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## López Obrador lays down marker in Mexico

Mexico's pre-campaign ahead of presidential and congressional elections on 1 July is over. In some respects, it was a bit of a damp squib. The three principal presidential aspirants stood unopposed so the envisaged internal contests to deepen democratic participation never took place. The pre-campaign was instructive, however, because while it was not designed as such it served as a forerunner of the campaign proper with the main candidates seeking to gain some traction. Above all, it showed that Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the early frontrunner, will stay the course, applying the lessons of his two failed bids for the presidency in 2006 and 2012, and benefiting from propitious external developments.

### Meade stuttering

José Antonio Meade, the presidential pre-candidate of the Todos por México coalition spearheaded by the federally ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), concluded his pre-campaign with a rally in the municipality of Tlalnepantla in the Estado de México (Edomex). Traditionally a bastion of support for the PRI, Edomex only remained in the party's hands in last year's gubernatorial elections because of a divided opposition. Flanked by the governor, Alfredo del Mazo Maza, and several former governors, as well as figures from within the federal government led by President Enrique Peña Nieto, Meade said he would be inspired by the PRI's victory in Edomex.

Meade will only officially become the Todos por México presidential candidate at a convention of delegates on 18 February after the internal contest that never was. He is already under pressure, however, to shake up his team, after failing to make any impact on the polls.

"[Meade] must speak more clearly to the people. Change his discourse. Direct himself more to bricklayers than engineers," Francisco Labastida suggested during the event in Tlalnepantla. Labastida, who in 2000 became the first PRI presidential candidate to suffer electoral defeat (at the hands of Vicente Fox who, ironically, now supports Meade) also suggested that Meade distance himself from Peña Nieto, whose approval rating of 26% is the lowest for a Mexican head of state since records began. Meade's main campaign coordinators are drawn from the cabinet. He might feel the need to give a more prominent role to the PRI's main ally, Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM), to support his candidacy.

There are also rumours of internal division within the PRI as Meade's campaign fails to take off. The current affairs magazine *Proceso* claimed on 13 February that PRI federal deputies were conspiring to topple the party president Enrique Ochoa Reza. In an article entitled 'The final hours of Enrique Ochoa in the PRI', *Proceso* claimed that nearly all of the party's 204

## A changed man?

Andrés Manuel López Obrador said in his interview with *El Universal* this week that he had no vendettas. He said he was not interested in investigating the Peña Nieto administration for corruption: "It is not the job of the incoming president to pursue the outgoing president." He even said that if he were to lose the elections he would return to his home in the southernmost state of Chiapas and would not lead any protests against electoral fraud (he brought Mexico City to a standstill in 2006).

federal deputies met the party coordinator in the lower chamber, Carlos Iriarte, this week to demand that Peña Nieto dismiss Ochoa before the official campaign begins on 30 March. Iriarte subsequently denied that there was any such rebellion.

According to *Proceso*, PRI federal deputies are up in arms about Ochoa's designation of candidacies for federal and local deputies and senators without consulting the local party leadership. Opinion surveys also show the PRI is behind in all eight states where gubernatorial elections are being held concurrently with the presidential and congressional contests on 1 July.

In addition, Ochoa is being blamed for his failure to prevent defections. Otniel García, the PRI federal deputy representing the state of Durango, defected from the PRI to López Obrador's Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena) this week. García had been overlooked to run for a seat in the senate for the PRI but will get his wish on Morena's ticket. Ochoa put the seal on a poor pre-campaign during a rally in the southern state of Tabasco on 10 February when he blasted PRI defectors with an ill-judged play on words: "los PRIetos no aprietan" (literally "dark-skinned people don't pull" or "aren't successful").

## López Obrador excelling

López Obrador concluded his pre-campaign in the states of Guanajuato and Jalisco. He will formally assume the presidential candidacy of his coalition Juntos Haremos Historia during a rally in Mexico City on 18 February. He is sounding increasingly confident. In an interview with the national daily *El Universal* on 13 February, López Obrador asserted that "we are better equipped than in 2006 and 2012 and the people are more determined to back a true change". He also hailed the importance of social networks, not just to get the message out but "to defend ourselves from a dirty war". López Obrador has the upper hand on social media, with by far the largest following on *Twitter* of any presidential candidate (at 3.55m, more than triple that of Meade), and the greatest name recognition.

López Obrador has also shown himself to be far more pragmatic than in the past. A case in point is the alliance forged this week with Elba Esther Gordillo, who left prison for house arrest last December after four years and 10 months behind bars for embezzlement. The former leader of the powerful teachers' union Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (SNTE) is seeking to regain her influence. Back in 2006, López Obrador said Gordillo had offered to support him and he had snubbed her because he was determined to come to power "with our integrity and principles intact". Now he is maintaining that "If the teachers and people close to Elba Esther are ready to help transform the country, with no conditions attached, they are all welcome."

The people close to Elba Esther are ready to help transform her fortunes if not those of the country. Gordillo's inner circle met López Obrador on 10 February in the state of Zacatecas. Emissaries included her grandson, former federal deputy René Fujiwara, former deputy education minister Fernando González Sánchez, and Senator Rafael Ochoa Guzmán, the former SNTE secretary general (2001-2011) who broke with the Partido Nueva Alianza (Panal) to form a teachers' movement, Redes Sociales Progresistas, backing López Obrador. Since striking its alliance with the PRI, the Panal has seen several prominent defections to López Obrador.

Mexico's second-largest teachers' union, Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (CNTE), which has tenaciously opposed the Peña Nieto administration's education reform, is also backing López Obrador. Gordillo and the CNTE are strange bedfellows. The CNTE has always been highly critical of Gordillo's authoritarian style. But they appear to have buried their differences, publicly at least, because they share the desire to see the education reform diluted. López Obrador is promising to change the reviled

## Independent candidates

Margarita Zavala carried out a 'firmatón' (large signature-gathering event) in the Ciudad de México (CDMX) on 12 February to get the last 2,000 votes she needed to reach the threshold of 1% of the electoral roll in the state. This meant she had amassed 1% of the electoral roll in 17 of Mexico's 32 different states, the bare minimum, and the total of 866,593 votes needed. Two other independent candidates have amassed sufficient valid votes at national and state level: Jamie 'El Bronco' Rodríguez Calderón, who only three years ago became Mexico's first independent state governor after winning election in Nuevo León, and Senator Armando Ríos Piter, who left the PRD last April to make a bid for the presidency as an independent.

teacher evaluation process, although this could be difficult to deliver given the secondary legislation approved at federal and state level.

