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## CONTENTS

<b>LEADER</b>	<b>1</b>
Scandal-hit Kuczynski resigns to avoid impeachment	
<b>ANDEAN COUNTRIES</b>	
<b>VENEZUELA</b>	<b>4</b>
Maduro performs purge as petro pummelled	
<b>COLOMBIA</b>	<b>6</b>
Farc dissidents provide major headache	
<b>BRAZIL &amp; SOUTHERN CONE</b>	
<b>BRAZIL</b>	<b>7</b>
Highs and lows of the Lula caravan	
<b>BRAZIL</b>	<b>8</b>
Getting crowded in the centre	
<b>ARGENTINA</b>	<b>9</b>
Looking to get tough on drug trafficking	
<b>CHILE</b>	<b>10</b>
Piñera sparks first tensions with opposition	
<b>MEXICO &amp; NAFTA</b>	
<b>MEXICO</b>	<b>11</b>
New police search powers provoke polemic	
<b>MEXICO</b>	<b>12</b>
Presidential candidates promise sweeping reform	
<b>CENTRAL AMERICA &amp; CARIBBEAN</b>	
<b>HONDURAS</b>	<b>14</b>
UN hails start of dialogue process	
<b>TRACKING TRENDS</b>	
<b>POSTSCRIPT</b>	<b>16</b>
G-20 meeting passes off successfully for Argentina's Macri	
Quotes of the week	

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## Scandal-hit Kuczynski resigns to avoid impeachment

Peru's President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski tendered his resignation on 21 March, the day before he was scheduled to appear before congress and fight a second attempt to impeach him in the space of three months. Ironically, the arithmetic had been looking favourable for Kuczynski surviving again, in the process delivering a severe blow to his political nemesis, Keiko Fujimori. That was until the day before Kuczynski stepped aside when he was compromised by several video recordings. Keiko has now recovered her mastery over her party, crushing a damaging internal revolt by her brother Kenji, and should reassert her dominance over the government after the first vice-president, Martín Vizcarra, takes up the reins of power.

President Kuczynski was weakened after he was drawn into the sprawling corruption scandal involving the Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht. His image was indelibly tarnished, in the view of the left-wing opposition and many Peruvians, by his decision to grant a pardon to former president Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000) in suspicious circumstances days after narrowly surviving an impeachment vote in December thanks to his son Kenji's support in congress. But still Kuczynski looked likely to prevail again in a second impeachment vote on 22 March, having just about amassed sufficient support in congress, if it were not for evidence that he had resorted to a tactic for which the Fujimori government became notorious: bribing members of congress.

Fujimori's government crumbled after several 'vladivideos' emerged showing his intelligence chief Vladimiro Montesinos systematically bribing members of congress (as well as judges and the news media). Kuczynski delivered a televised message to announce his decision to resign, arguing that "faced with this difficult situation...it is best for the country". Just days earlier, on 16 March, Kuczynski had been adamant that he would not resign, insisting that he had "done nothing wrong". He only went when it became clear that he would perish in the impeachment vote, and in order to avoid the ignominy of congressional excoriation over the scandal unleashed on 20 March. It was not resignation by fax but, as with Fujimori, Kuczynski was undone by video recordings.

The main opposition Fuerza Popular (FP, Fujimoristas) presented three video recordings and an audio of secretly taped conversations featuring one of its congressional deputies, Moisés Mamani, Kenji, and two of his 'avengers', dissident FP congressmen Guillermo Bocángel and Bienvenido Ramírez, as well as Kuczynski's lawyer, Alberto Borea.

Mamani appears to be offered a 5% kickback on public works projects for his region in exchange for voting against Kuczynski's impeachment. Ramírez explains how "within a week" of abstaining in December's impeachment vote he was rewarded with public works projects for Tumbes, the north-

## Lava Jato

President Kuczynski faced a seven-hour ordeal on 16 March before the Lava Jato commission, comprising six members of congress and presided over by FP's Rosa Bartra. He was quizzed about the US\$4m bribe Odebrecht allegedly paid former president Toledo to be awarded the construction of the Interoceánica Sur highway, while Kuczynski was serving in his cabinet, as well as the Brazilian firm's payment of US\$782,000 to Westfield Capital and US\$4m to the linked company, First Capital, of his business partner Gerardo Sepúlveda. A confidential report prepared by the financial intelligence unit (UIF) was presented to the Lava Jato commission the day before Kuczynski's appearance. Four of the six members of congress on the commission professed themselves to be dissatisfied with his replies to 140 questions.

western region he represents, as well as being able to appoint senior officials of his choice. In another video, Mamani is told that he can expect all of this "without moving a finger" if he becomes "a friend of the executive". Bocángel claims that Kuczynski had ordered that the budget be used to benefit Kenjistas. A position on the new congressional leadership committee, elected in June, also appears to be dangled in front of Mamani.

Kenji accused FP of "twisting the facts" and editing "in bad faith" in a bid to "decapitate the president". The prime minister, Mercedes Aráoz, vehemently denied any attempt to bribe members of congress. Aráoz claimed that the recordings were "no more than habitual meetings between members of congress". But it quickly became apparent that not many shared her insouciance about the recordings.

## Kuczynski's support evaporates

Former interior minister Carlos Basombrío called upon Kuczynski on Twitter to resign for "the good of the country", having engaged in "unacceptable practices to draw out his inevitable slow death". Basombrío said he had kept silent for three months since resigning from the cabinet over the revelations that payments of US\$782,000 were made to Kuczynski's consultancy firm Westfield Capital by Odebrecht between 2004 and 2007 (while serving as economy minister and later prime minister in the administration led by Alejandro Toledo [2001-2006]), and doubts over whether Kuczynski had transferred ownership of the firm to his Chilean business partner Gerardo Sepúlveda. Basombrío said he had decided to speak out now because "what has happened confirms my worst fears".

Crucially, at least 10 deputies who had committed to defend Kuczynski against impeachment, after a motion was approved on 15 March to hold a second vote on the matter, jumped ship, calling for him to resign immediately. Two deputies in Kuczynski's own party, Peruanos por el Cambio (PPK), swapped sides. "The presidency goes beyond people. It is necessary to protect institutions. As such, with a heavy heart, Mr President, I call upon you to step aside," tweeted PPK deputy Pedro Olaechea. Three deputies who left PPK last December – Vicente Zevallos, Gino Costa, and Alberto de Belaúnde – but had been prepared to vote against impeachment, also changed position.

