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Quotes of the week

# Colombian congressional result should propel Vargas Lleras into contention

The majority of Colombia's political parties could claim a victory of some sort in the congressional elections on 11 March but the biggest winner was Germán Vargas Lleras, whose right-of-centre party, Cambio Radical (CR), excelled. Vargas Lleras has been languishing in the opinion polls but this result should put his presidential bid on track ahead of the 27 May showdown. The centrist parties aligned behind President Juan Manuel Santos saw their presence reduced, amid a discernible shift to the Right in congress, but they retain an important influence. The new Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común (Farc) performed poorly in its first outing as a political party, but has a potentially crucial guaranteed 10 seats.

Vargas Lleras needed a strong showing by his CR in the congressional elections to be seen as a viable contender in the presidential race. He got it. The number of votes CR received in the senate elections more than doubled from just over 1m to 2.16m. The party finished with seven more seats in the 102-seat senate (107 with the five Farc seats), jumping from nine in 2014 to 16 now. It also nearly doubled its presence in the 166-seat lower chamber of congress (171 with the five Farc seats), increasing from 16 to 30 seats.

CR will become the second-largest party in the senate after the right-wing Centro Democrático (CD), whose leader former president Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010) was re-elected to the upper chamber with more votes than any other senatorial candidate in Colombia's history (870,000). This helped CD win 450,000 more votes in the senate elections than in 2014. In spite of this CD will be disappointed with the result as it lost one seat in the senate to finish with 19, although it compensated for this by winning 13 more seats in the lower chamber to total 32.

CD can lay claim to being the largest single party but it is still a long way short of a majority in either chamber. It will have been heartened, however, by the result of the internal elections held on the same day as the congressional contest. CD's Iván Duque sealed the presidential candidacy on behalf of the party with just in excess of 4m votes, with Marta Lucía Ramírez taking 1.54m votes, and Alejandro Ordóñez just under 400,000. Duque immediately announced that Ramírez would be his running mate. She won nearly 2m votes as the presidential candidate of the Partido Conservador (PC) in 2014 and has the backing of former president Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002).

Vargas Lleras and Duque will now set about courting the PC, which won some 1.93m votes in the senate elections, much the same as in 2014, although it lost three seats to finish with 15. More right-wing elements in the PC will favour the Duque-Ramírez ticket but there is a strong centrist faction in the party which was more content to be part of President Santos's ruling coalition and could prefer Vargas Lleras.

## Paramilitary setback

Opción Ciudadana (OC) failed to win a single seat in the senate, down from five, and lost four seats in the lower chamber to finish with two. Before being re-branded as OC, the Partido de Integración Nacional (PIN) was the fourthbiggest party in the senate with nine seats as recently as 2010. The PIN was comprised of relatives or pawns of politicians jailed for links with paramilitary groups (the parapolitics scandal) mainly in the northcentral department of Santander and Caribbean department of Sucre.

Duque and Vargas Lleras will also compete for the support of the Partido de la U (PU), a core member of Santos's coalition which lost a combined 19 seats in congress but still won 1.85m votes in the senate elections. Re-elected PU senator Roy Barreras said the party had three options: Duque, Vargas Lleras, and...Sergio de la Calle. This third way, which Barreras advocated, is an allusion to a possible alliance between the pro-peace centre-left presidential candidates Sergio Fajardo of Coalición Colombia and Humberto de la Calle of the Partido Liberal (PL). De la Calle ruled out such an alliance this week but if he remains rooted to some 5% in the presidential polls, and Fajardo recovers lost ground, he might yet step aside.

Fajardo will have been encouraged by the performance of Antanas Mockus, who won 539,000 votes (second only to Uribe) in his senate bid for Alianza Verde (AV), which is part of Fajardo's coalition. This helped AV double its senate presence from five to 10 seats. Fajardo's other ally, Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA), retained its five seats in the senate, with the party's Jorge Enrique Robledo winning the third most votes (225,000) after Uribe and Mockus.

For its part, the PL remains a force to be reckoned with, although this will not necessarily translate into a lift for De la Calle in the polls as he has not been fully embraced by the party's supporters. The PL lost three seats in the senate, returning 14, but it won more votes than any other party in the lower chamber elections, winning in 14 of the country's 32 departments, and taking 35 seats.

It was also an encouraging day for the early frontrunner in the presidential race, Gustavo Petro. There were low expectations for his left-wing Coalición Lista de la Decencia (CLD), but it won four seats in the senate and two in the lower chamber. Petro also won his internal election at a canter against Carlos Caicedo to secure his coalition's presidential candidacy, with a big haul of 2.85m votes.

The problem for Petro is that neither Fajardo nor De la Calle are receptive to his overtures. Indeed, the PL would be far more inclined to back Vargas Lleras than Petro. The sole offer of an alliance which Petro has received was unwanted. After the Farc's presidential candidate 'Timochenko' (Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri) pulled out of the presidential race having undergone open heart surgery last week, 'Jesús Santrich' (Seusis Pausivas Hernández), who will take one of his party's guaranteed five seats in the lower chamber of congress, announced that withdrawing from the contest did not entail pulling out of the electoral process. He added that the Farc would support "one of the democratic presidential candidacies," mentioning Petro as an option.

Petro, already being hounded by the Right accused of seeking to turn Colombia into "a second Venezuela", was swift to rule out the possibility, saying that he and the Farc had "totally different projects". Rejected by centre-left options, this is likely to leave Petro with no alternative but to deepen his anti-establishment discourse. Petro will attack clientelist practices and the 'mermelada' of traditional political parties, while seeking to persuade disenchanted moderate voters that he will not be a dangerous liability.

Petro is the best-equipped of all of the presidential candidates to tap into this deep reservoir of public distrust, which saw the number of blank and spoilt ballots hit a massive 2m in the senate elections, a total which, if it had been received by a political party, would make it the country's third-largest. He will also hope to increase voter turnout which, at 9.6m, was still only 48.6% of those eligible to vote, albeit this was up from around 44% in the last two congressional elections.

The Farc, for its part, won only a combined total of 84,000 votes in both the senate and lower chamber elections. De la Calle argued that this had revealed as "a farce" the claims by his detractors that he (as the government's

## Electoral breakdown

The senate elections are a more accurate indication of how presidential elections might go than the lower chamber elections because senators are elected by proportional representation in one national constituency (deputies are elected by PR with departments serving as constituencies). CD won in nine of the country's 32 departments in the senate elections: Amazonas, Arauca, Caquetá, Casanare, Cundinamarca, Guainía, Meta, Risaralda, and Vichada. The PL won the most votes in six departments; the PC in six; the PU in five, and CR in five (one of which was the small San Andrés y Providencia archipelago).

chief peace negotiator with the Farc in Cuba) had "handed the country over to the Farc". He said, rather hopefully, that this should now provide his presidential candidacy with a boost.