The party president of the left-wing Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), Manuel Granados, accused Morena of "incoherence" by inviting Gordillo, someone it had denigrated as "part of the mafia of power", to join López Obrador's ranks. Granados also claimed that the PRI and Morena were vying for control of the SNTE. The PRI-backed Juan Díaz de la Torre was re-elected as secretary general of the SNTE on 12 February. In a swipe at Gordillo, De la Torre insisted he would "avoid the temptation of [past] leaders...believing that...the SNTE is our own personal or family patrimony". Presidential candidates cannot ignore the teachers' unions not just because of their vote-pulling power (1.6m teachers, for instance, are affiliated to the SNTE) but also their organisational capacity.

### Anaya growing

Ricardo Anaya, the presidential pre-candidate of the Por México al Frente coalition between the right-wing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and leftist PRD and Movimiento Ciudadano (MC), concluded his pre-campaign on 11 February in the port city of Coatzacoalcos in the eastern state of Veracruz. He grabbed most attention that day not for the rally but for a video he uploaded to social networks in which a Jeep can be seen following him from Mexico City to Coatzacoalcos.

Anaya denounced that he was being pursued by agents from the intelligence agency Centro de Investigación y Seguridad Nacional (Cisen). He stopped his car and went back to confront the driver of the Jeep who admitted to being a Cisen agent. Anaya appealed to the government to explain why he was being tailed. "What are the criteria for spying on opposition politicians?" he asked bluntly. The interior minister, Alfonso Navarrete, confirmed that Cisen agents are following presidential pre-candidates to monitor electoral activities but no individuals were being targeted. Navarrete insisted that this constituted "surveillance not spying". He did not explain the semantic distinction.

### Phoney war

With the pre-campaign period over, there is now an odd 47-day hiatus until the end of March before the official campaign gets underway. The time is supposed to be spent by parties to formulate their electoral strategies after the internal contests. Candidates can be interviewed by the media, and question the prevailing situation in Mexico, but not make direct reference to their electoral campaign. The national electoral institute (INE) will also allow party publicity but only with "generic content". There can be no rallies. Writing in the national daily *Reforma*, the columnist Sergio Sarmiento questioned the point of the inter-campaign period, arguing that "whoever breaks the rules most skilfully will be the chief beneficiary".

A poll of polls by Oraculus published this week put López Obrador on 38.3%, more than 16 percentage points ahead of Meade on 21.8%, and two points up on December when the pre-campaign period began. The poll, which takes an average of nine recent opinion surveys by different pollsters, put Anaya second on 29.7%, up five points on December. López Obrador's poll support ranged from 34.8% to 41.8%; Anaya's from 26.4% to 33.1%. This suggests that Anaya is firmly in contention, although for now his best showing puts him the best part of two points adrift of López Obrador's worst showing in a separate poll.

The poll also shows support for Margarita Zavala, who abandoned the PAN last year to run as an independent, fell from 10% in December to 6%, virtually the same amount that Anaya has picked up. Zavala just met the requirements this week for registering as an independent candidate before the deadline of 19 February (see sidebar).

**Are electoral threats diminishing?**

The risk of electoral fraud and influence of illegal armed groups on Colombia's upcoming congressional and presidential elections in March and May respectively is down by more than a third on four years ago, according to a report just published by the local NGO Misión de Observación Electoral (MOE). The number of municipalities deemed by the MOE to be at "extreme risk", however, is up. The report was published shortly before the presidential candidate of the Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común (Farc), 'Timochenko' (Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri), suspended campaigning alleging a lack of "security guarantees", and guerrillas in the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) staged a series of attacks during a four-day 'armed strike'.

The MOE report claimed that a total of 170 of Colombia's 1,100 municipalities were at risk, down 34% on the same time ahead of the 2014 congressional and presidential elections. It concluded that there was an 'extreme risk' of electoral fraud or violence influencing the result in 64 of these 170 municipalities, including the national capital Bogotá and seven departmental capitals: Cartagena de Indias (Bolívar), Cali (Valle del Cauca), Ibagué (Tolima), Bucaramanga (Santander), Popayán (Cauca), San José del Guaviare (Guaviare), and Santa Marta (Magdalena). The MOE claimed that a further 65 municipalities were at 'high risk', and 41 'medium risk'. It concluded that the peace accord with the Farc had led to at least 79 municipalities ceasing to face electoral risk.

Critics of the MOE said that the inclusion of Bogotá on the list of municipalities at 'extreme risk' was exaggerated as the capital is not at the mercy of armed gangs. But the MOE contended that the upcoming elections had the lowest risk of violence since it began investigations in 2007, and that this had allowed the NGO to focus more on other threats such as corruption and clientelism. The MOE said that the practice of vote selling was rife in Bogotá, which concentrates 5.7m of the country's 36m eligible voters (almost 16%).

The MOE condemned in equal measure the threats to Miguel Matus, a senate candidate for the right-wing Centro Democrático (CD) who has denounced a plan by the ELN to assassinate him, and to Farc candidates. Shortly after the report was published the Farc halted its electoral campaigning. 'Timochenko' has been attacked in various places over the last 10 days since launching his campaign [WR-18-04]. Stones, eggs, tomatoes, and insults were hurled at him in the departments of Quindío and Valle del Cauca. He had to be protected from a hail of eggs on 7 February when leaving a press conference in Cali, where a man with a megaphone recited a list of Farc misdeeds in Valle del Cauca. Riot police (Esmad) had to intervene to control protesters in the city of Yumbo in the department, raising shields to repel stones launched at the Farc electoral caravan.

President Juan Manuel Santos reacted to the attacks by appealing for the public to show respect and tolerance and to stick to peaceful protests. But the Farc issued a statement announcing the suspension of campaigning until the government provided "sufficient guarantees". It denounced "successive attacks", which it insisted were not spontaneous but part of "a coordinated plan", an accusation laid at the door of Senator (and former president, 2002-2010) Álvaro Uribe's CD. On 12 February, 'Pablo Catatumbo' (Jorge Torres Victoria), a member of the Farc's political council (and formerly on the guerrilla group's secretariat), met the interior minister, Guillermo Rivera, to discuss security concerns.

**Electoral threats**

The MOE report concluded that the department with the largest number of municipalities at risk is Antioquia, followed by Norte de Santander, Chocó, Nariño, and Córdoba, with the biggest threats posed by the ELN and Farc dissidents. The three municipalities at most extreme risk, the MOE claimed, are Ituango (Antioquia), and El Tarra and Hacarí (Norte de Santander), the centre of disputes between illegal armed groups.

### **Mining massacre?**

Two days before the IACHR report was released, serious human rights violations appear to have been committed by the Venezuelan army in the south-eastern state of Bolívar. A total of 18 people were killed at the Cicapra mine in Guasipati after the army moved in. The official report alleges that the army came under fire, but the deaths were entirely one-sided.

“Massacres are the narco-dictatorship’s state policy,” Américo De Grazia, an opposition deputy representing Bolívar, said. “Did 18 citizens die and not a single soldier was injured?” he asked rhetorically. President Maduro declared the so-called Orinoco Mining Arc, extending 111,000km<sup>2</sup> from the border with Guyana in the east to Colombia in the west, as a strategic priority in 2016. Illegal mining, especially for gold, has mushroomed in the area amid the severe economic crisis.