With the writing on the wall, Kuczynski resigned. The rhetorical question posed to Peruvian bishops in Lima by Pope Francis during his January visit to the country – "What is happening in Peru where each time a president leaves office he is put in jail?" – must have come back to haunt Kuczynski when the attorney general's office promptly requested that the judiciary prevent him from leaving the country in connection with the Odebrecht case. In his televised resignation speech, Kuczynski had defiantly declared that "I have worked 60 years of my life with complete honesty". But his appearance on 16 March before the Lava Jato congressional investigative committee failed to convince many (*see sidebar*).

## Battle for control of Fujimorismo

The (FP) president of congress, Luis Galarreta, announced the launch of an impeachment process into Kenji, Ramírez, and Bocángel, as well as Aráoz, and the transport and communications minister, Bruno Giuffra, whose names were mentioned in the conversations recorded by his party. Here was proof that Kuczynski's removal was part of a wider game: the fierce civil war between the scions of the Fujimori family, Keiko and Kenji.

Once Kuczynski allied himself with Kenji, who began to attract FP deputies, whittling down the party's 73-strong bloc to 59 in the 130-seat congress, Keiko appears to have calculated that the only way to undercut Kenji and reassert her authority over FP was to supplant Kuczynski. The impeachment route looked like failing again. This would have meant another debilitating defeat

## Impeachment

The outcome of the impeachment vote had looked favourable for President Kuczynski. A multi-party motion was approved by congress on 15 March to subject him to another impeachment vote but it was only backed by the minimum number of 87 deputies. As many as 93 deputies had voted in favour of a similar motion last December but only 79 went on to back impeachment when push came to shove. Left-wing opposition parties were determined to impeach Kuczynski for abusing their trust by issuing a pardon for former president Fujimori three days after the failure of the first impeachment attempt, but many other parties were divided on the matter, until the emergence of the damning videos.

for Keiko and more desertions from FP to Kenji. In this sense, the videos look like a masterstroke, proving Keiko to be a much more adroit political operator than her brother. They compelled Kuczynski to resign and obliterated Kenji's challenge. But they also appeared to confirm the public perception of Keiko as capable of sinister stratagems worthy of Montesinos himself.

"Most of all I regret that my own brother was embroiled in these practices," Keiko said upon the presentation of the videos. Kenji was left bewailing his sister's "criminal behaviour", insisting that Mamani had approached him about the meeting, and accusing Keiko of "laying a trap" to overshadow the launch of his party. Kenji announced his new party, Cambio 21, ahead of the next presidential elections in 2021 (the name is a throwback to Cambio 90, the party which carried his father into office in 1990) on 20 March.

### Vizcarra to enjoy little room for manoeuvre

In the weeks beforehand, Keiko had begun to talk in glowing terms about Vice-President Vizcarra replacing Kuczynski; Vizcarra, who the FP threatened to censure as transport and communications minister in congress last May, over the contract for the new Chinchero airport in Cusco, forcing him to resign his cabinet post.

Vizcarra was subsequently removed from frontline politics and appointed as ambassador to Canada in September. A former governor of the southern region of Moquegua, Vizcarra will now fly home and is expected to be sworn-in as Peru's 67<sup>th</sup> president on 23 March, assuming congress accepts Kuczynski's resignation.

Vizcarra said on *Twitter* that he would put himself "at the service of my country, respecting what the constitution orders". Vizcarra will have a baptism of fire. Not only will he have to deal with the domestic political repercussions of the current debacle, including a resurgent Keiko who will now be puppetmaster again, but he will also need to host the Summit of the Americas in Lima in just three weeks from now (13-14 April). On the plus side, the currency, the Nuevo Sol, and the Peruvian stock market bounced on hopes that political instability will now recede.

By accepting the presidency, Vizcarra will remove the need for fresh elections. The fact that the Odebrecht scandal has tainted politicians from across the spectrum means the outcome of any elections would have been highly uncertain and few deputies would have fancied having to run again for congress in the current climate of public indignation with the political class.

According to the AmericasBarometer released this week by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (Lapop) based at Vanderbilt University in the US, just 7.5% of Peruvians have any faith in the country's political parties, the lowest figure ever recorded. A massive 91% of respondents were convinced that at least half of the country's politicians are corrupt, with 27% viewing corruption as the country's biggest problem, the highest figure in the whole region, even exceeding Brazil, the epicentre of the Odebrecht scandal (19%). And this survey was carried out between February and April 2017 – before the Odebrecht scandal fully hit Peru.

Since then, Odebrecht has cast a shadow over every Peruvian head of state since Fujimori: Peruvian authorities are seeking former president Toledo's extradition from the US; Alan García (1985-1990; 2006-2011) is suspected of corruption; and Ollanta Humala (2011-2016) is in jail with his wife Nadine Heredia in connection with the Odebrecht bribery scheme. If Kuczynski had been impeached for concealing the truth over his links to Odebrecht, many of his accusers would have been guilty of much the same crime. None more so than Keiko. She stands accused of receiving a far greater sum from Odebrecht for her election campaign in 2011.

**Maduro performs purge as petro pummelled**

President Nicolás Maduro is tightening his grip over the ruling Bolivarian movement, eliminating internal rivals in the oil sector and the military, after forging his own party *Movimiento Somos Venezuela*. But just as Maduro is seeking to consolidate control, an external development ratcheted up the pressure on him. The petro, the cryptocurrency billed by his government as a panacea for Venezuela's profound economic ailments, and launched with much fanfare by Maduro in February, was dealt a crippling blow by the US.

Defence Minister General-in-chief Vladimir Padrino López called on dissidents within the Bolivarian armed forces (FANB) this week to stop fomenting divisions in a bid to provoke a military coup. He boldly asserted that the FANB was "very happy with the state of the nation" and that "nobody will divide" it. He went on to praise the FANB's "strength, moral cohesion, patriotic, national, and democratic conscience".

Padrino López's paean to the FANB followed the arrest of retired major general Miguel Rodríguez Torres on 13 March for allegedly plotting against the Maduro administration. This, in turn, followed the decision to strip around a dozen retired generals critical of the government of their rank, and the detention of a dozen FANB officers, including four lieutenant colonels, suspected of sedition and rebellion.

Major General Alexis López Ramírez, executive secretary of the national defence council (Codena) until June last year, when he resigned in disagreement with the Maduro administration's decision to convene a constituent assembly, is also believed to have been arrested this week. After Rodríguez Torres was detained, López Ramírez tweeted his support and confidence that "Venezuela will recover its Republican character and the democracy for which we made such a great effort, shedding blood and suffering, to consolidate..."

