fair. Candidates like Maia and Alckmin are already lobbying to recruit other centrist parties to join a coalition so they will be entitled to more TV time and can prove the viability of their candidacies.

The Huck effect

Huck possesses two winning qualities which the more traditional centrist candidates lack: charisma and the ability to capture an audience. Whether he runs or not, his popularity puts pressure on establishment politicians like Alckmin to step up their game.

While the consensus is that Alckmin will represent the PSDB in the next election, this is by no means a given. He still needs to prove he can unite the centrist parties and "broadcast a message to Brazilians" to stand a chance of winning, former (PSDB) president Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2003) says.

In the meantime, the centre remains highly fragmented, increasing the chances that Bolsonaro or Lula will win. "My fear is that the centre will not organise itself," Cardoso said. "There is the danger that a demagogue will win," he added. "But I think there is still time to organise the centre."

Lula's trial approaches

On 24 January, a regional appeals court (TRF-4) will determine whether or not to uphold a conviction against former president Lula for passive corruption and money laundering. This will determine both Lula's political future and whether or not he can run in October's presidential elections.

Lula's allies and foes will line up outside the court in Porto Alegre, capital of the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul. Both sides are planning mass demonstrations, with the PT asking its followers to "occupy" the city. "To imprison Lula, they are going to have to imprison many people but more than that they will have to kill people," PT party president Gleisi Hoffmann said.

Meanwhile, members of the judiciary have called on local authorities to reinforce security amid fears that mounting political tensions will culminate in violence. Already, several TRF-4 judges have claimed to be the victims of online threats. They asked for extra protection to ensure the trial is conducted independently.

Cartes under fire

The suspected death of Abraham Fehr Banman at the hands of the Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo (EPP) elicited serious criticism of the government led by President Horacio Cartes. Deputy Pastor Vera Bejarano of the main opposition Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico (PLRA) said that it showed that the Cartes government is “insensitive” to the plight of the people of northern Paraguay. “The government has not done what it needed to do, provide security for these people,” Vera said. More scathingly, Ramón Lindstron, the brother of Luis Alberto Lindstron, who was kidnapped and killed by the EPP in 2013, said that “it is shameful that the Cartes government talks about democracy when we are being subjugated by a criminal group”.

Death of EPP hostages opens new security debate

The suspected death of one of the Mennonites who had been taken hostage by the insurgent Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo (EPP) criminal organisation has led to the opening of a new chapter in the debate on national security in Paraguay. This hinges on what new strategies should be adopted by the government elected in the upcoming general election on 22 April to neutralise the persistent threat to national security posed by the EPP.

When President Horacio Cartes assumed office in 2013 he said that he would not allow a criminal group such as the EPP to determine his government’s agenda. However, throughout his five-year term ending in August the EPP has presented a constant threat, repeatedly perpetrating attacks on the security forces and setting alight farming equipment and electricity infrastructure in its ‘area of influence’ in northern Paraguay.

More worryingly, the EPP has managed to kidnap civilians for ransom throughout Cartes’ term despite the deployment of a military-police task force (FTC) to the north of the country to combat the criminal group. This has led the local population to lose confidence in the FTC and the government’s ability to deal with the EPP in general.

This lack of confidence has been most clearly manifested by the repeated decision by the communities directly affected by the EPP – and in particular the Mennonite settlers in northern Paraguay – to ignore government directives and try to negotiate the release of kidnapped community members. Mennonite communities have paid hefty ransoms and delivered food and provisions to deprived areas around Paraguay on orders from the EPP. But, despite this, the EPP has not released the three Mennonites that it still holds hostage. Further aggravating the situation, it is now believed that the EPP has killed one of these hostages even though his family followed all the criminal group’s instructions.

On 11 January, the FTC announced that it had found human remains buried in a shallow grave in a cattle ranch in San Pedro department believed to belong to the abducted Mennonite settler Abraham Fehr Banman. The FTC said that the body was found after its personnel followed the instructions found in a pamphlet signed by the EPP and left in the area, which gave directions to where Fehr could be found. The remains have been sent down to the capital, Asunción, to undergo DNA testing. But it is widely believed that they are those of Fehr, who was abducted in the nearby area in August 2015. Preliminary forensic analysis has determined that the remains had been buried over a year ago, suggesting that Fehr was killed soon after he was abducted despite his family’s attempts to negotiate his release.