### **ELN reverse**

Pablo Catatumbo claimed that ELN guerrillas had killed a Farc member last week. This followed the abduction and murder of three demobilised Farc guerrillas by the ELN, one of the reasons given for the decision by the attorney general’s office this week to request the issuance of 21 arrest warrants for ELN guerrillas, including five members of the central command (Coce). The judiciary duly obliged, issuing warrants for ‘Gabino’ (Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista), the maximum leader of the ELN, and even ‘Pablo Beltrán’ (Israel Ramírez Pineda), the guerrilla group’s chief peace negotiator in Ecuador, although the government ensured this was suspended in the latter’s case as he is in Quito awaiting the increasingly unlikely resumption of talks.

The remains of the three former Farc guerrillas were exhumed on 5 February in Santacruz de Guachavez, a rural municipality in the department of Nariño not far from the border with Ecuador. The attorney general’s office said the Coce bore responsibility not just for this incident, but also the recent forced recruitment of 45 Urubata and Kipara Embera Katío indigenous minors in the municipality of Tadó, Chocó.

The attorney general’s office has also opened 27 investigations in relation to the four-day ‘armed strike’ the ELN carried out in eight departments from 10-13 February. According to the commander of the armed forces, General Alberto José Mejía, the ELN launched around two dozen attacks on infrastructure during the ‘armed strike’. One of them claimed the life of a soldier when guerrillas tried to blow up a bridge between the municipalities of Tarazá and Valdivia, in Antioquia. Another soldier was killed when ELN guerrillas ambushed an army battalion carrying out a drug seizure in Tibú in the Catatumbo region of Norte de Santander.

## **VENEZUELA | POLITICS & DIPLOMACY**

### **Maduro undeterred as pressure builds**

The government led by President Nicolás Maduro has shown scant regard for regional and international criticism over the years, but this has reached a new tenor over the last few days leaving it looking more isolated than ever. Firstly, the International Criminal Court (ICC) announced that it would investigate crimes allegedly committed by the Venezuelan state. Then the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) released a savage critique of the breakdown of democratic order and violation of human rights in the country. Finally, 14 hemispheric foreign ministers meeting in Peru issued an uncompromising statement not only refusing to recognise the validity of the presidential election on 22 April but also declaring Maduro persona non grata at the 13-14 April Summit of the Americas.

On 8 February the prosecutor of the ICC, Fatou Bensouda, announced a preliminary examination of the situation in Venezuela in the context of demonstrations and related political unrest since at least April 2017. She singled out the allegations that “state security forces frequently used excessive force to disperse and put down demonstrations, and arrested and detained thousands of actual or perceived members of the opposition, a number of whom would have been allegedly subjected to serious abuse and ill-treatment in detention”. The ICC has received various denunciations, including a detailed report from the former attorney general Luisa Ortega [[WR-17-47](#)].

On the same day as Bensouda’s announcement, the European Parliament unveiled new sanctions on President Maduro and other high-ranking officials in the government and the state-owned oil company Pdvsa. It also criticised the government’s unilateral decision to advance the presidential elections.

## Poverty

The IACHR report was based on press, civil society organisations in Venezuela, and international human rights organisations because the hemispheric body has been barred from conducting a visit to the country since 2002. In addition to the erosion of democracy it contains sections on food, poverty, and housing. It estimates that, contrary to the government's claims that Venezuela has one of the lowest poverty rates in Latin America, poverty has risen to 82% of Venezuelans with 51% living in extreme poverty.

On 12 February the IACHR released a 258-page report entitled 'Democratic Institutions, the Rule of Law and Human Rights in Venezuela'. The IACHR did not mince its words. It devoted a significant chunk of the report to detailing the Maduro administration's misuse of a malleable judiciary to subjugate the opposition-controlled legislature, the establishment of an illegitimate constituent assembly, and the suppression of dissent: "For democracy to be consolidated there has to be an institutional system rooted in the separation, independence, and balance of powers, along with the effective exercise of political rights through free and fair elections, and a commitment to respect and promote pluralism in society...these elements have not been present in Venezuela for several years and...in 2017...this state of affairs not only continued but worsened to a point at which it triggered an alteration of the constitutional order".

The IACHR went on to denounce the "dismantling of much of the democratic institutional system and the alarming increase in repression, violence, and citizen insecurity", and the "serious reprisals" meted out to "those who dissent", including "the destitution of mayors, governors, members of parliament, and opposition figures in general". It described as "unacceptable" the number of people "killed or detained in connection with arbitrary operations to suppress them".

The report, the third since 2003, concluded that the minimum guarantees were not in place for independent and impartial presidential elections. In presenting it, the IACHR's president, Francisco Eguiguren, said that "any democracy requires free, credible, and transparent elections. Any future electoral process will only have credibility and legitimacy if it complies strictly with these guarantees". Paulo Abrão, the executive secretary of the IACHR, promised to share information with the ICC, urging the Venezuelan government to stop living "in a state of denial about human rights violations".

The day after the publication of the IACHR report, foreign ministers of the 14-member Lima Group met in Peru to discuss Venezuela. Peru's foreign minister, Cayetana Aljovín, stated unequivocally that Maduro would "no longer be welcome" at the Summit of the Americas. The Lima Group cited the Quebec declaration, adopted at the third Summit of the Americas in Canada in 2001, stating that "any unconstitutional alteration or interruption of the democratic order in a state of the hemisphere constitutes an insurmountable obstacle to the participation of that state's government in the Summit of the Americas process". Noting both the ICC investigation and the IACHR report, the Lima Group's joint statement called on the government to present a new electoral timetable, and to open a humanitarian corridor.

Will any of this external pressure be brought to bear on the Maduro administration? The ICC moves painfully slowly; the government dismissed the IACHR report as "a selective and completely partial vision" (the IACHR cites the Maduro administration's response extensively having provided it with an advance copy of the document). The Lima Group statement is firm, but while the majority of Latin American governments are now united in condemning the actions of the Maduro administration they remain opposed to financial sanctions (especially on PdvsA for fear of worsening the humanitarian crisis), still less foreign intervention in Venezuela.

Julio Borges, the Venezuelan opposition's chief negotiator in the failed dialogue process in the Dominican Republic, announced on 14 February that he would tour the region seeking support for "free" and "just" elections in Venezuela, but it is not clear what he stands to gain from this beyond more rhetorical support. Maduro did make a small gesture to the opposition on the same day, however, by promising to reopen Venezuela's consulate in Miami, Florida, the country's largest expatriate community, to allow nationals there to vote.