Crucially, however, the Farc will have five seats in both the senate and the lower chamber under the terms of the peace accord. This means that a propeace bloc in the senate comprising the rump of Santos's ruling coalition, the PL and PU, together with AV, PDA, CLD, the two indigenous candidates, and the Farc could command a majority of 54 votes. Such a disparate bloc would only join forces to defend the peace accord. But, should Duque, for instance, win the presidency and try to dismantle core elements of the peace accord, such as the transitional justice system (JEP), he could be thwarted.

That said, it would be much easier for Duque or Vargas Lleras to govern than Petro. CD, CR and the PC, right or right-of-centre parties, won 50 seats between them in the senate, a potentially much more solid voting bloc for run-of-the mill legislation. The PL and PU would also be far more inclined to back Vargas Lleras than Petro on almost all issues other than backtracking on the peace accord.

Composition of current and incoming congress						
		Senate		er chamber		
	2014	2018	2014	2018		
Centro Democrático	20	19	19	32		
Cambio Radical	9	16	16	30		
Partido Conservador	18	15	27	21		
Partido Liberal	17	14	39	35		
Partido de la U	21	14	37	25		
Alianza Verde	5	10	6	9		
Polo Democrático Alternativo	5	5	3	2		
Coalición Lista de la Decencia	-	4	-	2		
Partido Político Mira	0	3	3	2		
Farc	-	5	-	5		
Opción Ciudadana	5	-	6	2		
Others	2	2	10	6		
Total	102	107	166	171		

#### **ELN** talks back on

"We have no end of motives to choose war, to change words for the deafening sound of bombardment. Paradoxically this is the most popular course. To pursue peace, by contrast, demands patience, moderation, many times swimming against the current, unflinching perseverance, and determination." With these words President Santos announced the resumption of peace talks with the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) during a televised address on 12 March.

Government and guerrilla negotiating teams are scheduled to renew talks in Ecuador as we go to press on 15 March. Substantial progress will need to be made in the coming months if a peace accord is to be finalised before Santos leaves office in August. There is far less public and political support, even within parties that backed the Farc accord, for peace with the ELN.

The fifth round of talks will include the topics of citizen participation, as well as humanitarian gestures and actions to be taken to help construct the peace. Santos said he had decided to send the government's chief negotiator with the ELN, Gustavo Bell, back to Ecuador to recommence talks with the guerrilla group because of its "important gesture" to declare a five-day unilateral ceasefire around the congressional elections.

## New opposition grouping

The Frente Amplio Venezuela Libre, which was established last week, issued a statement condemning the arrest of Miguel Rodríguez Torres who, it said, had the temerity to speak out against the government. As well as the MUD and dissident Chavistas, the group includes student movements, academics, businessmen, and trade unions. Representatives of the group met in **United Nations** headquarters in Caracas this week to condemn the "fraudulent" presidential elections on 20 May. The group aims to organise "citizen assemblies" across the country on 17 March to discuss the country's overriding economic and social problems.

#### **ANDEAN COUNTRIES**

#### **VENEZUELA | POLITICS & JUSTICE**

#### Edgy Maduro cracks down on dissent

Retired Major General Miguel Rodríguez Torres was arrested on 13 March accused of conspiring against the government led by President Nicolás Maduro and seeking to destabilise the Bolivarian armed forces (FANB). Rodríguez Torres served as interior minister under Maduro and head of Venezuelan intelligence under former president Hugo Chávez (1999-2013). His arrest follows that of nearly a dozen active members of the military, which all suggests that, despite assertions to the contrary, Maduro is apprehensive about dissent in the military ranks ahead of presidential elections on 20 May.

Rodríguez Torres was part of Chávez's inner circle, taking part in the failed military coup in 1992. He served as Chávez's intelligence chief for 10 years, helping set up a revamped intelligence agency (Sebin), in 2009, which he ran. He briefly served as interior minister under President Maduro but was dismissed in 2014 after a harsh crackdown on opposition protests, also being held responsible for the killing of José Odreman, the leader of one of the progovernment militia groups, or colectivos.

Rodríguez Torres became a critic of the Maduro administration and formed the dissident Chavista coalition Movimiento Amplio Desafío para Todos (DDT) last August. He had sought to run for the presidency but was barred from standing for public office by the comptroller general last month, as soon as the government announced presidential elections. On 21 February Rodríguez Torres had tweeted that Venezuelans wanted "a radical change" and predicted that in clean elections Maduro would lose 80%-20%.

Rodríguez Torres was arrested during an event in a hotel in Caracas by six Sebin agents, and bundled into a van. Iris Valera, the prisons minister, had publicly demanded his arrest for his alleged links to Oscar Pérez, the rogue officer from the investigative police (CICPC), who was killed in an operation of overwhelming force on 15 January [WR-18-02]. The final straw appears to have been the decision by Rodríguez Torres to join the nascent Frente Amplio Venezuela Libre, a forum claiming to represent "Venezuelan civil society, democratic Chavismo and parties from the [opposition coalition] Mesa de la Unidad Democrática" (see sidebar).

The arrest follows the detention and expulsion of 11 FANB officers, including four battalion commanders (lieutenant colonels). The NGO Control Ciudadano y Justicia Venezolana, which first reported this "purge", said the officers had been accused of treason and fomenting rebellion for belonging to a clandestine movement known as Transición a la Dignidad del Pueblo. The NGO said the government was carrying out "arbitrary and illegal arrests" to keep the FANB "loyal and submissive to the Revolution".

A further 13 former members of the FANB were stripped of their rank in a decree published in the official gazette on 28 February. These include Generals Herbert García Plaza and Antonio Rivero, currently in exile, and General Raúl Isaías Baduel, a former Chavista turned fierce critic who was sentenced by a military court to eight years in prison for embezzlement in 2010. Baduel's prison conditions in a maximum security jail known as 'La Tumba' in Sebin's Caracas headquarters, have been toughened: he is being held in solitary confinement, with only artificial light, and denied any visits.

### Media muzzling ended?

The national assembly censured the former superintendent of information and communications, Carlos Ochoa, on 12 March. Ochoa had been fired last week in one of the first moves by the newlook Cpccs whose members were appointed for one year on 28 February until elections are held alongside municipal elections in early 2019. Ochoa was accused of financial irregularities, as well as abusive and arbitrary use of the 2013 communications law, issuing draconian sentences, ostensibly to end bad practice. to force "selfcensorship" in the media. In his defence, Ochoa said that if he was "guilty" of anything it was for having "sanctioned firmly but justly" media that had abused freedom of expression, selling "death and desolation". He insisted journalists "are not a caste above right or wrong". President Moreno promised during his election campaign to reform, or even eliminate, the controversial communications law.