This has raised serious concerns among the Mennonites and the wider community in northern Paraguay about the safety of the other EPP hostages. Mennonite communities organised a march on 14 January, near the town of Santa Rosa del Aguaray, San Pedro department, demanding the release of all EPP hostages. During the march, demonstrators expressed their frustration at the government’s failure to protect them; and they called for the development of a new public security strategy for the area that involves more than just the continued deployment of the FTC, which has failed to produce the expected results.

The call for a radical re-think of the strategies used to fight the EPP was picked up by political opposition leaders. Following the march, Efraín Alegre

Carnival

Rio de Janeiro will host around 1.5m tourists for Carnival this February, according to the state tourism ministry Riotur, up 400,000 from 2017. Last year, local mayor Marcelo Crivella rained on the samba parade by pointing out that lavish public spending on Carnival was incompatible with the austerity measures prescribed by President Michel Temer. But this year, Crivella changed his tune and got more into the Carnival spirit by allowing private companies to sponsor the mega-event, increasing the total budget to R\$3.5bn (US\$1.08bn), up R\$500m (US\$154.8m) from last year. He opened an interview with news site *G1* by singing “Whoever doesn’t like samba...isn’t a good mayor.”

of the main opposition Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico (PLRA) and the presidential candidate of the Alianza Ganar opposition electoral alliance, called for the establishment of a national dialogue over how to best improve public security in the north. Alegre invited all political and civil-society leaders including the presidential candidate of the ruling Asociación Nacional Republicana-Partido Colorado (ANR-PC) party, Mario Abdo Benítez, to take part in this dialogue. Alegre called for an initial round table to be held in Santa Rosa del Aguaray this week so that the demands of the local community could be heard.

“We need to listen to the people, the security forces, everyone,” Alegre said, adding that “unity and state policies are demanded to face the serious situation in the north of the country”. Coming up with a convincing new strategy to combat the EPP may prove to be a significant electoral issue.

TRACKING TRENDS

ARGENTINA | Inflation defies official forecasts. Argentina’s consumer price index rose to an annualised rate of 24.8% in 2017, overshooting the central bank’s top inflation target of 17%, the national statistics institute (Indec) reported last week.

In December 2017, consumer prices rose by 3.1%, marking the biggest monthly increase in inflation in the year, due to a sharp increase in utility tariffs resulting from the decision by the government led by President Mauricio Macri to continue with its plans to remove government subsidies on these gradually.

The year-end 2017 inflation figures represent a problem for the Macri government as they show that it still faces an uphill battle to bring inflation under control, after it peaked at around 40% on private sector estimates, under the previous administration led by former president Cristina Fernández (2007-2015). It also makes the government’s plans to continue rolling out its proposed economic reforms more difficult, as the persistently high inflation rate exacerbates the negative impact that these could have on the general population. This, in turn, makes public acceptance of the reforms more difficult to obtain. Failure to rein in inflation as Macri had promised also erodes public confidence in his government.

BRAZIL | Downgrade. International credit ratings agency Standard and Poor’s (S&P) downgraded Brazil’s credit rating this week to ‘BB-’ from ‘BB’, with a ‘stable’ outlook. This leaves Brazil’s credit rating three notches below investment grade on a par with countries like Bangladesh, the Dominican Republic, and Macedonia.

The downgrade comes after the government led by President Michel Temer failed to deliver on its promised pensions reform to reduce the fiscal deficit, which has hit a wall in congress. Further downgrades could follow if the government goes ahead with plans to bend the so-called ‘golden rule’, which could undermine its commitment to fiscal responsibility. The ‘golden rule’ stipulates that new debt cannot be issued by the government to finance current expenditures and should only be used for investment.

BRAZIL | Yellow fever. The World Health Organization (WHO) has added São Paulo state to the list of at-risk areas for yellow fever. This means anyone visiting the area must be vaccinated first and is advised to take precautionary measures to avoid getting bitten by mosquitos. The decision comes after the WHO noted a surge in yellow fever cases last winter. Since December 2016, the WHO has registered over 777 human cases of yellow fever and 261 people have died.