In a letter published on social media at the weekend, retired former army general Clíver Alcalá Cordones appeared to encourage a coup. "When the military consider the civil leadership incapable of confronting the government's arbitrary actions," Alcalá Cordones wrote, "it increases the motivation for them to impose reason and raise their voices in the face of the deviation of government functions".

Alcalá Cordones had been appointed commander of the army by former president Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) in 2012 and was in charge of one of the eight integral strategic defence regions (Redi, in the Spanish acronym) into which Venezuela is split. He commanded the Redi in the southern region of Guayana, comprising the states of Amazonas, Bolívar, and Delta Amacuro. His whereabouts unknown, but believed to be in hiding, he urged the military not to be "passive" or "silent". He also demanded fair treatment for senior officials who until recently "led tactical units in the army and are now incarcerated in prison cells without respect for legal procedure".

There is a common link between the senior military officials being purged by the Maduro administration. They were loyal to Chávez, comprising his inner circle, and in several cases participated in his failed military coup attempt in 1992, and are now convinced of the betrayal of his legacy.

"Just as Stalin ordered the killing of Trotsky, and Fidel ordered the arrest of Huber Matos [a top commander who broke from the Cuban Revolution in

**Military coups**

Defence Minister and General-in-chief

Padrino López said there was "no longer any place for [military coups] in this century". They

appear to have been acceptable in the last one, though, as the ruling PSUV habitually celebrates the 1992 failed coup attempt led by Hugo Chávez, the founder of the Bolivarian movement and late president (1999-2013).



## **Military dissent**

Calculating the extent of any divisions within the FANB is very difficult, but the series of recent purges is testament to the government's intent to snuff out any dissent. It is worth reminding readers that there are more than 2,000 generals in Venezuela's FANB (more than twice as many as in the US military), the vast majority promoted during the Bolivarian Revolution. About 50 are considered to be a kind of praetorian guard for President Maduro. Many others are not Maduristas as such but are loyal to Maduro because of the privileges obtained under him.

1959 and endured harsh imprisonment for 20 years], so Maduro has arrested Rodríguez Torres and López Ramírez. The Revolution devours the Revolution," David Smolansky, a senior politician in the Venezuelan opposition party, Voluntad Popular (VP), tweeted. Smolansky knows what he is talking about. Mayor of the Caracas municipality of El Hatillo from 2014 to 2017, he fled into exile in Brazil last year, the third generation of his family to leave a country because of political prosecution (his grandparents left the USSR in 1927, and his father Cuba in 1970).

Smolansky also appeared to advocate a military coup to remove Maduro from power, saying the army should "fulfil its constitutional role". As did Venezuela's supreme court in exile. It called upon the armed forces this week to "disown" the country's government and "re-establish" the constitutional order and the rule of law.

The increasingly unsubtle encouragement for the military to conduct a coup is not just emanating from dissidents in the FANB and some in the political opposition but also from a steady stream of US officials. The latest was Steven Mnuchin, the US treasury secretary, this week. Speaking during his attendance of the G-20 summit in Argentina, Mnuchin said he had discussed with his regional counterparts "how to achieve our shared objectives of restoring Venezuelan democracy, combating the kleptocracy of the Maduro regime, and responding to the humanitarian crisis caused by Maduro's economic policy". Mnuchin added, "we once again call upon the Venezuelan military to respect and uphold the constitution".

## **Petro sanctions**

Mnuchin went on to criticise the Maduro administration for "attempting to circumvent sanctions through the petro digital currency". US President Donald Trump issued an executive order on 19 March barring all transactions by US companies and citizens with "any digital currency" issued by the Venezuelan government, after the launch of the petro "in a process that Venezuela's democratically elected National Assembly has denounced as unlawful".

The US move against the petro is a setback for the Maduro administration. The vice-president of the ruling Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV), Diosdado Cabello, reacted by saying he "absolutely rejects the resolution of President Emperor Donald Trump against Venezuela...subjecting the Venezuelan people to more sanctions and aggression". Cabello added that "it is extraordinarily unusual that a country as powerful as the US should devote so much time to a country as small as Venezuela".

## **Temer and Santos talk Venezuela**

Brazil's President Michel Temer acted as host in Brasilia to his Colombian opposite number Juan Carlos Santos this week. High up the two men's agenda was the situation in Venezuela, and the humanitarian crisis caused as large numbers of Venezuelan refugees flow into both Colombia and Brazil.

According to official estimates, in the last two years over 500,000 Venezuelans have moved into Colombia and around 40,000 have crossed into Brazil. Temer said that the two countries had agreed on a common aim: "the political pacification of Venezuela; full democratisation during elections; and an end to the persecution of opponents of the current regime".

Santos said that he and Temer had agreed to work for the restoration of democracy in Venezuela. He stressed that both the Colombian and Brazilian governments had offered humanitarian aid to Venezuela, but that this had been repeatedly rejected.

Regional action on Venezuela is expected to loom large on the agenda of the Summit of the Americas, due to be held in Peru on 13 and 14 April, which will be attended by US President Donald Trump and to which Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro has had his invitation publicly withdrawn.

## Violence

More than 17,000 people have been displaced after violent clashes between guerrillas in the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and fighters in the illegal armed group Los Pelusos (formerly the Ejército Popular de Liberación [EPL] guerrilla group), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has reported. Those affected live in the municipalities of San Calixto, El Tarra, Teorama, Convención, Hacarí, El Carmen, and Tibú, in the violence-torn region of Catatumbo in the department of Norte de Santander. The fighting broke out after a meeting in Teorama between the two sides over control of drug-trafficking routes failed to reach an amicable agreement. At least six were killed in the resultant clashes, the commander of the armed forces, General Alberto José Mejía, reported.

## Farc dissidents provide major headache

At least nine former guerrillas who refused to demobilise after the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc) signed a peace accord with the government were killed during a joint military and police operation in the southern department of Guaviare this week. One of those killed, known by the alias 'El Mocho', was the chief lieutenant of the leader of the Farc's former Frente Primero, 'Gentil Duarte' (Miguel Botache Santillana), who has become the most-wanted man in Colombia. The swelling number of Farc dissidents is putting pressure on the peace accord and raising fears that they could become the key player in the drug trade.

The strike against the Farc dissidents in Guaviare was swiftly hailed by President Juan Manuel Santos as an important blow. Gentil Duarte is widely seen by the authorities as posing the biggest threat to the peace process. The dissident Farc force, Bloque Oriental, has drawn in former guerrillas from 10 different fronts, numbering at least 600, with an equal number of militia. It controls a large part of the cocaine trade in six departments, including the main transit routes into Brazil and Venezuela, and is dedicated to a complete service from drug production to trafficking.