#### **ECUADOR | POLITICS**

#### Moreno rises above institutional power clash

After a rollercoaster week, Ecuador's national assembly has a new president and the attorney general appears to be on borrowed time. Neither development is bad news for President Lenín Moreno whose stated commitment to combating corruption remains intact. Meanwhile, Moreno's newly appointed transitional Consejo de Participación Ciudadana y Control Social (Cpccs), the fourth branch of government, has begun to dismantle some of the controversial coercive institutional structure erected by his predecessor Rafael Correa (2007-2017).

The national assembly voted overwhelmingly on 9 March to dismiss the body's president, José Serrano, and start an impeachment process against the attorney general, Carlos Baca, both embroiled in a conspiracy scandal. A total of 103 out of 106 deputies present approved a motion presented by the opposition Partido Social Cristiano (PSC). The two men had been summoned to present testimony in the national assembly after Baca divulged a compromising audio tape in which Serrano can be heard speaking with the former comptroller general, Carlos Pólit, a fugitive from justice wanted on corruption charges related to the Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht, about the possibility of "taking down" Baca.

In his appearance before the assembly, Serrano admitted he had made a mistake talking to Pólit but said he had done so because he had been offered relevant information on corruption cases allegedly implicating Baca. Serrano questioned why, for instance, Baca had taken no action against senior figures in Odebrecht who had admitted to paying bribes to secure public works contracts in Ecuador. For his part, Baca denounced a conspiracy against him, saying that during his nine months as attorney general he had opened various cases into corruption. He did not explain how he had obtained the audio tape recorded last month.

President Moreno had urged Serrano to "assume responsibility for his mistakes" ahead of the vote. Moreno said officials needed to act with "probity and transparency or step aside to avoid compromising [the country's] democratic institutions". The ruling left-wing Alianza País (AP) decided to vote in favour of the motion to remove Serrano in order to preserve the government's credibility. Serrano, who retains his seat, described the decision to dismiss him as "unconstitutional" and "illegal", violating his human rights. PSC Deputy Henry Cucalón said Baca had been no more convincing than Serrano in his testimony and had been unable to rebut allegations of embezzlement when he formed part of a commission investigating the infamous '30-S' police mutiny in 2010, denounced by then-president Correa as a coup attempt.

A total of 80 deputies voted on 14 March to elect the AP's Elizabeth Cabezas as the new president of the national assembly. AP deputies were joined by all the main opposition parties, except the PSC, while Correista dissidents abstained from voting. Cabezas said Ecuador needed to rediscover "faith, hope, and optimism", and called for "dialogue…during these tough and difficult times of political uncertainty, and economic and social concerns".

However, days earlier, while presenting an application to register the pro-Correa Movimiento de la Revolución Alfarista (named after the liberal reformer former president Eloy Alfaro [1895-1901; 1906-1911]) before the national electoral council (CNE), Ricardo Patiño, a prominent cabinet minister in the last government, promised "resistance, opposition, and permanent mobilisation against this counter-revolutionary and neoliberal government" from its 27 former AP deputies. The CNE rejected the group's first proposed name of Revolución Ciudadana.

#### **BRAZIL & SOUTHERN CONE**

#### CHILE | POLITICS

#### Piñera reprises reins of power

Sebastián Piñera was sworn-in on 11 March for a second four-year term, the second time he has inherited the presidential sash from Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010; 2014-2018). Piñera might have won by a significant margin in the December 2017 presidential run-off but his initial conciliatory tone – his promise of "national agreements" and calls for "national unity" – underscores the fact that he is unlikely to have an easy ride in congress

where his centre-right Chile Vamos coalition lacks a majority.

In his inaugural speech delivered to congress, President Piñera announced plans to work towards "five national agreements". These cover "children" – more specifically the need to address the crisis in the national children's service (Sename) which had proven damaging for the Bachelet government, citizen security, health, the need to establish peace in the restive southern region of La Araucanía, where the indigenous Mapuche lay claim to ancestral lands, and "development and poverty reduction" through ending economic stagnation.

Indicative of his pledge to address the Sename crisis, Piñera's first official activity upon assuming the presidency was to visit a Sename centre in La Pintana commune, Santiago Region, where, accompanied by top officials such as the new ministers of justice, Hernán Larraín, and social development, Alfredo Moreno, he announced a 10-point plan. This includes pledges to replace the current Sename with two new and modern services – one to protect infants and adolescents and another to address adolescents who break the law; carry out an audit of the current situation; create an ombudsman for children; and improve the infrastructure of Sename, among other things.

As regards his other headline-grabbing promise – to end economic stagnation – in his inaugural speech, Piñera indicated plans to introduce austerity measures although he omitted to spell them out. His new finance minister, Felipe Larraín, has said that these measures, which are currently being explored with the comptroller general, are necessary to address the fiscal deficit which, he claims, is in fact 2.1% of GDP rather than the 1.7% as previously reported by the outgoing left-wing Nueva Mayoría government. Larraín added that the new government also plans to introduce a new fiscal reform this year which would simplify the tax system.

Yet it is worth pointing out that Piñera inherits a favourable situation, with the economy showing signs of picking up after years of slow GDP growth, which closed at just 1.5% in 2017 on the latest (December 2017) report from the Economic Commission for Latin America & the Caribbean (Eclac). At the end of last month, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) released a new report which forecasts that Chile's GDP growth will rise to 2.9% in 2018 and 2019 "amid robust global economic conditions and firmer copper prices" (see sidebar).

#### Congressional breakdown

Although the ruling Chile Vamos will be the largest party in the lower chamber, with 73 of 155 seats, and the senate, with 19 of 43 seats, it will lack a majority in either, meaning Piñera will need to seek consensus to advance his legislative agenda. The presidency of both the senate and the lower chamber will also be in the hands of the opposition, respectively Carlos Montes and Maya Fernández Allende, granddaughter of former president Salvador Allende (1970-1973), both members of Bachelet's Partido Socialista (PS).

#### Inequality

The OECD report also highlighted the need to further reduce inequality, pointing out that Chile's income inequality gap is "more than 65% wider than the OECD average". Noting that "sound macroeconomic management has placed Chile on a solid economic footing, and measures implemented by the outgoing administration to make growth more inclusive go in the right direction", the OECD calls on the incoming administration to build on these efforts with "further reforms".