Brazil’s health ministry will distribute vaccines to all affected states. “We have the necessary stock to meet the needs of the Brazilian population. Today we have syringes to vaccinate 20m people and last week we asked the Pan-American Health Organisation (PAHO) for another 20m,” the acting health minister, Antônio Carlos Nardi, said.

Politics turned upside down

Alfonso Romo
 Andrés Manuel López Obrador also announced the appointment this week of Alfonso Romo as the man charged with forging links between business, government, and civil society in his campaign. Romo, a veteran businessman with strong previous links to PRI and PAN federal governments, is a recent convert to López Obrador's cause. Romo said he had always been suspicious of López Obrador before meeting him and being won over by the sincerity of his convictions. "I investigated him just as if it were a company I was buying," Romo said in an interview with the news magazine *Proceso* last November. Romo also expressed his belief that traditionally hostile middle class businessmen were coming around to López Obrador.

Never have political and ideological distinctions been so blurred in Mexico. Ricardo Anaya was formally registered as the presidential candidate of the left-wing Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) this week. Anaya, the former president of the right-wing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), is heading the electoral coalition Por México al Frente forged between the PAN, PRD, and left-wing Movimiento Ciudadano (MC). Meanwhile Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the radical left-wing presidential candidate, appointed a former PAN federal deputy as his campaign coordinator and urged PAN supporters to vote for him. Both Anaya and López Obrador cited the same common denominator to reach beyond the customary political dividing lines: combating corruption.

PRD anoints Anaya

Anaya was adopted as the PRD's presidential candidate during an event at the party's headquarters in Mexico City on 16 January, surrounded by leaders of the PRD factions, colloquially known as *tribus*: Héctor Bautista of Alternativa Democrática Nacional; Héctor Serrano of Vanguardia Progresista; Jesús Ortega and Jesús Zambrano of Nueva Izquierda; Guadalupe Acosta of Iniciativa Galileos; and Luis Arias and Hortensia Aragón of Foro Nuevo Sol. This show of unity, however, came the day after various PRD politicians, principally from the Izquierda Democrática Nacional *tribu*, defected to López Obrador's Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena), claiming that the PRD had lost its way backing Anaya.

This is the first time in its history that the PRD has selected a presidential candidate from outside of the party. Addressing the gathering, Anaya said he was sensible of the honour. Dressed in the PRD's yellow jacket, Anaya promised that he was committed to "humbly representing the legitimate aspirations" of PRD members and supporters. "Only together can we succeed...always putting Mexico first," Anaya said.

"In the PRD and the PAN we have no differences in our conviction to combat the three cancerous tumours that are overwhelming our country: corruption, violence, and inequality," Anaya said. He added that neither former PRI governor Roberto Borge nor Javier Duarte would be in jail if it were not for the PRD and PAN forging coalitions that won the gubernatorial elections in July 2016 in both Quintana Roo and Veracruz respectively, states which had always been in the hands of the PRI.

The president of the PRD, Manuel Granados, said the two parties were united in their determination to effect "regime change". Anaya agreed, adding that this "regime change" could not be "replacing one autocracy with another; neither *continuismo* under the PRI nor authoritarian restoration, concentration of power, personalism and *caudillismo*, which is what Morena represents".

López Obrador courts PAN

On the same day as the PRD confirmed Anaya as its presidential candidate, López Obrador announced during a rally in the north-eastern state of Nuevo León that Tatiana Clouthier, the daughter of Manuel 'Maquío' Clouthier, the PAN presidential candidate in 1998 who died in a suspicious motor accident the following year, would be his campaign coordinator. Tatiana Clouthier said that López Obrador embodied the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity that

César Duarte

‘Justice for Chihuahua. We demand from the Peña Nieto government the immediate extradition of César Duarte’ proclaim giant billboards erected in Chihuahua on 16 January. The word ‘fugitive’ is emblazoned in red beneath an image of Duarte, along with the phrase ‘wanted on 10 counts of embezzlement’.

had been abandoned by the PAN. She said, for instance, that he had promised to decentralise power, moving the majority of federal cabinet ministries away from Mexico City; and that he was the only candidate reaching out to the poor and downtrodden, favouring an economy with a human face, not the savage capitalism which had caused significant poverty in Mexico.