Vice-President Óscar Naranjo acknowledged last week that there was "serious concern" in the government about the development. In spite of this, Naranjo tried to downplay its significance in the overall scheme of things. He said that the Farc used to operate in 265 of the country's 1,100 municipalities before the peace accord, and that dissidents are now based in 41, making up "just 6% of the old group".

This figure does not tally with the calculations made by the online monitoring service *InSight Crime* in a recent report. It claimed that there were "at least 2,500 former Farc members, who have established a presence in over half of the country's departments". This is more than a third of the number of Farc guerrillas who demobilised.

If the *InSight Crime* figure is accurate, it would also put the Farc dissident force on a par with the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), the guerrilla group with which the Santos administration just resumed peace negotiations in Ecuador. *InSight Crime* contended that the "new criminal network [of Farc dissidents] may come to dominate the production of cocaine in Colombia", being battle-hardened, knowledgeable about the drug trade, and entrenched in rural communities.

The *InSight Crime* figure could be inflated by Farc militia members, an urban subset of the Farc of indeterminate number, although Santos estimated there were some 10,000 of them. Very few militia members demobilised. They provided support services for the Farc, often running illicit economies in the drug trade and extortion. Left in situ, these militias are able to continue with their previous activities under new leadership.

The big concern for the Santos administration, and the successor government in August, is that the burgeoning size of the Bloque Oriental will erode already weak public support for the peace accord, raising questions about why Farc leaders are being offered lenient sentences under the transitional justice system (JEP) and political participation when so many guerrillas remain in the field. The other fear is that if the next government decides to roll back some of the peace accord, notably the JEP, demobilised guerrillas could take up arms again within the Bloque Oriental.

## Highs and lows of the Lula caravan

Former President Lula da Silva (2003-2011), the main hope for the Left in this year's Brazilian presidential elections, was on a rollercoaster political ride this week. In a swing through the southern states, his electoral caravan was attracting both supporters and enemies; meanwhile the courts continued to argue over his legal status, with a real prospect that he might be imprisoned for corruption in a matter of days.

There is no doubt that Lula is the frontrunner, with polls consistently showing that he has the backing of somewhere between one fifth and one third of the voters. But he is now much more of a polarising figure than he was in the 2000s.

Lula has just launched the fourth phase of his round-the-country electoral campaign 'caravan', swinging through 17 cities in southern Brazil. Accompanied at different stages by his successor Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016), and the former presidents of Uruguay and Ecuador, respectively José Mujica (2010-2015) and Rafael Correa (2007-2017), Lula promised a return to the economic growth and redistribution of income that characterised the high points of their rule.

But times are different: while many supporters turned out, so too did his opponents, carrying pichulecos – the dolls portraying Lula in striped prison clothes. In some southern cities such as Bagé, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, anti-Lula farmers turned out in tractor cavalcades to protest against his presence.

Perhaps the real battle over Lula's candidacy is being fought in the courts. At that level the outcome remains uncertain. At the start of next week (26 March) a three-judge appeals court will rule on whether to uphold a 12-year prison sentence imposed on Lula for taking bribes and money laundering.

The court has already upheld the conviction on the first of a number of appeals. If the judges now unanimously reject all other outstanding appeals, they could, in a matter of days, order Lula's arrest, to start serving his 12-year sentence. This would almost certainly exclude him from this year's presidential race.

But that is not the end of the story. On 22 March (as this issue went to press) the supreme court (STF) was due to re-open hearings on a request by Lula's lawyers arguing that their client should not do any jail time at all, until after all appeals are exhausted. The STF had ruled against that in 2016, but its composition has changed since then and Chief Justice Cármen Lúcia indicated that the issue should be revisited.

Brazilian analysts say there are deep divisions and ill-feeling within the country's top court. If the ruling does change, it will be relatively easy for Lula's legal team to stretch out the appeals for most of this year, up to and past October's presidential elections, meaning that he will be able to stay in the race.

### Franco murder

Meanwhile, the murder on 14 March of Marielle Franco, a left-wing Rio de Janeiro city councillor, continues to have political repercussions. As a human rights activist and critic of the heavy-handed tactics of Rio's military police, there is widespread speculation (but as yet no hard evidence) of some kind of police involvement in Franco's death. Leftists, including Franco's party (Partido Socialismo e Liberdade – PSOL) have suggested the killing is part of

### Protest action

In the wake of the protest action encountered by former president Lula, Gleisi Hoffmann, the party president of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), demanded better security in the face of what she called the activities of "extreme right-wing militias" with "fascist characteristics".

## Alckmin

Gerardo Alckmin is currently ranked fourth in the opinion polls. He promises pension, tax, and political reforms. Like most mainstream Brazilian politicians, he faces some corruption allegations (in his case relating to public works contracts in the state of São Paulo).

a creeping right-wing coup. Some right-wing politicians, in turn, have claimed she was linked to criminal gangs.

In what could be a sign of things to come, there has been a furious debate on social media, with a proliferation of 'fake news' stories, including unfounded claims that Franco was the mistress of an incarcerated drug dealer. A study by the think tank Fundação Getúlio Vargas (FGV) found that 7% of all tweets on the subject reflected the extreme right-wing narrative that blames the victim and her activism for her own death. Notably, however, extreme right presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro (usually ranked second in the opinion polls after Lula) has so far made no public comment on the killing.

## BRAZIL | POLITICS

### Getting crowded in the centre

**One of Brazil's larger political parties, the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), has formally proclaimed São Paulo state governor Gerardo Alckmin as its candidate for October's presidential elections. Meanwhile, President Michel Temer has indicated he might after all consider running himself.**

The centre-ground in Brazilian politics is a rather mysterious place at the moment. Frustration with a sluggish economy, with the political establishment, and with seemingly never-ending corruption stories has led much of the electorate to move to the Left, to the Right, or towards candidates simply seen as outsiders. But fear of the alternatives, along with mainstream political traditions, could at some point lead to a swing back to the middle ground (particularly if the presidential race goes to a second-round run-off).

There is certainly no shortage of likely centrist candidates. The PSDB, Brazil's third-largest party, has now endorsed Alckmin for the presidency. Strangely perhaps, this does not entirely rule out someone else making a later bid for the party's support. A definitive choice does not have to be made until August when candidates must formally register with the electoral authorities.

Intriguingly President Temer, from Brazil's largest political party, the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB), who has spent months if not years saying he will not be a candidate, has now suggested that he might consider running after all. Responding to journalists' questions on 20 March, Temer said, "I haven't decided...time will tell at the legal deadline" – a reference to the fact that the electoral authorities require all presidential candidates to register by 15 August.