**Enapu ruling**

In another ruling against the Peruvian state, last month the Corte-IDH ordered it to pay compensation to 28 workers from the state-run ports management firm (Enapu) who had been arbitrarily dismissed by the government led by Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000) in 1996. The Corte-IDH agreed that the workers had been dismissed with no justification and it rejected the Peruvian government's argument that they had been properly compensated after they were offered new contracts in 2003, on the grounds that these did not take into consideration their previous years of service to calculate things like salary levels and future pensions. Consequently, the Corte-IDH has ordered the Peruvian state to pay US\$55,000 in compensation to each Enapu worker.

**Clashing with Corte-IDH**

Peru's congress is refusing to accept a resolution issued by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (Corte-IDH) over a legacy human rights case. The issue looks like the prelude to a major institutional clash that may see Peru ignore the Corte-IDH's authority in a bid to protect a suspected political agreement that allowed President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski to avoid impeachment in December last year. Such a move could help to maintain political stability in the short-term by ensuring that Kuczynski completes his term. But it would have a negative effect on Peru's image and standing in the international community in the long-term.

On 9 February, the Corte-IDH issued a series of precautionary measures over the so-called 'El Frontón' human rights violation case that dates back to 1986. The case revolves around the allegations that Peru's armed forces carried out extrajudicial executions as they attempted to regain control of prisons in Lima following a series of riots that took place that year. In 2000 the Corte-IDH ruled that human rights abuses were committed during the operations and ordered Peru to clear up the case. Peru's judiciary has been trying to do this since. However, the Corte-IDH decided to issue new precautionary measures in relation to the case after formal abuse of authority complaints were presented by national legislators against four of the seven constitutional court (TC) justices, who last year ordered a new investigation into the actions of naval officers in the El Frontón case.

Legislators have accused justices Manuel Miranda, Marianella Ledesma, Carlos Ramos, and Eloy Espinosa-Saldaña of inappropriately changing a previous TC resolution from 2013 that found that no human rights abuses were committed by naval officers in the El Frontón case. But the Corte-IDH ordered the complaints and potential impeachment process against the justices in congress to be archived on the grounds that they could affect the processing of the El Frontón case. The Corte-IDH argues that the precautionary measures are necessary to ensure that the moves against the justices do not produce "unnecessary pressures" on the TC or on Peru's penal system to close the case.

The precautionary measures ordered by the Corte-IDH have been questioned by Peru's congress. Luis Galarreta, the president of congress from the main right-wing opposition Fuerza Popular (FP, Fujimoristas), said that the Corte-IDH order was "inapplicable" as it runs counter to Peru's constitution. Galarreta explained that the constitution gives congress the power to investigate public officials and to sanction them and impeach them if they are found guilty of committing administrative irregularities. He added that the constitution is also clear that congress is sovereign and cannot be told how to handle internal affairs by any foreign institution. Galarreta said that he would be writing to the Corte-IDH to ask it to clarify what its competencies are and in what circumstances it can intervene. He also said that he would discuss the issue with the presidents of congress in other Latin American countries to gather their opinions.

**Suspicious**

The strong stance adopted by Galarreta against the Corte-IDH measures has aroused suspicion in Peru that this is part of a strategy to undermine the court and withdraw Peru from its jurisdiction ahead of the hearing that it is due to hold on the recent presidential pardon granted to former president Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000). It is widely speculated that the pardon granted to Fujimori by President Kuczynski formed part of a backroom deal to avert his impeachment in the FP-dominated congress. Such suspicions acquired

## **Pafta**

On 12 February Peru's foreign trade & tourism minister, Eduardo Ferreyros Küppers, and his Australian counterpart, Steven Ciobo, signed the Peru-Australia Free Trade Agreement (Pafta) during a ceremony in Canberra, Australia. The two countries began negotiating a new trade agreement back in May 2017 as part of efforts to shore up bilateral trade relations. Noting that Pafta will eliminate almost all tariffs on goods traded by Peru and Australia after it comes into full effect in five years, Ferreyros said that the two countries believe that the liberalisation of bilateral trade will help to "reduce poverty and promote economic development". Two-way Peru-Australia trade reached US\$443m in 2016, a 51.2% year-on-year increase. But it is expected that this could increase further after Pafta is ratified by the two countries' respective legislatures and comes into full effect.

added weight after the actions of the Corte-IDH were also criticised by Kuczynski's Peruanos por el Cambio (PPK).

Deputy Juan Sheput, the spokesperson of the PPK congressional bench, has said that as a signatory of the Organization of American States (OAS) American Convention on Human Rights, which established the Corte-IDH, Peru must abide by the court's rulings. But Sheput went on to question the Corte-IDH's impartiality and suggested that the court was in need of reform. Sheput said that the Corte-IDH currently has a clear political bias towards the Left and that its actions are questionable. "If one analyses the trajectory of these [Corte-IDH] judges, indisputably all of them are biased towards the Left...the way in which the court acts is too biased towards an ideological sector," Sheput said in a 12 February interview with Peruvian media.

Sheput went on to say that, in light of this, the Peruvian government could promote a major overhaul of the Corte-IDH to restore its impartiality. "Peru could lead a Latin American consensus to demand that the OAS restructures the Corte-IDH, as it is now losing prestige over such rulings," Sheput said. Latching on to Sheput's comments, FP Deputy Carlos Tubino has been even more blunt, declaring that "hopefully the president will withdraw us from the Corte-IDH because it has not helped us at all". The TC's response to all of this has been to call on congress and the government to abide by the Corte-IDH orders and honour its commitment to uphold the American Convention on Human Rights.

### **Landmark supreme court ruling**

On 13 February, Peru's supreme court (CSJR) confirmed the conviction for human rights violations against one Peruvian army officer and one army intelligence agent for the kidnapping, torture, and rape of a university student detained in 1992, at the height of Peru's internal armed conflict (1980-2000), when the security forces were actively engaged in a 'dirty war' against leftist insurgent guerrillas and their supporters.

This is the first time that the CSJR has deemed that the abduction and rape of an individual by the security forces constitutes a crime against humanity, which carries longer prison sentences. It comes four days after the CSJR broke new ground in deciding to review the case, the first involving allegations of rape by the security forces in the context of the internal armed conflict. This sets a significant precedent given that Peru's truth & reconciliation commission has identified 534 cases of women who may have been raped by the security forces during the armed conflict.

## **TRACKING TRENDS**

**COLOMBIA | Flower exports.** The Colombian association of flower exporters (Asocolflores) reported on 12 February that Colombia's floriculture sector exported a total of 246,000 tonnes (t) in 2017, a 5% year-on-year increase.