López Obrador praised Tatiana Clouthier’s democratic and human rights credentials. Clouthier, a former PAN federal deputy for the north-western state of Sinaloa, acknowledged pragmatically that part of her appeal to López Obrador was to reach out to voters in northern Mexico, where his popularity is lowest. This is also evident in the incorporation last month of the Partido Encuentro Social (PES), whose roots are in Baja California and northern Mexico, into his Juntos Haremos Historia electoral coalition.

López Obrador, meanwhile, urged “honest” members of the PAN to support him, accusing Anaya of being untrustworthy and betraying their party’s principles and insisting that he, not Anaya, was the man to deliver on combating corruption. At first blush, it might seem like no party would be less likely than the PAN to lose supporters to López Obrador. But there is profound disillusionment within the PAN at Anaya’s alliance with the PRD; some respect for the manner in which López Obrador has stood up to US President Donald Trump; and reassurance that he brought a former PAN ally in the form of the socially conservative PES into his coalition.

Corral combats corruption

Corruption was always going to be a major electoral campaign issue but it has been put centre stage by the governor of Mexico’s northern state of Chihuahua, Javier Corral. Corral addressed a rally of some 3,000 people in the state capital, also Chihuahua, on 14 January during which he lashed out at the federal government for withholding federal funds [\[WR-17-01\]](#), which he said constituted unjust punishment for his administration’s unswerving efforts to root out corruption.

“This is not just a message for Chihuahua,” Corral said, while addressing an extraordinary session of the PAN national council in Mexico City a day earlier, “but a message for all of the country’s governors that whosoever dares to touch the nerve centre of the system of corruption, knows that they will suffer what is happening to Chihuahua”. The PAN party president Damián Zepeda expressed “full solidarity” with Corral. Ricardo Anaya, meanwhile, accused the PRI of trying to dismiss “a legitimate fight against corruption being waged by Javier Corral, as electioneering”, which he flatly denied.

Despite this show of support, Corral accused the PAN of an equivocal stance on corruption, urging the party to end “simulation and shameful negotiations” in fighting against it. His remark seemed to be motivated in part by comments made days earlier by the PAN governor of the central state of Querétaro, Francisco Domínguez, the coordinator of the finance commission of the national confederation of governors (Conago). Domínguez had emphatically said that Conago had not received any complaints with relation to federal funds being withheld from any state.

Corral is determined to step up his campaign against political corruption. He announced that a ‘Caravan and march for dignity’ would set out on a 2,000km journey from Ciudad Juárez, on the US border, to Mexico City on 20 January to condemn what he called the federal finance ministry’s financial reprisals for his anti-corruption campaign and to demand that the federal government move to obtain the extradition of his (PRI) predecessor César Duarte, thought to be sheltering in the US, to face corruption charges.

Corral, who will personally launch the march and rejoin it at key points along the route, said that he hoped it would inspire “a revolution of conscience against political corruption, the scourge of the country”. He also sought to draw a historic parallel saying that the march would swell in numbers as it passed through the country to Mexico City “just as under [Francisco ‘Pancho’] Villa”, the revolutionary hero and Chihuahua native who descended on the capital in 1914.

A bad week for relations with The White House**Trump**

On 12 January, El Salvador's government sent its US counterpart a formal letter of protest at comments attributed in the media to US President Donald Trump that characterised the homelands of some immigrants as "shithole" countries – including El Salvador and Haiti. President Salvador Sánchez Cerén said he "vigorously rejected" the comments attributed to Trump, which also triggered outrage among some citizens.

"A national emergency". This is how Salvadorean online publication *El Faro* described the US government's decision, announced last week, to terminate the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) designation for El Salvador which temporarily allows those fleeing countries afflicted by war or natural disasters to live and work legally in the US. In line with President Donald Trump's hardline immigration policy, the move was not a surprise and followed similar decisions regarding Haiti and Nicaragua last year, with the decision on Honduras pending. However, it will have a particularly severe impact on El Salvador. There are 200,000 Salvadoreans in the US under TPS (compared with 50,000 Haitians and 2,500 Nicaraguans), while remittances accounted for some 16% of El Salvador's GDP in 2017.