So far the PMDB has not endorsed any candidate. Since the impeachment of his predecessor Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016), Temer has presented himself as an interim president without any personal political ambition, focused on making necessary, if politically unpopular reforms to pull the country out of recession. Given his very low approval ratings it was presumed that Temer would eventually announce his support for another centrist, such as Finance Minister Henrique Meirelles, or the leader of the federal lower chamber of congress, Rodrigo Maia.

That still remains possible, and likely, but some say Temer began to consider his own chances after ordering the army to take control of security in the state of Rio de Janeiro in February, and creating a new ministry of security. The implication is that Temer began to think that any improvement in the battle against crime might give him some personal electoral leverage. However, there is as yet little sign of the type of dramatic improvement that would be capable of boosting Temer's extremely low approval rating.



## Armed forces involvement

Ambassador Barletta's decision to approach Minister Menéndez, to present him with the Argentine government's new bilateral security cooperation agreement, came amid efforts by the Uruguayan government to allow the armed forces to become directly involved in border security. Back in February the government led by President Tabaré Vázquez sent draft legislation to Uruguay's congress outlining a legal framework under which the military could be regularly employed to protect the country's borders. This initiative is expected to receive the backing of the political opposition, which has long been calling on the government to improve security on Uruguay's porous borders, and public security in general, amid rising levels of criminality.

## Looking to get tough on drug trafficking

The Argentine government has called on Uruguay to cooperate with it to clamp down on the smuggling of illegal drugs across the shared border. The call comes amid reports that the Paraná-Uruguay River international waterway (Hidroavía) is increasingly used as a conduit by drug trafficking organisations (DTOs). This has been attributed to the lack of appropriate policing of the 3,400km waterway that marks the boundaries between Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay. The Argentine government is now determined to take decisive steps to address this issue.

Argentina's security ministry and naval prefecture (PFA), the security force tasked with protecting the country's maritime and riverine territories, reported that between 2016 and March 2018 there were 588 seizures of illegal goods on the Hidroavía. As a result of these seizures, the PFA confiscated 22.2 tonnes (t) of marijuana as well as some consignments of cocaine and synthetic drugs such as methamphetamines (no figures provided). According to the reports, the smuggling of marijuana is more common in the southern area of the Hidroavía (which separates Argentina's Buenos Aires province from Uruguay) and smuggling of cocaine is more common in the northern area of the Hidroavía (which separates Argentina's Entre Ríos province from Uruguay).

The Argentine authorities say that in order to combat the illegal trafficking of drugs and goods through the Hidroavía, the PFA has purchased four new Israeli-made patrol boats, which have allowed it to increase its patrols of the area. However, the Argentine authorities have recognised that this is not enough to police the Hidroavía effectively and that in order to achieve this they must work together with the other countries that have access to it. Indeed, the Argentine government has recognised that the lack of an international security cooperation agreement with Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil, and Bolivia to allow these countries to carry out joint security operations in the Hidroavía is a major impediment to exercising full control of the area.

Argentine government officials have explained that, in the absence of such an agreement, the PFA is powerless to stop and search suspect foreign-registered ships travelling through international Hidroavía waters. Pointedly, the Argentine government has said that it is now seeking to reach an agreement with its regional neighbours to tighten security controls in the Hidroavía. Matías Lobos, the deputy secretary of border control at Argentina's security ministry, has explained that "We are seeking an agreement between the five countries to control everything that passes through the Hidroavía". But the problem is that regional governments have been trying to reach such an agreement for the last 10 years to no avail.

The main obstacle has been the refusal of the landlocked countries – Paraguay and Bolivia – to surrender control of their main access to the sea to their larger neighbours. Yet, on 22 February, the Argentine and Brazilian governments issued an ultimatum to all countries with access to the Hidroavía to draft and subscribe to such an agreement. Following the issuing of the ultimatum, the Argentine government said that if no comprehensive deal could be reached, then it would seek to establish bilateral agreements with the likes of Brazil and Uruguay. It now appears that the Argentine government has decided to move forward in that direction. On 19 March, Argentina's newly appointed ambassador to Uruguay, Mario Barletta, told the Uruguayan press that he had presented an Argentine government proposal for a new bilateral security cooperation agreement that would allow for the joint patrolling of the shared Hidroavía waters to Uruguay's defence minister, Jorge Menéndez (*see sidebar*). Barletta said that the proposal would create a permanent bilateral inter-institutional commission tasked with patrolling the shared Hidroavía waters.

## Piñera sparks first tensions with opposition

President Sebastián Piñera's conciliatory rhetoric upon taking office for a second term earlier this month [[WR-18-10](#)] looks short-lived. Last week his interior minister, Andrés Chadwick, announced that the new right-of-centre Chile Vamos coalition government was ditching a draft constitutional proposal, put forward by Piñera's predecessor, Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010; 2014-2018), days before she left office.

Along with free education and fiscal reform, constitutional reform – to update the magna carta which dates back to the military dictatorship led by General Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) – had been one of Bachelet's three chief electoral pledges in 2013. On 5 March, in a television address to the nation, Bachelet finally unveiled her new draft constitution, the fruit of a participative process which began in October 2015. She said the new document "establishes the inviolability of human dignity and the respect and protection of human rights", which includes free education for all and the right to strike. She said this corrects "a tremendous omission of the current text".

Bachelet also noted that the proposed new constitution "takes care of a historic debt – constitutional recognition of indigenous people", and highlighted efforts to address "severe defects" with regard to the role of state institutions. For example, it would remove the super majority needed to pass some laws and establish a better balance between the executive and legislative branches.

If intended to secure constitutional reform as part of her legacy, Bachelet's move would seem to have failed, despite speculation that President Piñera's lack of a majority in the bicameral legislature would leave him more open to negotiating with the opposition Nueva Mayoría (NM) coalition. In his 2017 manifesto, Piñera had notably ruled out introducing a new constitution, calling instead for improvements. On 15 March, Chadwick said unequivocally that the initiative would not be promoted by the Piñera administration but instead it would consider updating some aspects of the constitution.

This met with derision from the NM, some members of which had criticised Bachelet's decision to wait until the final days of her mandate to table her proposal. A national deputy for the NM's Partido Socialista (PS), Leonardo Soto, a member of the lower chamber's constitutional committee, complained that the new government's decision to shelve the bill was a "betrayal" of its promise to build bridges with different political groups, declaring that the "honeymoon with the opposition" was over.