Colombia is the world's second largest flower exporter behind the Netherlands, and Asocolflores said that the increase in the volume of exports last year brought total exports to US\$1.4bn, a record high. Asocolflores attributed the increase in exports to the opening of new markets such as Saint Lucia, Antigua & Barbuda, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Thailand, the Maldives, and Ethiopia. However, data from Colombia's agriculture ministry shows that the US remains the main export market for Colombian flowers accounting for 78% of all exports, followed by the United Kingdom (4%), Japan (4%), and Canada (3%).

Meanwhile, in a sign that Colombia's floriculture sector is poised to have another positive year in 2018, Colombia's flagship airline Avianca reported, also on 12 February, that its air cargo arm transported 11,853t of flowers from Colombia and Ecuador (the world's third largest flower exporter) to overseas destinations ahead of Valentine's Day. According to Avianca this represents a 4.35% increase in the volume of flowers it shipped from the two countries to foreign destinations last year. Avianca operated 190 flights with flower shipments between 16 January and 7 February.



**Macri and Moyano go head to head****Triaca**

The Moyanos were the only CGT bosses to call on Labour Minister Jorge Triaca to resign in late January. Their call followed a scandal involving Triaca and his maid, Sandra Heredia, who he had fired in a foul-mouthed audio on WhatsApp, the online messaging service, earlier in the month. Triaca apologised, but it later emerged that Heredia was undertaking undeclared work for the labour minister, who instead of granting her a salary increase in April last year found her some work at the Sindicato de Obreros Marítimos Unidos (Somu), the dockworkers' union, which is under judicial intervention after the arrest of its leader, Omar 'Caballo' Suárez, for alleged illicit enrichment. This was a big blow to Triaca's credibility. Macri has spared him for now but he will need to earn back political credit through driving a hard bargain with the unions in upcoming annual salary negotiations.

The government led by President Mauricio Macri is exploiting divisions within Argentina's largest trade union movement, the Confederación General del Trabajo (CGT), in a bid to isolate the most powerful union boss of the last 30 years. Facing corruption charges, Hugo Moyano and his son Pablo, who recently inherited the leadership of the Sindicato de Camioneros truck drivers' union, decided to take on Macri by organising a general strike for 21 February. The Moyanos boasted that this would bring the government to its knees, adding, threateningly, that Macri had "little time left". But the government has successfully courted a succession of union bosses in recent days, leaving the Moyanos cutting increasingly isolated figures.

The office of the prosecutor for economic crime and money laundering (Procelac) accused the Moyanos on 12 January of mismanagement, money laundering, illicit association, and fraud, based on reports from the country's top financial crimes watchdog Unidad de Información Financiera (UIF), part of the justice ministry. Hugo Moyano, the current president of Club Atlético Independiente in Greater Buenos Aires, stands accused of diverting funds from his union to use in his football club.

The Moyanos claim that President Macri is orchestrating the judicial moves against them because of their opposition to his government's planned labour reform. They announced a general strike ostensibly against the government's economic policies but with the intent of grinding the country to a halt in a massive show of force. But, uncowed, Macri has set about picking off union leaders. The daily desertion looks like leaving the Moyanos in the lurch. The truck drivers' union has the capacity to paralyse the country on its own but, without wider support, the danger for the Moyanos is that the general strike will look self-serving, designed to save their skin. It would also allow the government to maintain that they are part of an intolerant minority within the CGT rejecting dialogue. Conscious of his predicament, Hugo Moyano railed against other union bosses in the CGT this week for being "subordinated" to the government.

Juan Carlos Schmid, part of the three-pronged CGT leadership committee, is supporting the Moyanos, but the other two members, Carlos Acuña and Héctor Daer, oppose the general strike. Macri has unleashed his labour, interior, and transport ministers, Jorge Triaca, Rogelio Frigerio, and Guillermo Dietrich respectively, to win over more union bosses. Dietrich has come up trumps as fellow transport union leaders have abandoned the Moyanos: Roberto Fernández, the leader of the bus, tram, and trolleybus union Unión Tranviarios Automotor (UTA), and Omar Maturano and Sergio Sasia, respectively the leaders of the two national railroad unions, La Fraternidad (LF) and Unión Ferroviaria (UF).

Sasia signed an accord with the government this week to reduce the UF's number of collective labour agreements from 10 to two. Dietrich celebrated the accord which he said would modernise the railway system, regulating labour relations, allowing for a clear career progression with employees permitted to work on different lines within the long distance, regional, and metropolitan networks (expressly prohibited before), and creating a unified salary structure.

Bringing the Moyanos to heel would show Macri means business, impressing investors that he is not to be trifled with, especially as non-Peronist presidents have repeatedly been brought down by the unions. But the Moyanos are fighting on, seeking an alliance with none other than former president Cristina Fernández (2007-2015), a bitter enemy, through their shared opposition to Macri.

## Carnival gets political

**Brazil's 2018 Carnival has been one of protests. Beyond the frivolities of feathers and glitter, this year's parades had a strong political flavour, allowing citizens to vent their frustrations.**

On the opening night of Carnival, Samba school Paraíso do Tuiti attacked President Michel Temer and his economic reforms. In an allegory entitled "my God, my God, has slavery really come to an end?" dancers rattled their chains in protest against the government's labour reform which organisers say has watered down workers' rights.

Behind them loomed a giant "vampire president", alluding to Temer. Notably, Brazil's biggest broadcaster *O Globo* refrained from commenting on the political overtones of the parades when these images appeared on television, preferring to focus on the more glamorous parts instead.

Another easy target for satire was Rio de Janeiro mayor Marcelo Crivella, who recently reduced Carnival funding. Samba school Mangueira portrayed the former bishop turned evangelical politician as Judas with the caption: "forgive him for he does not know what he is doing". Crivella eschews Carnival for religious reasons and escaped to Europe during the festivities. "Not enjoying Carnival is a sin," was Mangueira's rejoinder.

Even businesses, which sometimes sponsor samba groups, have not been spared from ridicule. In one parade, dancers from samba school Beija Flor held up a giant rat, referencing corrupt politicians, and a polystyrene model of the Petrobras headquarters, refencing Brazil's biggest bribery scheme involving the state-run oil company.

The problem with taking aim at politicians and businesses – or the "public enemy number one" – is that it promotes "populism and an us versus them mentality", writes Mario Rosa, a columnist for news outlet Poder360. Carnival, he goes on, is the prelude to October's presidential and congressional elections where "populism and hypocrisy go on show to the sound of applause...with the people playing the role of a clown".

Besides providing acerbic commentaries on politics, the samba groups did not shy away from hard-hitting social issues. One Beija Flor float depicted habitual carioca violence with gun-touting criminals, policemen, and the victims of stray bullets in coffins full of flowers.

The scene was too close to home for many residents. Three people died during this year's Carnival in Rio de Janeiro and dozens of robberies were reported despite the heightened police presence. "We were not prepared...but we will get better," said state governor Luiz Fernando Pezão.