#### Pledges fulfilled?

A report by local democracy and government transparency advocacy group Del Dicho al Hecho, released to mark the end of Bachelet's mandate, found that the outgoing administration had only fulfilled 56% of Bachelet's 172 electoral promises. The same report showed that the area to have registered the best result was energy, where 100% of electoral pledges were fulfilled, followed by democracy (85%); education (84%); and gender equity (80%). The areas where her government registered least success, according to the same report, were transport & telecommunications (8%); agriculture (20%); and mining (25%).

The coalition's centre-right Renovación Nacional (RN) outperformed the conservative Unión Demócrata Independiente (UDI) in the lower chamber for the first time (36-31 seats). The Nueva Mayoría won just 43 seats in the lower chamber (56 with Democracia Cristiana [DC]) and 15 in the senate (21 with DC). The PS was the big winner with 19 of the coalition's 43 seats in the lower chamber; the Partido por la Democracia (PPD), Partido Radical Socialdemócrata (PRSD) and Partido Comunista de Chile (PCCh) won eight seats apiece.

Chile's new congress					
	Lower chamber	Senate			
Chile Vamos	73	19			
Renovación Nacional	36	7			
Unión Demócrata Independiente	31	10			
Evolución Política	6	2			
Nueva Mayoría	43	15			
Partido Socialista	19	7			
Partido por la Democracia	8	7			
Partido Radical Socialdemócrata	8	1			
Partido Comunista de Chile	8	-			
Frente Amplio	20	1			
Democracia Cristiana	13	6			
Others	6	2			
Total	155	43			

#### **BRAZIL | POLITICS**

#### Gomes joins the fray

Far-left candidate Ciro Gomes from the Partido Democrático Trabalhista (PDT) thinks he has the winning ticket in Brazil's electoral lottery. Cashing in on the unpopularity of the current government, he has promised a radical break with the establishment led by President Michel Temer.

Last month, markets cheered on the decreased odds that former president Lula da Silva (2003-2011) from the left-wing Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) would feature in this October's presidential elections. But the prospect of a surprise victory for Gomes as a possible substitute could be even worse news for Brazil's economy – and foreign investment.

Gomes has called for a U-turn on all President Temer's major structural economic reforms. During his pre-candidacy speech on 9 March, he unveiled grand plans to abandon privatisation initiatives; expropriate Brazil's oil fields; undo spending caps; and give the ill-fated pensions overhaul a final kiss of death. He also called for a tax shake-up to benefit lower-income workers.

Lula is still the frontrunner in early opinion polls. But if he is unable to run, Gomes could inherit the lion's share of his voter intentions, according to the latest poll by CNT/MDA. The walls appear to be closing in for the PT leader, who is running out of appeals channels after he was convicted of passive corruption and money laundering in January.

If the election takes place without Lula, Gomes is one of four main candidates who are in with a chance of making it through to the second round run-off, the poll found. The other three stand-out candidates are the centreleft environmentalist, Marina da Silva from Rede Sustentabilidade (Rede), the centre-right candidate Geraldo Alckmin, from the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), and the ultra-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro. of the Partido Social Liberal (PSL).

#### Last chance saloon

In a final attempt to appeal against former president Lula's corruption conviction, his lawyer, Sepúlveda Pertence, met the head of Brazil's top court, the supreme court (STF), Cármen Lúcia Antunes on 14 March. If the STF does not accept his habeas corpus plea, Lula could be imprisoned by an appeals court in as little as two weeks.

Gomes has run in the three previous elections without much success, having largely been overshadowed by Lula. But this year could be different. He said Lula had been blocking his candidacy on the Left; just as the outspoken Bolsonaro is currently outshining the more mild-mannered Alckmin on the Right.

#### Long race until October

Meanwhile, Alckmin is treating this electoral cycle less like a sprint and more like a marathon. One of his tactics is to undermine opponents gradually rather than aggressively shooting them down straight away. A case in point is what happened to the mayor of São Paulo, João Doria. At the start of this year, rumours abounded that Doria might eclipse Alckmin and represent the PSDB in this year's elections. But thanks to a little political manoeuvring, Doria has ended up becoming pre-candidate for São Paulo governor not the presidency.

Alckmin's negotiating skills also mean it will be easier for him to form coalitions later down the line. This is something Bolsonaro and Gomes may struggle to do given the former is affiliated with a very small party and the latter has alienated other leftist allies, especially the PT.

#### A Brazilian Robin Hood?

As well as old-timers like Gomes and Alckmin, there will be plenty of new names on the ballot sheet this year. One fresh face is the head of the landless movement Movimento dos Trabalhadores sem Teto (MTST) Guilherme Boulos, who is running as a pre-candidate for the leftist Partido Socialismo e Liberdade (PSOL).

Like Gomes, Boulos will prioritise income redistribution and overhauling the tax system. He describes the state's current system as "the opposite of Robin Hood: taking from the poor and giving to the rich". This is in line with a recommendation from the 2018 economic survey from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that lost revenue from tax exemptions could be more effectively spent on social welfare programmes like the conditional cash transfer programme for low-income families, Bolsa Família, which currently accounts for 0.5% of GDP.

However, Boulos's other ideas – like describing the legal case against Lula as fraudulent, and labelling the impeachment of former PT president Dilma Rousseff (2011-2015) as a coup – read like rehashes of the PT's manifesto. This has led to some disagreement on PSOL benches from those who see Boulos as a Lula puppet, albeit much younger at just 35.

#### **Unknown entities**

Not all parties have revealed who will represent them before the deadline for all pre-candidacy nominations on 7 April. The ruling Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (MDB) has not yet chosen between President Temer and his finance minister, Henrique Meirelles. Either way, they are unlikely to win since both potential contenders have a measly 1% of voter intentions. However, Temer's recent decision to inject R\$2bn (US\$613m) of additional funds to municipalities for health, education, and social assistance looks designed to give him a popularity boost.

#### **Old frenemies**

If Temer does run for re-election, he could find himself pitted against his former ally-turned-rival Rodrigo Maia, who is head of the federal lower chamber of congress. Maia is running for the centre-right Democratas (DEM), which has not put forward its own presidential candidate since the return to democracy in 1989. Maia is capitalising on greater voter fragmentation in this year's elections but his high rejection ratings mean he may be better off staying in congress.

## And the winner is...no one

In another sign that this year's electoral race is wide open, 53% of Brazilians said they did not sympathise with any political party. This was the result of a CNI survey published on 13 March, which canvassed over 2,000 opinions based on interviews carried out last December.

As part of his pre-electoral campaign, Maia distanced himself from the head of state, saying that Brazil did not need another candidate with "Temer tattooed on his forehead". He was alluding to the impeachment vote last year, when one die-hard legislator posted a photo of himself with a Temer tattoo before casting his vote. Temer was acquitted of the corruption allegations. If he had been impeached, Maia could have become president under Brazil's succession rules.