### New Carabineros head

One of President Piñera's initial acts upon taking office on 11 March was to name a new director of the Carabineros militarised police after Bruno Villalobos resigned on 12 March. Appointed for a four-year term in 2015, Villalobos had long faced calls to step down – both over the major tax fraud scandal which broke last year, as well as the more recent botched 'Operación Huracán' case. This involved claims that the Carabineros tampered with evidence from an operation carried out last year in the southern region of La Araucanía in which eight indigenous Mapuche leaders were arrested.

On 14 March, Piñera named Hermes Soto Isla, a former head of the Carabineros in the Santiago metropolitan area and the Bío Bío and Antofagasta regions, as Villalobos's replacement. He also pledged to modernise the Carabineros and the investigative police (PDI), focusing in particular on improving the way in which police forces gather and use intelligence – a reference to the shortcomings exposed by 'Operación Huracán'.

### Cadem poll

A survey by local pollster Cadem, published on 12 March, found that 82% of respondents agreed with President Michelle Bachelet's proposal to draft a new constitution. However, 63% disapproved of her decision to send it to congress just before the end of her second term.

### Independents

Jaime 'El Bronco' Rodríguez Calderón missed out on being able to stand as an independent presidential candidate by barely 30,000 signatures, according to the INE. Despite having collected well in excess of the number required, the INE found numerous forgeries, duplications, and irregular photocopies of voter ID. Another hopeful, Senator Armando Ríos Piter, had only 242,646 voter endorsements validated out of some 1.77m. Rodríguez Calderón went to the INE accompanied by thousands of supporters on 18 March in an attempt to register his candidacy despite the INE ruling. In a rally outside the INE headquarters he said that he was a "bastard son of the electoral law" but would fight on, urging the INE not to "limit the freedom of decision of the Mexican people". Ríos Piter demanded "an exhaustive revision", insisting the signatures backing him were genuine.

## New police search powers provoke polemic

Mexico's supreme court (SCJN) has approved the new police search powers included in the country's 2014 national code of criminal procedures. But the approval is proving controversial, with the likes of the national human rights commission (CNDH) warning that it could lead to the systematic violation of civil rights in Mexico that could turn the country into a police state.

The new police search powers included in the national code of criminal procedures allow the police to search individuals without having a judicial warrant. They only need to have "reasonable suspicion" that these individuals may be involved in criminal activity. The CNDH challenged the new powers on constitutional grounds, arguing that they undermine some of the civil liberties enshrined in the constitution (Article 148). Moreover, the CNDH expressed concerns that law enforcement agents would abuse the new powers leading to an increase in human rights violations in a country where these are already rife.

But after analysing the CNDH's complaint, on 13 March the SCJN plenary unanimously voted to dismiss it. The SCJN ruled that there are no grounds for the CNDH's complaint as the new search powers do not necessarily constitute a curtailing of civil liberties. The court said that police searches are part of accepted preventative controls that help to prevent, investigate, and prosecute crime and, as such, the new powers do not run counter to the constitution. However, the SCJN ruling satisfied neither the CNDH nor other local human rights organisations, which have been openly critical.

The CNDH insisted that the new powers will promote "the violation of individuals' basic rights and liberties, especially those of adolescents and young people". In this context, the CNDH said that the SCJN ruling would not contribute to creating "an environment of increased security and less violence". It went on to say that the driving force behind its complaint was to ensure juridical security against the current scenario which is marked by the arbitrary detention of individuals by law enforcement agents. Indeed, the CNDH noted that complaints about arbitrary detentions are one of the main grievances brought before it by the public. According to the CNDH, between 2007 and 2017 it received 10,255 such complaints. Moreover, the CNDH said that arbitrary detentions are the gateway to other more serious human rights violations, such as torture, cruel and inhumane treatment, and even enforced disappearances.

The criticism prompted the SCJN to issue a statement on 15 March clarifying the basis for its ruling. The statement points out that under the code of criminal procedures the police can only conduct a search without a warrant if they can justify that there are reasonable suspicions to do so. According to the SCJN statement, under the code of criminal procedures the accepted justifications for this are that an individual meets the physical description of a wanted criminal, is caught in the act of committing a crime, even if this is not clearly visible, or if they have information based on prior investigations that an individual fits the profile of a suspected criminal.

The SCJN was clear that any searches carried out by the police outside of these parameters would be arbitrary and illegal and could still be denounced as such. Moreover, the SCJN insisted that police forces around the world currently operate under similar rules and that "this is not a concept exclusive to Mexico". It added: "various international tribunals have adopted this as a guideline for police action".

**Presidential candidates promise sweeping reform****Anaya's campaign team**

In addition to Jorge Castañeda, Anaya appointed PAN grandee Santiago Creel as his campaign coordinator. The presidents of all three parties in his electoral alliance, Damián Zepeda, Manuel Granados, and Dante Delgado, will have roles, along with PRD bigwig Jesús Ortega, who will be in charge of political alliances, and Agustín Basave, a former PRD party president, who will be an adviser. Anaya's overall operational coordinator will be his close friend Édgar Mohar, the PAN treasurer.

Mexico's presidential candidates are vying with each other for the tag of most committed fighter of corruption. Upon officially registering his candidacy before the national electoral institute (INE) on 16 March, the current frontrunner in the race, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, said his first reform would be to "abolish the immunity and privileges" of the political class. Not to be outdone, José Antonio Meade promised to eliminate the so-called *fuero* at all levels of government while registering his presidential candidacy for a coalition spearheaded by the federally ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Ricardo Anaya, who is running for the Por México al Frente coalition, has seen his anti-corruption promises undermined by the money-laundering allegations he has been forced to fight.

López Obrador struck a conciliatory tone while registering his candidacy for Juntos Haremos Historia, a coalition comprising his left-wing Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena), the leftist Partido del Trabajo (PT), and the conservative Partido Encuentro Social (PES). He said there would be "no reprisals, persecution, or banishment...justice is needed not revenge". But he was clear that a major shake-up of the political system was a prerequisite in his bid to expunge official corruption and improve transparency and accountability.

López Obrador went beyond confirming his intention to cancel the lucrative pensions of former heads of state, promising that his first move would be to modify Article 108 of the constitution to allow presidents to be prosecuted for "electoral crimes and corruption" not just treason. He also announced his creed: "no lying, no stealing, and no betraying the people". He said he would introduce to the constitution the instrument of recall referendums for presidents, to be held every two years during his six-year term in office, insisting that the people are sovereign and can "give and take away".

Meade called for the elimination of the *fuero* at all levels, ending the oft-abused immunity from prosecution enjoyed by serving politicians which is so reviled by the public. "To Mexicans annoyed about corruption, we are committed to running an honest government," Meade declared. "The PRI is transforming itself," he added.