Violence against minority groups was another overriding theme during Carnival. This year, Beija Flor's muse was not a voluptuous mulatta but trans rights activist, drag queen, and pop star Pablllo Vittar, clad in a rainbow-coloured cape. He held balloons emblazoned with words such as "femicide" and "discrimination" to raise awareness of hate crimes.

Even the underlying assumption that Carnival is a safe haven for transgressive behaviour has been questioned. "I didn't kiss anyone this year," boasted Vittar. His comments come following a high-profile anti-harassment campaign to promote consent. Some revellers held up signs saying "no means no" in Brazil's take on the #MeToo campaign.

### On life, death and Carnival

"If man's only certainty in life is death; a Brazilian's only certainty is Carnival next year," wrote author Graciliano Ramos (1985). In spite of budget cuts, questionable public security and reports of a yellow fever outbreak, Rio de Janeiro's Carnival still went ahead, attracting a turnout of 6.5m.

**Setback for the bullets, beef and bible caucus****Crivella and Pães**

Rio de Janeiro mayor Marcelo Crivella's anti-hedonistic stance contrasts sharply with the attitude of his predecessor Eduardo Pães (2009-2017). Pães revelled in Carnival and used it as a platform to boost his publicity, but he is now in jail for corruption. These days, politicians are increasingly being excluded from Carnival as anti-establishment sentiment grows. São Paulo mayor João Doria learnt this lesson when he was humiliated on social media after samba singer Zeca Pagodinho refused to take a 'selfie' with him.

The so-called bullets, beef and bible caucus is growing in number and stature. Already, they have converted around 300 federal legislators to their cause. Their most outspoken member, Jair Bolsonaro, could become Brazil's next president. But they are not all-powerful and received a major blow this week when the federal senate snubbed their attempts to liberalise gun laws.

On 8 February, the senate approved an arms treaty to prevent Brazil from exporting arms to countries which violate international human rights laws. Although Brazil signed the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) sponsored by the United Nations in 2013, this agreement needed the approval of congress to be legally binding. But the bill remained stuck in congress for years, partly thanks to stalling tactics from the bullets, beef and bible caucus. Having finally been approved by both chambers, it now passes to President Michel Temer for promulgation.

Arms trading is a big business in Brazil, as the world's third largest exporter of small firearms after Italy and the US. The industry is worth around US\$591m, according to the latest report from the NGO Small Arms Survey published in September 2017 based on data from 2014. But information about where Brazil's gun exports end up is difficult to come by, ringing alarm bells for human rights groups. The last time Brazil's transparency laws for exports were updated was during the military dictatorship (1964-1985).

Brazil also has a strong internal demand for arms. One common misconception is that most of Brazil's weapons come from abroad, partly thanks to images of gangsters wielding AK-47s splayed on the front pages of major media outlets. In fact, however, 61% of weapons seized by local police are made in Brazil, a 2016 survey by NGO Sou Da Paz, based on public security statistics from four different states, found.

Currently, gun sales are legal in Brazil – but these are strictly regulated. Registered firearm owners can only buy a restricted number of weapons and need to apply for a permit.

Arms must be re-registered with the authorities every five years to check they have not been sold onto the black market. The minimum age for gun ownership is 25 and those who have previous criminal convictions are barred from applying.

In recent months, the bullet, bible and beef caucus has also tried to water down these regulations, with limited success. They argue that carrying a gun is a legitimate form of self-defence, using the refrain: 'good citizens do not commit crimes, only criminals'.

This argument is refuted by Sou da Paz. In 2015, 72% of lethal deaths in Brazil were committed using firearms, while those carrying a gun were 52% more likely to die than those who were unarmed.

Despite being forced to back down on the gun laws, the bullet, bible and beef caucus can claim one minor victory this week. Temer ceded to their request to create a new department for national security (*see sidebar*), which should be formalised after Carnival.

This is seen as a bureaucratic change which does little to address public security concerns. One priority for the new department will be to strengthen

## New department for public security

The department for public security will control the police, the national prisons department and government security body, which are currently working under the ministry of justice. The new department will be tasked with developing policies to combat drug trafficking, recover assets hidden abroad, deal with immigration and refugee policy, and defend the consumer in relation to anti-trust matters, according to Justice Minister Torquato Jardim.

state police forces. After state police forces suffered from budget cuts and corruption scandals, the army has been acting as a kind of substitute police force in some states since last year.

### Brazil seals security accords with Guyana

Brazil and Guyana have signed bilateral agreements to reinforce security to combat narco-trafficking and other transnational crimes at the shared border, and to pool their defence resources. This comes after a visit by Brazil's defence minister, Raul Jungmann, and a team of cabinet ministers to meet Guyana's President David Granger.

Talks also turned to the territorial dispute between Venezuela and Guyana over the area to the west of the Essequibo river. The oil-rich area currently belongs to Guyana but Venezuela has urged the country not to begin drilling there until the territorial dispute is settled. Jungmann said Brazil would only accept a peaceful resolution to the longstanding dispute through diplomatic channels. "For the sake of regional stability, any forceful exit cannot be condoned," he said.

## CHILE | POLITICS & SECURITY

### Fallout from 'Operación Huracán' makes waves

**"This is weakening the state's capacity to combat crime, drug trafficking, organised crime, and terrorism,"** president-elect Sebastián Piñera said this week in reference to the current spat between Chile's militarised police (Carabineros) and the attorney general's office (Fiscalía) over the 'Operación Huracán' case. **The impact of the dispute over alleged tampering of criminal evidence by the Carabineros is such that Piñera has mooted promoting a major reform of the police body once he assumes office on 11 March. In the meantime, the concern is that the case will continue inflaming the Mapuche conflict.**

Operación Huracán was a Carabineros operation targeting suspected members of radical indigenous Mapuche groups believed to be responsible for a recent series of arson attacks in Chile's southern Araucanía area, where the Mapuche lay claim to ancestral lands. Based on intelligence gathered from intercepted electronic conversations (via text and mobile phone messaging services) in September 2017 Carabineros said that they were able to identify, track, and arrest eight individuals suspected of being involved in terrorist activities. However, when prosecutors from the Fiscalía began analysing the evidence provided by Carabineros they found inconsistencies.

Eventually prosecutors determined that some of the evidence had been tampered with. In particular, they determined that some of the message exchanges presented as evidence had been planted in the devices seized by the Carabineros. The Carabineros rejected any suggestion that its officers had tampered with the evidence. Nonetheless, the Fiscalía decided to drop the case against the Mapuche, a decision which was formalised by a judge on 9 February, resulting in the release of the detained Mapuche. The Fiscalía also announced the opening of an investigation into the Carabineros for the manipulation of evidence. This has not gone down well with the Carabineros, which refused to collaborate with the Fiscalía investigation.