#### New year, same old corruption cases

If Temer had hoped the corruption cases would go away this year, he was much mistaken. In an unprecedented ruling, on 11 March, a supreme court judge asked Temer to disclose his bank details, as part of an investigation into whether a ports decree published last year favoured logistics company Rodrimar. He denies wrongdoing.

#### Spotlight on security

At least three possible presidential candidates including Temer and Bolsonaro and Maia will be focusing on improving public security to win votes. The CNT/MDT poll found that 79.9% of Brazilians were following the situation in the state of Rio de Janeiro closely after the federal government sent in the army to patrol the streets.

Initially, government critics dismissed the federal intervention in Rio as a short-term strategy to boost Temer's approval rating. But in a recent interview with independent news site *Poder360*, the new minister for public security, Raul Jungmann, said that society would be "clamouring" for federal forces to stay in Rio in 2019. Currently they are due to remain until 31 December 2018 – when Temer's term is over. The problem is what happens to Brazil's other 25 states.

#### **ARGENTINA | POLITICS & ECONOMY**

#### Tensions with the industrialists

"A tense week for relations with the government". This is how Miguel Acevedo, the president of the Unión Industrial Argentina (UIA), the main industrial sector lobby, has described the past week. Acevedo's remarks follow a public spat between the sector and Production Minister Francisco Cabrera over the economic policies pursued by the government led by President Mauricio Macri. The Macri government may be engaged in a running dispute with Argentina's trade unions over its economic reform plans [WR-18-07] but this is the first time that it has clashed with the local business sector over economic policy since it assumed power in 2015, raising suspicions that the government may be losing its support.

The spat began when UIA members complained about some of the issues afflicting the sector during a meeting of its board held on 27 February. UIA members argued that as result of the market-friendly economic reforms implemented by the Macri administration – such as the lifting of import restrictions and the reduction of energy subsidies – the domestic market had been flooded with cheap imports, while rising production costs were hurting the sector. After hearing the complaints, the UIA board said that it would transfer these to the government in upcoming meetings. However, before this took place Cabrera published an opinion piece in the local press in which he dismissed some of the UIA's concerns and criticised its members.

In the piece, entitled 'Do we import too much? No, we export too little', published on 10 March, Cabrera denied that Argentina's domestic market is being flooded by imports and chastised local industrialists for not being more competitive and taking full advantage of export opportunities to

#### An unexpected 'bucket of cold water'

The 6 March arrest of prominent industrialist and former president of the Unión Industrial Argentina (UIA), Juan Carlos Lascurain (2008-2010), amid the public spat between the UIA and the government has sparked serious concerns. Lascurain, the leader of the association of metallurgical industries (Adimra), was arrested (and later released on bail) in connection with corruption investigations related to infrastructure development projects in the municipality of Río Turbio, in the southern department of Santa Cruz, commissioned by the previous federal government led by Cristina Fernández (2007-2015).However, the UIA president, Miguel Acevedo, said that the arrest came as "a bucket of cold water" for the UIA, raising concerns about judicial persecution as the sector tries to smooth over its differences with the government.

promote domestic economic growth. More scathingly, in a series of subsequent interviews with the local media, Cabrera called on Argentina's industrialists to "stop whining and start investing" in order to become more competitive. Cabrera also said that the government was working to try to bring down Argentina's production costs by reducing the tax burden on businesses and promoting national infrastructure development.

Cabrera's comments did not sit well with UIA. Acevedo declared himself "surprised" by the remarks and was adamant that the industrial sector was not whining but rather "struggling to survive" as a result of a "political decision" by the government to open up Argentina's domestic market. Acevedo was careful to say that the UIA is prepared to compete but he insisted that the government has to do its part to improve competitiveness by further reducing the tax burden and working with the industrial sector to find ways to bring down Argentina's high energy, transport, and labour costs. "The government may be trying to change things but there are some things that are becoming truncated and they are not materialising," Acevedo said in allusion to the government's stalled economic reform agenda.

President Macri reacted to the clash by backing Cabrera. He said that he fully stood by Cabrera's call for less complaining and more investing by the industrial sector, which he said had become too used to the protectionist policies pursued by successive previous governments. But with discontent among industrialists increasing, the government called UIA representatives to a meeting with Cabrera and the cabinet chief, Marcos Peña, on 12 March, to address their complaints. After the meeting both sides said that they had agreed to establish new sub-sectorial working tables to discuss how to tackle the challenge of improving Argentina's competitiveness, promote exports, and, in the process, create more jobs and economic prosperity.

#### TRACKING TRENDS

BRAZIL | **US tariffs**. The Brazilian government has expressed concern after US President Donald Trump signed a decree to apply a 25% tariff on steel imports and 10% on aluminium to protect national security. In a joint statement issued on 8 March, Foreign Minister Aloysio Nunes and Trade Minister Marcos Jorge said this would damage Brazilian exports and negatively impact bilateral trade, which has mostly favoured the US over the last 10 years, besides having a negative impact on commercial and investment relations.

Brazil argues that its exports do not threaten US national interests because the metallurgical industries in both countries are complementary. Firstly, 80% of Brazilian steel exports are semi-finished products and are later processed by metalworkers in the US. Secondly, Brazil is the largest importer of US metallurgical coal, which is used to boost steel production in the US.

Moreover, Brazil argues that the tariffs are incompatible with the obligations of the US as a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and do not align with the security agreements contained in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade 1994 (GATT 1994).

The Brazilian government said it would favour dialogue and partnership to find a solution, but would not hesitate to take action to preserve its rights and interests.

BRAZIL | **Starbucks**. Starbucks has signed an agreement with SouthRock Capital, which is headquartered in the city of São Paulo, allowing the private equity firm to develop and operate branches of the US-based coffee company in Brazil. At the time of going to print, the value of the deal had not been disclosed.

Under the agreement, SouthRock Capital has agreed to pay Starbucks' licencing fee. With this change, the 17 countries where Starbucks operates in Latin America and the Caribbean will all become fully licenced rather than directly managed. Starbucks is currently expanding in the region and is due to open more coffee shops in Uruguay later this year.

# Peña Nieto stays above the fray

President Peña Nieto has not reacted to Ricardo Anaya's accusations that he is behind the money laundering investigations launched by the PGR and that these are designed to force him out of the presidential race. Asked by reporters for his opinion on Anaya's accusations, Peña Nieto replied "I will not respond to any bickering by candidates, which is to be expected during an electoral campaign." However, Peña Nieto also called on the media not be become "hooked" on all the remarks made by candidates during "this political contest, this democratic contest".