The TPS designation for El Salvador was initially granted in the wake of two devastating earthquakes in 2001 that left hundreds of thousands in the country homeless. On 8 January, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen announced the decision to terminate the benefit – which will take effect in June 2019 – as the original conditions caused by the 2001 earthquakes "no longer exist".

The DHS statement claimed that, since 2001, El Salvador had received "a significant amount of international aid to assist in its recovery efforts, including millions of US dollars dedicated to emergency and long-term assistance [and] many reconstruction projects have now been completed". The DHS statement goes on to argue that, in recent years, the US government "has been repatriating individuals back to El Salvador – more than 39,000 in the last two years – demonstrating that the temporary inability of El Salvador to adequately return their nationals after the earthquake has been addressed".

The move has been widely criticised with, for instance, US legislators from both the Republican and Democratic parties, along with US-based human rights advocacy groups such as the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), questioning whether the conditions are there to receive returning nationals. Sceptics highlight the perennial issue of security given El Salvador has the highest homicide rates in the region (*see box below*) as well as food security concerns, and the impact on the economy.

In November 2017, seven US Republican members of the House of Representatives sent a letter to then DHS Acting Secretary Elaine Duke, calling for TPS to be renewed, noting the security situation in El Salvador "is very unstable". On 8 January Jason Cone, the executive director of international humanitarian NGO Médecins Sans Frontières USA, issued a statement pointing out that "in recent years, rates of violent death in El Salvador have been higher than in all countries suffering armed conflict except for Syria". Given this, Cone argues, "it is unfathomable to send people in the [US] back to El Salvador...the US is sending Salvadorans back to one of the most violent places in the world, and putting them at risk of death. This violates one of the most fundamental principles of international law".

With relation to other doubts regarding El Salvador's capacity to absorb the return of its nationals, in October 2017 US Democrat Senators Ben Cardin and Chris Van Hollen sent a letter to Duke and US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson highlighting the fact that 31% of the Salvadorean population lives below the poverty line. The letter also pointed out that, "in 2016, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization reported that due to a historic drought in the region, some 1.5 million people in Honduras and El Salvador are in need of humanitarian assistance".

Honduran talks

The so-called Coalición Partidaria comprises Alianza Patriótica Hondureña (APH), the party led by Romeo Vásquez Velásquez, who was commander of the armed forces when Manuel Zelaya was driven from office in 2009; Partido Anticorrupción (PAC); Demócrata Cristiano (DC); Unificación Democrática (UD); Frente Amplio; and Centro Social Cristiano VAMOS. The parties in the coalition called for urgent electoral reforms, offering to provide their good offices in support of a national dialogue to restore “order, peace, and justice” to Honduras and overcome a confrontation it described as “the product of overweening political ambition”. The APH won four seats in the 128-seat congress in November’s legislative elections; the PAC, DC, and UD one seat apiece.

There are also concerns regarding the impact on the economy which continually registers the slowest growth in Central America. Last month the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America & the Caribbean (Eclac) forecast 2.4% GDP growth for El Salvador in 2017 – well below the 3.3% average for Central America.

The latest figures from El Salvador’s central bank (BCR), released on 12 January, show that in 2017 the country received a total US\$5.02bn in remittances – up 9.7% on 2016 and equivalent to 15.8% of GDP. The US accounts for 97.2% of total remittances, followed by Canada (0.9%) and the European Union (0.9%). This led international credit ratings agency Moody’s Investor Service on 15 January to dub the US decision regarding TPS, “a risk for El Salvador’s economy”.

Latest homicide figures

At the start of the year, the director of El Salvador’s national police (PNC) Howard Cotto presented its annual balance sheet which showed a total of 3,954 homicides took place in El Salvador in 2017, which translates into a rate of 60 per 100,000 inhabitants. While down from 81 per 100,000 in 2016, this is still significantly higher than the rest of Central America.