This might be stretching the credulity of the electorate. The trouble is that, while Meade's intentions might be sincere, this is precisely what Enrique Peña Nieto promised before assuming office in 2012, and yet the party's dinosaurs proved to be far from extinct, with even more rapacious carnivores holding sway during the new period of PRI power. A succession of PRI governors, men hailed by President Peña Nieto as the future of the PRI, were exposed as massively corrupt, while allegations of conflict of interest dogged First Lady Angélica Rivera and close associate and cabinet heavyweight Luis Videgaray.

The last of the three main contenders, Anaya, registered his candidacy before the INE a week earlier, spending more time fending off allegations of corruption than unveiling plans to combat it. Anaya sent three envoys to the headquarters of the Organization of American States (OAS) in Washington DC this week to denounce the alleged misuse of the country's state institutions by the PRI and the Peña Nieto administration to tarnish his name.

The presidents of Anaya's right-wing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) and the leftist Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) and Movimiento



## Room for improvement

The new ASF head David Colmenares noted that of the 800 complaints that the body has received since its creation in 2000 only four have resulted in successful prosecutions (a success rate of just 0.04%). “That is something we have to change, there is no point in working only for all complaints to be archived,” Colmenares said. He added that to improve this record the ASF will have to strengthen its investigative capabilities. But Colmenares insisted that “Our work will be completely apolitical and independent. We will not exempt anyone or cover up anything, but not all [government] officials are corrupt, and not all governors are potential criminals”.

Ciudadano (MC), Damián Zepeda, Manuel Granados, and Dante Delgado respectively, met OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro to make the case that the federal attorney general’s office (PGR) is fighting the PRI’s “dirty war”, expediting an investigation into allegations of money-laundering against Anaya surrounding the sale of a family-owned industrial estate in the state of Querétaro for M\$53m (US\$2.9m).

Zepeda said the meeting was essential to expose the “lies” of the PRI secretary general, Claudia Ruiz Massieu, who met Almagro days earlier to accuse Anaya of seeking to conceal his corruption by discrediting Mexican institutions. Zepeda denounced “a pact of impunity” in Mexico. He said the PGR has still not taken legal action against the former PRI governor of Chihuahua (2010-2016), César Duarte, who is accused of large-scale corruption, but was expediting investigations into Anaya to knock him out of the electoral contest. The PGR issued a statement “categorically rejecting the accusations”, insisting that the probe had “no electoral considerations whatsoever”.

Anaya’s travails were compounded this week when the INE confirmed that Margarita Zavala was the only aspiring independent candidate to have met the requirements to be entitled to stand in the presidential elections. Zavala narrowly cleared the hurdle of collecting 866,593 voter signatures, spread across 17 of Mexico’s 32 states, but only by a meagre 3,575 after nearly 740,000 were adjudged to contain irregularities.

There is real concern in the Anaya camp that Zavala, who abandoned the PAN five months ago to run as an independent, poses a big threat. Former (PAN) foreign minister Jorge Castañeda (2000-2003) called for the INE to bar her from running for the falsification of so many signatures. Shortly afterwards, he was confirmed as Anaya’s strategic campaign coordinator.

### New ASF head appointed

Mexico’s federal chamber of deputies selected David Colmenares Páramo as the new head of the Auditoría Superior de la Federación (ASF), the national oversight body of the federal congress, on 15 March. Colmenares replaces Juan Javier Pérez Saavedra, who assumed the role on an interim basis in January following the end of the term of the previous ASF head, Juan Manuel Portal Martínez (2010-2017), and after the deputies could not agree on a replacement.

The difficulties in electing a new permanent ASF head stemmed from the ongoing discussion in the senate over who should fill the newly created post of anti-corruption prosecutor, who will be in charge of leading the national anti-corruption system (SNA) introduced in the 2015 constitutional reform. The reform was promoted by the government in order to improve the fight against official corruption. But senators from the ruling PRI and the opposition have failed to reach a consensus over who should be the new anti-corruption prosecutor due to misgivings about whether any of the candidates put forth for the role are suitably politically neutral.

The delay in appointing the anti-corruption prosecutor, who will have significant powers to allow him or her to investigate and prosecute government officials, has also slowed the appointment of other key SNA figures such as the ASF head, as legislators refused to make any appointments until an agreement could be reached over the anti-corruption prosecutor. However, in the end, the chamber of deputies opted for Colmenares, the first economist to assume the post, with no formal political affiliations.

Following his selection, Colmenares expressed the hope that his appointment would serve to expedite that of the anti-corruption prosecutor by the senate. He promised to improve the ASF’s efficiency in combating corruption and not to become hostage to any political parties (*see sidebar*).

**UN hails start of dialogue process**

The main political parties in Honduras sat down at the negotiating table last week for the first time since November's disputed presidential elections. The "technical pre-dialogue" process, brokered by the United Nations (UN), involved representatives from the Partido Nacional government led by President Juan Orlando Hernández, the opposition Alianza de Oposición contra la Dictadura coalition (whose presidential candidate Salvador Nasralla maintains that he won the November vote and that widespread fraud was committed), the opposition Partido Liberal (PL), and Partido Innovación y Unidad-Social Demócrata (Pinu).

The start of the dialogue process comes amid continued mixed signals for President Hernández. The recent release by the European Union's Electoral Observer Mission (EU-EOM) of its final report, which endorsed his victory, served as a boost. However, a UN report since published into the post-electoral violence leaves the government under considerable pressure to address alleged human rights violations committed by the security forces.

At the launch of the talks on 12 March, the UN permanent coordinator in Honduras, Igor Garafulic, declared that there was a "will to dialogue" to overcome the continued political crisis. The establishment of the technical table is in line with the call for dialogue by a UN exploratory mission which paid a visit to Honduras's capital, Tegucigalpa, from 6 to 10 February, at the behest of the Hernández government. At the time, the UN issued a press release which underlined the necessity of "confidence-building measures...that could help establish the basis for a future dialogue" as part of efforts to "reduce tensions and generate credibility in such a process".

So far Garafulic's optimism regarding dialogue would seem borne out by agreements announced following the third meeting of the pre-dialogue table on 18 March. After the meeting, which was also attended by the head of the newly created human rights ministry, Karla Cuevas, and the representative of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Honduras, María Soledad Pazo, Garafulic pointed to progress. He said that agreements reached at the table included the deal to promote the legislative initiatives necessary to make the resolutions and agreements decided as part of the dialogue, legally binding.