#### **MEXICO & NAFTA**

#### **MEXICO | POLITICS**

#### Anaya defiantly registers candidacy

"In the face of the factious, illegal, and cowardly use of the federal attorney general's office [PGR], in the face of the attacks ordered from Los Pinos by [President Enrique] Peña Nieto, here we are." With these words Ricardo Anaya formally registered his presidential candidacy for the Por México al Frente opposition coalition ahead of elections on 1 July. Anaya's candidacy has been cast into doubt in recent weeks amid money laundering accusations levelled against him, which the PGR is currently investigating [WR-18-08]. But Anaya, who remains second in the polls, insists that this is part of a campaign by the federally ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) to discredit him and that he will not pull out of the presidential race despite the probe. Anaya's defiance and counter accusations are shaking up the contest.

The pressure on Anaya to abandon his presidential bid to fight the allegations made against him intensified after in early March the PGR confirmed that it had opened a formal investigation. This led not just to PRI figures calling for Anaya to abandon his candidacy and collaborate with the investigations, but even to some in the Por México al Frente coalition questioning whether he should abandon his candidacy and allow the coalition to field another candidate. Such questions were raised by certain quarters in the leftist Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), long uneasy about backing Anaya, of the right-wing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN).

Anaya has refused to bow to the pressure. Instead he has gone on the offensive, claiming that the probe launched against him is an attempt by the PRI to force him out of the race because he is outperforming its presidential candidate, José Antonio Meade. After the PGR controversially released a video of his appearance before prosecutors to provide evidence in relation to the money laundering case, Anaya gave a press conference on 4 March in which he accused President Peña Nieto of being behind the government attempts to undermine his campaign and unduly influence the presidential election.

Anaya went on to say that the political use of federal government institutions and the 'dirty war' launched against him is a "threat" to democracy. "Today is against me; tomorrow it could be against any other candidate that opposes the regime, we cannot allow this." In another bid to bolster his campaign, Anaya also linked the moves against him to the commitment he has made to end impunity and punish government corruption if elected. Anaya claimed that the Peña Nieto government has been illegally diverting public funds to Meade's campaign but that this has not been investigated by the PGR. He even said that Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the presidential candidate of the leftist Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena), who continues to lead the opinion polls [WR-18-09], was not being targeted like him because he has reached a deal "to spare Enrique Peña Nieto and his collaborators" from being prosecuted for corruption if he wins election.

Anaya's accusations have been rejected by the government and the PRI. Peña Nieto refused to respond to Anaya's accusations (*see sidebar*). But Interior Minister Alfonso Navarrete denied that the PGR investigation was seeking to interfere with the electoral process and was adamant that the probe against Anaya fully complies with due process.

# Independent presidential candidates

On 8 March the national electoral institute (INE) confirmed that three of the 86 independent candidates seeking to run in the 1 July presidential election had successfully completed the registration process. The 2014-2015 political reform opened the door for independent candidates to contest Mexico's presidency for the first time. But to register independent candidates are required to collect signatures in support of their candidacies equivalent to 2% of the electoral register (roughly 864,543 signatures) spread across 17 of the country's 32 states. After a signature verification process, the INE confirmed that former Nuevo León state governor Jaime 'El Bronco' Rodríguez, former federal senator Armando Ríos Piter, and former First Lady Margarita Zavala, had submitted sufficient signatures to register as independent presidential candidates.

Meade and the PRI party president, Enrique Ochoa Reza, have rejected the accusations that the former's campaign has received any irregular federal government financing. However, Anaya ratified his accusations after he formally registered his candidacy before the national electoral institute (INE) on 11 March. He said that the PRI and the Peña Nieto government were targeting him because "I will deliver justice if I win the presidency".

#### Countermoves

The accusations made by Anaya produced sufficient concern for a group of PAN federal senators to send a letter to the Organization of American States (OAS) warning about government interference with the electoral process. This prompted the PRI to send its secretary general and former foreign minister, Claudia Ruiz Massieu (2015-2017), to the OAS headquarters in the US to reject Anaya's accusations. After meeting the OAS secretary general, Luis Almagro, Ruiz said that she had explained that the PGR's probe into Anaya answered to legitimate concerns that a presidential aspirant may be involved in money laundering, "which in our view is worrisome for the democratic process".

Ruiz also said that she transmitted to Almagro the PRI's "indignation" with Anaya and the PAN's attempts to manipulate public opinion and discredit Mexico's institutions both at home and abroad by making groundless accusations. "Anaya is lying to the international community," Ruiz said, arguing that the Por México al Frente candidate was attempting to "evade his responsibilities by trying to manipulate public opinion using and abusing the OAS". Ruiz concluded by saying that she had asked Almagro that the OAS mission accompanying the electoral process in Mexico include references to Anaya's actions in its final report.

Meanwhile López Obrador, who initially dismissed the moves against Anaya and his accusations as a "show" by the Por México al Frente and the PRI to try to revive their respective presidential campaigns, has now also criticised Anaya's actions. Speaking at a political rally in Querétaro state, López Obrador challenged Anaya to make good on his threats to denounce government corruption that has taken place under Peña Nieto. "Anaya says that he is going to put Peña Nieto in jail.... Why doesn't he present charges already and stop being such a demagogue?" López Obrador asked rhetorically. López Obrador had previously said that the mutual recriminations between Anaya and the PRI were only increasing his support in the polls. But Anaya's bold accusations have raised the profile of his campaign.

#### Iquala suspect arrested

Mexico's interior minister, Alfonso Navarrete, reported on 12 March that federal police officers had arrested Erick Uriel 'La Rana' Sandoval, who is wanted in connection with the 2014 mass abduction and suspected killing of 43 trainee teachers taken from the town of Iguala, Guerrero state.

The Iguala mass kidnapping is the most emblematic case of human rights violations in Mexico to have taken place under the Peña Nieto administration, which has come under domestic and international pressure to clear up what happened as well as the fate of the disappeared.

The Mexican authorities believe that Sandoval, a known member of the Los Guerreros Unidos criminal organisation suspected of being responsible for the Iguala abductions, may be instrumental in solving the case. In particular, the authorities say that they believe Sandoval was in direct contact with the kidnapped trainee teachers and can confirm or deny the authorities' main hypothesis that they were murdered, and their bodies incinerated at a landfill in Cocula, Guerrero.

However, the relatives of the Iguala disappeared have said that in their opinion, Sandoval's arrest is "totally irrelevant" to resolving the case. The relatives reject the authorities' hypothesis and believe that their loved ones are still alive, and want investigators to concentrate on finding them.