In Honduras, at the start of the year, President Juan Orlando Hernández highlighted a 17-percentage-point fall in homicides – from 59 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016 to 42.7 in 2017. Guatemala’s police force also announced a slight drop in the homicide rate, from 27.3 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016 to 26.1 per 100,000 in 2016. As regards Nicaragua, back in December 2017 Nicaragua’s police director Aminta Granera reported that the homicide rate over the period August 2016-July 2017 was six per 100,000 inhabitants – the lowest in Central America and the country’s lowest rate for the past 16 years. Meanwhile, Costa Rica recorded 12 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2017 – albeit its highest level to date (*see page 16*).

HONDURAS | POLITICS

Hernández urges talks as violence flares up

Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández appealed to the political opposition this week to engage in “a sincere and elevated dialogue”. Hernández extended the invitation not just to Salvador Nasralla, his rival from the Alianza de Oposición contra la Dictadura, who claims he was denied victory in November’s elections by electoral fraud, but also Luis Zelaya, the candidate of the Partido Liberal, and former president Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009), Nasralla’s campaign coordinator who led a peaceful protest in Tegucigalpa days earlier which ended in violence.

“Dialogue is the way to construct a nation for everyone,” President Hernández said in the Twitter invite to his rivals. Nasralla initially replied on *Twitter* by saying that talks should be between just him and Hernández mediated by Ángel Edmundo Orellana, who served in the cabinet of Manuel Zelaya. Nasralla later added that “the theft of the elections” should be the only topic under discussion.

Six smaller parties formed a coalition (*see sidebar*) on 15 January calling upon Hernández and Nasralla to hold talks forthwith to strike an accord in the national interest as “hatred, division and polarisation is growing by the day”. Protests against electoral fraud outside the presidential palace in Tegucigalpa on 12 January ended in violent clashes with the police, who dispersed protesters with tear gas and water cannon, and the vandalism of local businesses.

Quotes of the week

“It is like boys, who have no notion of danger.”

Argentine trade union boss Luis Barrionuevo responds to cabinet chief Marcos Peña who he said had told him that there would be “no turning back” on the government’s proposed labour reform whatever strikes and protests the unions might organise.

“They can steal the [party] buildings but we will be left with the Revolution, we will be left with the principles.”

Ecuador’s former president Rafael Correa on his decision to abandon the ruling party Alianza País (AP).

“If Chihuahua fails in this new battle, an important part of hope in Mexico will die because this really touches on the pact of impunity.”

The governor of Mexico’s northern state of Chihuahua, Javier Corral.

Security dominates Costa Rican electoral debate

Costa Rica closed 2017 with a record 603 homicides (12 per 100,000 inhabitants), up from 579 in 2016, according to figures released by the judicial investigation police (OIJ). The issue dominated the second day of a two-day electoral debate organised by the electoral authorities (TSE) last week ahead of next month’s general elections. The government led by President Luis Guillermo Solís links the rise in domestic violence to growing international drug trafficking.

Presidential candidates are proposing to address the security issue with a mixture of *mano dura* (repressive policies) and more preventative measures aimed at tackling the root causes, such as poverty and unemployment. These different approaches are evident within the proposals of the three main contenders (all from opposition parties): Juan Diego Castro (Partido Integración Nacional, PIN); Rodolfo Piza (Partido Unidad Social Cristiana, PUSC); and Antonio Alvarez Desanti (Partido Liberación Nacional, PLN).

Castro, the current frontrunner, is leaning towards a more ‘mano dura’ response. A former security minister (1994-1996) who served under the PLN presidency of José María Figueres (1994-1998), Castro is promising to draw up a “more comprehensive national security policy involving all three State powers” and is calling for more prisons to be built with international loans and for those found bearing illegal arms to receive prison sentences. Piza and Alvarez would seem to be in favour of a more preventative approach, providing young people at risk of falling into delinquency with other opportunities. The two are also promising better technology for the police to improve crime prevention as well as better cooperation with neighbours like Panama and Colombia to crack down on transnational organised crime.

The most recent public opinion poll by the Universidad de Costa Rica’s centre for research and policy studies (Ciep), released last month, showed Castro on 18% of voting intentions (up from 15% in November 2017) while Piza is on 13% (up from 11%) and Alvarez is on 14% (down from 17%). It is worth pointing out that the error margin was 2.5%. Indicative of public disaffection with the political class as a whole, the number of undecided voters is still at 34%, little changed from 37% as measured in November.

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