Meanwhile, increasing the pressure on the Carabineros, lawyers for the suspected Mapuche filed a lawsuit against them for falsifying evidence and trying to frame their clients. Significantly, the lawyers have also called for the investigations into the case to be conducted by the civilian investigations police (PDI) to ensure their impartiality; and also for the PDI to look into

## Larraín chimes in

After President-elect Sebastián Piñera's vow to reform Chile's police forces and improve the gathering and use of intelligence to help prevent and solve crimes, his designated justice minister, Hernán Larraín, chimed in saying that there is a lot of room for improvement. Speaking in a 12 February interview, Larraín stated that "I think that intelligence gathering in Chile is poor, [in particular] intelligence that allows for the anticipation of events seems to be non-existent and we have had this situation for years in the Araucanía area". Larraín added that the 'Operación Huracán' scandal exposed "failures in the functioning of the police, the attorney general's office...the entire system".

whether evidence recently used to convict any other Mapuche community leaders had been manipulated.

On the other hand, the interior ministry has announced its intention to appeal the decision to drop the case against the Mapuche on procedural grounds, arguing that the Fiscalía's decision had been too hasty. Amid this growing institutional crisis, Piñera has sought to provide reassurances that, once installed, his government will seek to address this head on.

In an 11 February interview, Piñera said that, in light of the crisis, "it is fundamental not to leave victims [of crimes] defenceless and criminals unpunished". Piñera said that his incoming government would seek to reform Chile's police forces and anti-terrorism legislation, which is often used to prosecute the crimes carried out by radical Mapuche groups.

"In this way we will seek to establish a true strategic alliance between the government, the police, prosecutors, judges, and citizens to better combat terrorism," Piñera said. He added that this would involve reforming the intelligence units of police forces to ensure "better coordination between prosecutors, police and judges".

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## TRACKING TRENDS

**BRAZIL | Blackouts.** Roraima state governor Suely Campos has called on President Michel Temer to improve local electricity provision following a series of blackouts last month. Currently, Roraima is the only Brazilian state that is not connected to the national electricity grid (SIN). Instead, 50% of Roraima's electricity comes from cash-strapped Venezuela under an agreement signed in 2001. This includes the Guri hydroelectric dam in Puerto Ordaz, located in Venezuela's eastern state of Bolívar. The electricity is transmitted to Roraima through the Guri power line, which has been poorly maintained due to a lack of funds.

To reduce reliance on Venezuelan energy, Suely wants to build a new power line called Tucuruí connecting Roraima to Manaus. Brazil's energy regulator Aneel granted a consortium of companies including Alupar and Eletronorte permission to build the line in 2011. But work has not begun yet due to a dispute over building it on indigenous territories.

**PARAGUAY | Corredor granelero del norte.** The Paraguayan government has announced the launch of a new regional logistics development programme dubbed 'Corredor granelero del norte'.

A statement from the public works & communications ministry (MOPC) explained that this initiative consists of promoting the use of the overland freight transport corridor linking the new riverine port in the city of Concepción in northern Paraguay with Brazil's Mato Grosso do Sul state. This will allow grain and soya producers in Mato Grosso do Sul and northern Paraguay to transport their produce to Concepción from where it will be shipped overseas via the River Paraguay rather than relying on Brazilian Atlantic ports.

The announcement was made after the Paraguayan government reached a deal with local lorry drivers who had been striking against the MOPC's decision last month to authorise Brazilian long combination vehicles (LCV) to operate in Paraguay, as part of the plans to promote the overland transport corridor.

The striking lorry drivers were opposed to having to face increased competition from their Brazilian counterparts but decided to drop their protest action after securing assurances from the Paraguayan government that Brazilian lorries will only be allowed to transport 50% of all cargo destined for the port in Concepción and after approving their call to increase local freight rates by 10%-15%. Following that announcement, the MOPC said that Brazilian LCVs will be allowed to circulate freely in the Corredor granelero del norte for the space of one year to see if the project can be successful.

## Rivas and Costa Rica

The Costa Rican daily *La Nación* reports that CSE President Roberto Rivas is president of a real estate company, Chibilu del Oeste SA, which owns land covering 1,514 square metres worth some US\$193,000. According to investigations by the same newspaper, in 2009 the same company had registered four houses in the same luxury condominium, totalling 2,441 square metres. Also in 2009, the Costa Rican government raised concerns over two luxury vehicles, reportedly owned by Rivas, which were exempt from tax and bore diplomatic number plates despite the fact that he was not a member of a diplomatic delegation.

## CENTRAL AMERICA & CARIBBEAN

### NICARAGUA | POLITICS

#### Ortega under pressure over corruption

Nicaragua's national legislature last week approved a bill proposed by President Daniel Ortega's Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) which significantly reduces the powers of the president of the electoral authority (CSE), Roberto Rivas. The move was eye-catching as Rivas, who has been in the post since 2000, is a key Ortega ally, having overseen a series of elections (widely slammed as fraudulent) which have produced significant FSLN victories. The move by the FSLN-controlled legislature is a clear response to growing pressure since the US Treasury Department blacklisted Rivas last year. Yet corruption concerns affecting top officials come as the government continues to receive accolades from institutions like the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Approved on 7 February with 74 votes in the 92-member national assembly (well above the necessary 56), the legislative changes stipulate that the CSE vice president will now take over responsibility for administering the institution, with the body's president to assume a largely symbolic function.

The FSLN's official justification for the change was that it was necessary to strengthen administrative efficiency of the CSE, one of the country's most discredited institutions. But it followed the US Treasury Department's announcement on 20 December that it was sanctioning Rivas in line with the Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. A US Treasury Department press release cited Rivas as "drawing a reported government salary of [US]\$60,000 per year" and having been "accused in the press of amassing sizeable personal wealth, including multiple properties, private jets, luxury vehicles, and a yacht". The same press release noted that Rivas has been "described by a Nicaraguan Comptroller General [CGR] as 'above the law', with investigations into his corruption having been blocked by Nicaraguan government officials". The press release also claimed that Rivas had "perpetrated electoral fraud undermining Nicaragua's electoral institutions".

Indicative of the apparent lack of will within local institutions to investigate the concerns regarding Rivas, last month CGR head Luis Angel Montenegro had declared it "beyond the competency" of the CGR to investigate Rivas, whose brother Harold was fired from his post as Nicaragua's ambassador to Costa Rica on 2 February without any official reason. Yet Costa Rica (with which Nicaragua has traditionally had strained relations due to various territorial disputes) had shown itself willing to take action. On 9 January the Costa Rican press cited the public prosecutor's office as saying that it had opened an investigation into Rivas with regard to alleged money laundering. The case was reportedly opened after "analysing publications shared by the Costa Rican institute on drugs (ICD), in relation to information disseminated in the US on alleged criminal acts apparently committed by Rivas in Costa Rica" (*see sidebar*).