Meanwhile, representatives of Nasralla – who had initially told reporters that dialogue would go nowhere if "the main issue is not electoral fraud" – declared themselves satisfied with the dialogue so far. It is, however, worth pointing out that the Alianza appears to be divided: its general coordinator, former president Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009), was a big absentee from the talks.

**Human rights concerns**

As well as the proposal to give legal teeth to agreements reached as part of the talks, Garafulic revealed plans to create a committee to support and work with the government institutions which are currently investigating post-electoral violence. Long a demand of the opposition and international community, the need for this was again evident following a report released by the OHCHR on 12 March – the same day that Garafulic announced the launch of the pre-dialogue table. The OHCHR report focused on human rights violations that took place country-wide between voting day and the presidential inauguration on 27 January and was unequivocal that elements of the security forces, "especially the military police of the public order and the army, used excessive force, including lethal force, to control and disperse protests, leading to the killing and wounding of protesters as well as passers-by".

**Other complaints regarding the security forces**

In its report on the post-electoral violence, the OHCHR found that mass arrests took place, and that at least 1,351 people were detained between 1 and 5 December [2017] for violating the curfew. The same document adds that the OHCHR had also received "credible and consistent allegations of ill-treatment at the time of arrest and/or during detention as well as reports of illegal house raids conducted by members of the security forces".

## Recommendations

In its report on the election, the EU-EOM made a string of recommendations. Among other things, these include updating the voter register; providing a larger budget for the clean politics unit so that it can work more efficiently at preventing corruption and fraud; and introducing spending ceilings and campaign transparency requirements for political parties (not just candidates, as is currently the case).

At the time of completing the report, on 27 January the OHCHR had registered that at least 23 people were killed in the post-electoral protests, including 22 civilians and one police officer. Among other concerns, the OHCHR considered that, based on its monitoring, “at least 16 of the victims were shot to death by the security forces, including two women and two children, and that at least 60 people were injured, half of them by live ammunition”.

As well as calling for charges to be brought against those responsible for the violence, the OHCHR report echoed previous calls by the likes of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) for authorities to “restrict the use of the military police and armed forces in law enforcement functions, and to regulate the use of force by all security and law enforcement agencies, in line with applicable international human rights norms and standards”.

### EU-EOM report

The OHCHR’s damning report came a week after the EU-EOM released its final report on the election which, in a major boost for President Hernández, found that “vote counting in polling stations respected voters’ will” and the electoral authorities (TSE) implemented “a publication system which ensured that candidates and citizens alike were able to verify all election results”.

The EU-EOM report also addressed one of Salvador Nasralla’s chief complaints – a power outage which took place during the counting of votes. Nasralla had had an early lead over Hernández but, once power was restored, this appeared to evaporate. While acknowledging these technical difficulties, the report notes that EU-EOM technical experts, who were in the data centre at the time, confirmed the purely technical nature of the incident, which was “due to an inadequate amount of space on the server’s hard drive”. It goes on to add that the EU-EOM “did not observe any indication of alterations to the database which, had it occurred, would have been easily identified by checking the results published by the TSE against those on results forms held by political parties”.

Yet the EU-EOM report (which included various recommendations – see sidebar) did identify some problems with the electoral process. It highlighted “instances of using state resources for campaign purposes (prohibited by the Election Law), almost always carried out by the president’s party” as well as the “notable inequality of resources between competitors, to the advantage of the ruling party”. It also flagged up “serious budgetary, personnel and logistics deficiencies in the Clean Politics Unit, mandated to implement the new Clean Politics Law” along with problems with the electoral register which it describes as “insufficiently accurate” due to the fact that it includes deceased people and emigrants.

## TRACKING TRENDS

PANAMA | **World Bank approves loan for indigenous sector.** On 15 March, the World Bank (WB) announced its approval of a US\$80m loan aimed at improving the infrastructure and quality of health, education, water, and sanitation services in Panama’s 12 indigenous territories. According to a press release by the WB, which estimates the size of Panama’s indigenous population at 418,000 people, the project will directly assist some 200,000 people through improved infrastructure and the better quality and cultural relevance of services provided in their communities. The same press release notes that the initiative is based on the priorities established by the indigenous communities and their traditional leaders and will support the implementation of the comprehensive national plan for indigenous peoples of Panama.

As regards priorities, in the short term the project will “focus on urgently needed infrastructure and equipment; in the medium term the project will support the design and pilot-testing of programs to improve the cultural relevance of those services. In the long term, the project seeks to transform the capacity of the government and indigenous leaders to plan and invest in indigenous territories, in keeping with the vision and priorities established by those communities”.

## Quotes of the week

“I don't want the country or my family to continue to suffer the uncertainty of recent times.”

*Peru's President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski resigns his position.*

“I have a legitimate ambition: to go down in history as one of Mexico's greatest presidents.”

*Mexico's presidential frontrunner Andrés Manuel López Obrador.*

“I denounce the illegitimate, immoral, and absurd persecution of the Venezuelan people by the imperialist government of Mr Donald Trump.... Nobody will stop the petro and nobody will stop the Venezuelan people.”

*Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro.*

## POSTSCRIPT

### G-20 meeting passes off successfully for Argentina's Macri

The Argentine government hosted a meeting of finance ministers and central bank governors of the G-20 group of industrialised countries in the capital, Buenos Aires, on 20 and 21 March.

The meeting, the first of a series of G-20 summits to be organised by Argentina over the course of this year (during which the South American country is exercising the pro-tempore presidency of the G-20), passed off without any security incidents. In the run up to the event there had been concerns that civil-society and political opposition groups critical of the economic policies implemented by the centre-right Cambiemos coalition government led by President Mauricio Macri would try to stage violent public protests outside the venue where the meetings were held. But no such incidents were registered during the meeting, which went by smoothly.

Moreover, during the meeting, Angel Gurría, the secretary general of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), praised the economic reforms that the Macri administration has succeeded in getting approved by congress, noting that these should help to ensure the country's future economic growth.

In particular, Gurría said that the government's tax reforms should help to lower Argentina's fiscal deficit and ease the tax burden on businesses to the benefit of the domestic economy. However, Gurría noted that Argentina's GDP per capita remains below that of OECD member countries. He also pointed out that Argentina, which has applied for OECD membership, still has to do a lot more to boost productivity, employment, and trade in order to ensure sustained economic growth.

One of the keys on this front is driving through congress a sweeping labour reform package. The Macri administration is hoping that a concerted strategy of divide and rule with the umbrella trade union movement Confederación General del Trabajo (CGT) will stand it in good stead.

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