#### **CENTRAL AMERICA & CARIBBEAN**

#### **EL SALVADOR | POLITICS**

#### FMLN pummelled in congressional elections

The ruling left-wing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) suffered the heaviest defeat of its history in El Salvador's congressional and municipal elections on 4 March. The exact scale of the defeat was not immediately apparent due to a fault in the electronic voting system, delaying the start of the final count. But what swiftly became evident was that President Salvador Sánchez Cerén will face a much more hostile legislative assembly for his remaining 15 months in power, with the right-wing opposition Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Arena) the chief beneficiary of the 'punishment vote' the FMLN received at the polls.

The supreme electoral tribunal (TSE) apologised on 6 March for a "mistake" in tallying the congressional results. This was after Arena's René Portillo Cuadra, who had won the second-most votes for his party, appeared near the bottom of the list of elected deputies issued by the TSE. Several other prominent Arena and FMLN deputies, specifically those standing in the country's two largest departments of San Salvador and La Libertad, which supply 24 and 10 deputies respectively to the 84-seat legislative assembly, also appeared to have missed out on seats. The TSE acknowledged that an error had occurred in a script produced by the electronic voting company Smartmatic, which was contracted to provide the software and services for the electoral process. This meant that the order of legislative candidates did not reflect the preference expressed by voters.

Sadly for the FMLN, this glitch did not affect the number of votes cast. The TSE confirmed that the ruling party had registered its worst performance since 1994 when it first participated in elections after the country's bloody civil war (1980-1992). Back then the FMLN won 21 seats, jumping to 27 in 1997 in just its second electoral contest. By 2009, when the FMLN won the presidency, the party had secured 35 seats in the legislative assembly, receiving 943,000 votes. In the latest elections, it won barely half as many votes (some 475,000) and just 23 seats, eight fewer than in the last legislative elections in 2015.

Arena won 37 seats, two more than in 2015. The right-wing Partido de Concertación Nacional (PCN) picked up two seats to finish with eight, and the right-of-centre Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC) tripled its presence to three seats. This means that the Right will command 48 seats, a simple majority, and could muster 59 in alliance with the centre-right Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (Gana), three more than the coveted two-thirds majority.

A two-thirds majority is needed to overturn a presidential veto and to censure cabinet ministers. It is also required to appoint the attorney general and magistrates to the supreme court and the court of audits. In June this year four of the five magistrates on the constitutional chamber (Sala) of the supreme court will be renewed. The Sala has been a persistent thorn in the side of the Sánchez Cerén administration but is also adjudged by the legislative assembly to be encroaching on its constitutional remit. The Right could use its two-thirds majority to appoint less independent-minded magistrates. In December, it could irk the FMLN by re-electing Douglas Meléndez as attorney general. The FMLN accuses Meléndez of doing the Right's bidding.

If all these parties join forces, the FMLN will be powerless to stop them. The FMLN has worked with Gana in the legislative assembly and can rely on support from the one deputy elected by the left-wing Cambio Democrático (CD), but this would only total 35 seats, insufficient to advance Sánchez Cerén's agenda.

#### **Óscar Romero**

Pope Francis signed a decree on 7 March permitting the canonization of Óscar Arnulfo Romero, the archbishop of San Salvador assassinated in 1980. This is the final step in Romero's journey to becoming a saint, having been beatified in May 2015. The announcement was made three days after the thumping victory of Arena, founded by Roberto d'Aubuisson, the intellectual author of Romero's assassination, in legislative and municipal elections. President Sánchez Cerén celebrated the news of Romero's canonisation which is expected to take place in October.

# Drug gang with political ties disbanded

El Salvador's police have disbanded a drug- and peopletrafficking network operating in the municipality of San Antonio de la Cruz in the north-western department of Chalatenango on the Honduran border. It was allegedly led by the local mayor, Lucio Ayala, who won re-election for Arena in the municipal elections. Ayala was arrested with six others accused of smuggling marijuana and cocaine, and crack. They also offered to smuggle people northwards into the US for US\$8,000. In a separate (but related) operation, police arrested 17 people, including two police officers, in Metapán, a municipality in the contiguous department of Santa Ana, bordering Guatemala, suspected of contraband and people smuggling, and links to Ayala.

In the concurrent municipal elections, the FMLN lost the country's second-most important elected post, the mayoralty of the capital San Salvador, to Ernesto Muyshondt, Arena's former vice-president of ideology. Muyshondt won twice as many votes as his FMLN rival, Jackeline Rivera, despite it having been shown that he held secret talks with leaders of all of the mara gangs in February 2014, during the last presidential election campaign, offering a series of inducements in exchange for them using their influence to persuade voters to back his party.

The FMLN not only lost control of San Salvador but was also left with just two of the 14 departmental capitals – San Miguel, the eponymous capital, and Zacatecoluca, the capital of La Paz – to 10 for Arena. The PCN won the other two. In total, Arena won 136 of the country's 262 mayoralties, and a further two in coalition with the PCN, up from 119 in 2015. The FMLN won just 64, plus four more in coalition with the CD and smaller parties, down from 82 in 2015.

But all of these results conceal an important detail: Arena is also losing popularity. The party won some 60,000 fewer votes (823,000 in total) than in the 2015 legislative elections. It was not a case of disillusioned FMLN supporters switching to Arena but rather abstaining or casting blank or spoilt ballots. At 46%, turnout was the lowest of the last four congressional elections. And the number of blank and spoilt ballots totalled 227,000, narrowly eclipsing the support for Gana (223,000), the third-most successful party in the legislative elections. This looks like a success for the popular outgoing mayor of San Salvador, Nayib Bukele, recently thrown out of the FMLN after clashes with the party's leadership, who had called for voters to protest in this way. Bukele is intent on running for the presidency in 2019.

The FMLN leadership held a post mortem. Cabinet changes are expected imminently, but while the FMLN secretary general, Medardo González, said he accepted responsibility for the electoral results he neither offered to resign nor to back away from the endorsement of Gerson Martínez, a 63-year-old veteran guerrilla, and public works and housing minister (2009-2017), as the party's presidential candidate. The director of migration, Héctor Rodríguez, published a letter on *Twitter* to González, urging changes, "not just people, but priorities and strategies" to avoid "being buried in the next presidential elections". Rodríguez suggested bringing forward internal elections to renew the party leadership, and holding open primary elections in which all members can vote. At present Martínez is expected to be anointed as the party's presidential candidate in a vote next month in which just 600 delegates can vote.

Arena will hold closed primary elections (with 122,364 members able to vote) on 22 April to choose its presidential candidate. The contest pits two businessmen – Javier Simán and Carlos Calleja – against one another. Arena will proclaim the winner at a party convention on 6 May.