#### Response

The changes to the CSE approved by the legislature, however, have left sceptics unconvinced that much will change, not least given that the CSE's vice president Lumberto Campbell (who, under the changes to the law, will assume Rivas's responsibilities) is also an FSLN ally. As well as complaining that the legislature's move effectively protects Rivas (given he retains his salary and immunity from prosecution), political opposition groups such as Frente Amplio por la Democracia (FAD) and Ciudadanos por la Libertad

## Rivas

The corruption allegations surrounding CSE president Roberto Rivas are nothing new. In 2009 a member of the Organization of American States-sponsored Inter-American Convention against Corruption accused Rivas of various crimes, including tax fraud to the tune of some US\$85,000, using US\$14,000 in public funds for a private donation to a Catholic Church in 2001, and sidestepping laws regulating the award of public contracts through purchasing some US\$48,000 worth of electoral material directly, without subjecting it to a bidding process.

(CxL) argue that it is merely a cosmetic change. They point out that it falls well short of recommendations for more far-reaching reforms as made by the Organization of American States (OAS) in its report on the November 2017 municipal elections. This found that “Nicaragua’s electoral system would benefit from a comprehensive electoral reform”.

These concerns were also shared by the US, with the spokesperson for the US embassy in Managua, Nicole Finneemann, cited in the local press as saying that the “reform approved...does not address these issues” (an allusion to the OAS’s recommendations). The US has long signalled complaints about the CSE and its administration of elections. The latest indication of this was the approval in October last year by the US House of Representatives of the Nicaraguan Investment Conditionality Act (NICA Act) of 2017 which would prevent the Nicaraguan government from accessing international financing until reforms are implemented that “promote democracy, strengthen the rule of law, respect human rights...[and] Nicaragua holds free, fair, and transparent elections overseen by electoral observers”. The latest version of an initiative first introduced in 2016, the NICA Act was approved unanimously by the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee on 27 July.

## Accolades

Despite these corruption concerns, the FSLN continues to receive strong backing from other international institutions. Earlier this month, the IMF published a statement following a staff visit to Nicaragua in which it concluded that the country’s economic performance in 2017 was “above expectations, with a favourable outlook for 2018”. In its concluding statement, released on 6 February, the IMF notes that real GDP increased about 4.9%, supported by buoyant agricultural exports, tourism, and remittances. Headline inflation increased to 5.7% reflecting rising oil and food prices, while core inflation stood at 4.1%. The same press release notes that the external current account deficit fell to 6.1% of GDP from 8.6% of GDP in 2016, and gross international reserves (GIR) rose by US\$297m to US\$2.59bn, reaching a coverage of about 4.2 months of imports.

Meanwhile, on 1 February, the government mouthpiece *el19digital* cited WB Vice President Jorge Familiar as saying that “of all of Latin America, Nicaragua is the country with the best record in executing its projects [and] remains committed to the development agenda [which] begins with macro-economic stability”. Various WB projects worth some US\$400m are currently being carried out in Nicaragua. The same *el19digital* report cites Finance Minister Iván Acosta as saying that prior to 2007 (when the Ortega government took office) the WB disbursed an average of US\$120m every three years. However, since the FSLN administration took office, it has reached an annual average of over US\$160m.

## Costa Rican dispute

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague has issued a judgement on the latest dispute between Costa Rica and Nicaragua: the two cases concerning the Maritime Delimitation in the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean, and Land Boundary in the Northern Part of Isla Portillos.

In its ruling, the ICJ delimited the maritime boundary between the two countries, granting Costa Rica an estimated additional 10,000km<sup>2</sup> in the Caribbean Sea. It also ruled that Nicaragua must withdraw its military camp currently installed on the beach of Isla Portillos, as it violates Costa Rica’s territorial sovereignty. The ICJ concluded that Nicaragua should pay some US\$379,900 by 2 April as compensation to Costa Rica, for material damage caused by its unlawful activities on Costa Rican territory. Both governments are claiming victory, however, given that the amount Nicaragua has been ordered to pay in compensation is far short of the claim for US\$6.7m filed back in June 2016 by Costa Rica’s President Luis Guillermo Solís.

## POSTSCRIPT

### Quotes of the week

“This is like a game of football: there are those who take to the pitch with a strategy and know how to play as a team; there are those who get hold of the ball and don't pass it; and there are those who score own goals, don't know how to lose, and rage against the referee. It's up to you to decide.”

*José Antonio Meade, the presidential candidate of Mexico's PRI tries to inject some life into his flagging campaign on Twitter.*

“You cannot be a democrat...and participate only in the elections that you think you can win and recognise only the results that are favourable to you.”

*Venezuela's communications minister Jorge Rodríguez on the country's political opposition.*

“It is the threat of a mafia boss, an action that, as democrats, we profoundly condemn, as all the country's political sectors should.”

*Argentina's cabinet chief Marcos Peña on the comment by the former leader of the truck drivers' union Hugo Moyano that the government has “little time left...the people are convinced that it is failing and has no response”.*

### Referendum triumph could come at a cost for Ecuador's Moreno

Ecuador's President Lenín Moreno was forced to wait a few days longer than anticipated to celebrate victory in the national referendum on 4 February after the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) issued precautionary measures against one of the seven questions in the referendum. These were ultimately rejected by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (CorteIDH). But the split within the ruling Alianza País (AP) over the referendum has emboldened the political opposition, which is seeking the impeachment of the finance minister, Carlos de la Torre, and demanding that the AP should cede the presidency of various legislative commissions now that it has lost its majority in the national assembly.

The IACHR issued precautionary measures against the question related to the restructuring of the Consejo de Participación Ciudadana y Control Social (CPCCS), some of whose members had appealed that it was unconstitutional because it requires their dismissal. The AP splinter group loyal to former president Rafael Correa (2007-2017) had also turned to the CPCCS for redress.

President Moreno condemned what he called the IACHR's “insolent intervention in our democratic system”, insisting that “we will not allow supranational institutions to conspire against our constitution, against democracy, international law, and the will of the Ecuadorean people”. Moreno also lashed out at Correa. “We cannot accept under any circumstances attempts at internal destabilisation orchestrated by political actors who opposed the referendum and, after the resounding loss, look for support in international forums that they previously reviled,” Moreno said. He even alleged that a corruption network under Correa had formed to try and recover power, and he expressed hope it had not “permeated” international forums.

In the event, the CorteIDH voted by 4-2 against the precautionary measures, a verdict Moreno hailed as “excellent news”. But he now faces a challenge at home. The main opposition Movimiento Creo is pushing for the impeachment of De la Torre over the finance minister's re-assignment of US\$300m from a solidarity fund established for Manabí and Esmeraldas, the coastal provinces devastated by an earthquake in 2016. The opposition is also pushing for control over more legislative commissions after the rupture of the AP, which exercises the presidency of 11 of the 12 commissions.

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