El Salvador's congressional composition					
	2018	2015	Swing		
Arena	37	35	2		
FMLN	23	31	-8		
Gana	11	11	-2		
PCN	8	6	2		
PDC	3	1	2		
CD	1	0	1		
Independent	1	0	1		
Total	84	84			

<sup>\*</sup> It could yet get worse for the FMLN. One FMLN seat is very closely contested and could be awarded to Arena in the final count. The country's first independent deputy, Leonardo Bonilla, won election with populist proposals, tapping into public disenchantment with the political class, such as reducing the size of the legislative assembly from 84 to 64 seats, limiting the contracting of advisers, and abolishing immunity from prosecution.

#### **GUATEMALA | SECURITY**

#### Police chief ejection reignites transparency concerns

The dismissal of Guatemala's national police (PNC) chief Nery Ramos, despite evidence of security-related progress, is again fanning concerns about the commitment on the part of the conservative Frente de Convergencia Nacional (FCN-Nación) government led by President Jimmy Morales to anti-corruption efforts. It follows the sacking in January of the head of the tax authorities (SAT), Juan Francisco Solórzano Foppa [WR-18-03], and departure of the interior minister, Francisco Rivas – both similarly well-respected figures. It also follows evident government discomfort with the ongoing presence of the United Nations-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (Cicig) [WR-18-07]. The official reason given by the Morales government for the decision to fire Ramos has failed to convince.

Rivas's successor, Enrique Antonio Degenhart Asturias, announced that he was replacing Ramos, in the post since September 2015, with Erwin Rolando Tzi Juárez, the head of the immigration police (Dipafront). As well as Ramos, Degenhart also revealed that he was replacing two other top PNC officials deputy PNC director Edwin Mayén and deputy PNC director of criminal investigations Stu Velasco – while a third, deputy PNC director of operations, Rony Espinoza, was transferred to replace Mayén.

Claims by Degenhart, whose own appointment had proven contentious (*see sidebar*), that the change was necessary to "refresh" the PNC raised eyebrows, not least given evidence of progress in security efforts. Earlier this year, the interior ministry claimed to have reduced the national homicide rate from 27.3 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016 to 26.1 per 100,000 in 2017. This tendency looks set to continue: new figures released by the national institute of forensic science (Inacif) showed the homicide rate dropped by 11.07% from 885 to 787 in the first two months of 2018, compared with the same period in 2017.

Ramos's efforts were recognised by other sectors. The same day that Degenhart made the change, the US embassy in Guatemala tweeted its appreciation of the outgoing PNC chief as a "valuable [US] collaborator", noting that, under his leadership, the PNC had obtained "substantial successes" such as the drop in the homicide rate, improvements in community policing, and creation of new tools to combat criminality. Local human rights groups such as Movimiento Pro Justicia and Fundación Myrna Mack, along with the influential private sector lobby Cacif, also questioned the decision to fire Ramos. Cacif described it as "inconvenient" given the results achieved by the PNC.

#### **Key figures implicated**

Amid concerns that Nery Ramos's departure will damage anti-corruption efforts, attempts to bring two high-profile figures to justice (with varying degrees of success) have made headlines in recent weeks. On 23 February, Roberto López Villatoro, a wealthy entrepreneur and powerful behind-the-scenes figure in local politics, and Eddy Giovanni Orellana Donis, a former appeals court judge, were arrested over judicial corruption charges. Orellana is accused of accepting a luxury apartment as a gift from López Villatoro in exchange for allegedly influencing the 2014 selection of supreme court (CSJ) judges in his favour.

Yet efforts to bring to justice another member of the establishment — Brigadier General Erick Fernando Melgar Padilla (accused by Cicig and the attorney general's office on 16 February of obstructing justice) — met difficulties after a judge revoked his arrest warrant. Melgar Padilla comes from a powerful family, his brother, Herber Armando Melgar Padilla, is a national FCN-Nación deputy and a close ally of President Morales, who in January named another brother, Manfred Alberto Melgar Padilla, as deputy food and nutritional security minister.

#### **Degenhart**

A businessman and former director of migration (2010-2012), Enrique Antonio Degenhart's appointment itself had been questioned by the local media given he had been named in the 2016 'Panama Papers' scandal (when over 11m confidential documents were leaked from the offices of Panamabased offshore law firm Mossack Fonseca) as an intermediary for offshore entity Westbend Management SA.

# Quotes of the week "Seeking peace has never been as popular as showing war trophies. I say so from personal experience. But peace saves lives."

Colombia's President
Juan Manuel Santos
justifies the renewal of
peace negotiations
with the ELN.

The country is anxiously waiting for the serious cases of corruption denounced recently to be confronted. It expects more results and less talking. It wants transparency and tolerance. Elizabeth Cabezas, the new president of Ecuador's national assembly.

"My government has the mission of recovering unity and confidence in Chile."

Chile's President

Sebastián Piñera in his inaugural speech.

#### **POSTSCRIPT**

#### Latest Mexican intervention smacks of desperation

The failure of the government led by President Enrique Peña Nieto to employ a coherent and coordinated strategy to arrest the deterioration in public security in Mexico was laid bare this week. Federal forces were ordered into Tlaquepaque, a municipality in the metropolitan area of Guadalajara, the country's second-largest city, to disarm the municipal police. No arrests were made. Instead the municipal police officers have been compelled to undergo re-evaluation en masse, followed by training, because of suspicion that the local force had been infiltrated by organised crime. This followed a sharp increase in the homicide rate in Tlaquepaque amid a brutal turf war involving the country's most violent drug trafficking organisation (DTO), the Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG).

The Mexican army, along with federal and state police, and members of the federal attorney general's office (PGR), marched into Tlaquepaque, in the western state of Jalisco, on 11 March, taking over municipal police headquarters and disarming 734 municipal police officers. Some 400 federal and state police officers have taken over public security duties in the municipality.

The mayor of Tlaquepaque, María Elena Limón, said she had not been informed about the federal intervention and had yet to be given any document from the state governor, Aristóteles Sandoval, a member of the federally ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), setting out the legal case for it. Limón, a member of the left-wing Movimiento Ciudadano, promised to cooperate fully with federal and state authorities but urged them "to take care to respect the way things are done". She demanded that Sandoval share with her the results of the police probe and allow her government to take the necessary legal action to clean up the municipal force.

Sandoval made no reference to the questionable legal grounds for the intervention in Tlaquepaque. Instead, he focused on the need for "decisive action against insecurity" as the climate of violence in Guadalajara was "likely to get worse" in the months ahead. There have been 52 homicides in Tlaquepaque already this year as the municipality has borne witness to what Sandoval called a "reconfiguration" of the CJNG. Rival cells within the CJNG have engaged in shootouts in broad daylight and massacres in bars, with body parts found in bags.

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