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Mexico's López Obrador accused of setting up parallel governments

Just one month after winning Mexico's presidential elections and four months before he takes office, President-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador is being accused by some within the political opposition of a naked power grab under the pretext of combating corruption. López Obrador plans to do away with the numerous federal delegations in each of Mexico's 32 states which administer federal resources and coordinate federal programmes. In their place would be one 'coordinator' per state. Several of those assigned to fill these positions are candidates who were defeated in recent gubernatorial elections in the respective states. This is prompting accusations that López Obrador is intent on undercutting the authority of democratically elected governors.

López Obrador has revealed the names of 32 coordinators, one for each state, to oversee federal development programmes. They will replace more than 900 federal delegations in the states as part of his 'Republican austerity plan' to reduce government expenditure and increase social spending. At present, for instance, nearly every federal cabinet ministry has a delegation in each state with control over federal programmes and multi-billion-peso funds. The federal economy ministry actually has 49 in total (32 delegations and 17 under delegations); the foreign ministry, 44; the social development ministry (Sedesol), 32; and the environment ministry (Semarnat), 31.

The new structure is ostensibly designed to reduce bureaucracy and the scope for corruption, while improving accountability. But it has not been universally acclaimed. The influential business sector lobby Coparmex, which buried the hatchet with López Obrador after his electoral triumph, was critical of the proposal. Coparmex said it was not opposed to eliminating the federal delegations but raised doubts about whether the plan would resolve the problem of corruption. It also expressed its concern that the state coordinators, chosen by López Obrador, would "weaken the checks and balances between state and federal governments", while eroding the difference between the executive and the party in power.

Several governors and governors-elect echoed these concerns. Silvano Aureoles, the governor of the western state of Michoacán for the left-wing Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), claimed that the new coordinators could become "parallel governors". Enrique Alfaro Ramírez, who comfortably won the gubernatorial elections in the contiguous state of Jalisco on 1 July for the left-wing Movimiento Ciudadano (MC), said he was ready to cooperate with the López Obrador administration but on the condition that "the basic principles of the constitution and federal pact are enforced". Alfaro, who takes office on 6 December, was speaking during a press conference in Guadalajara, the state capital of Jalisco, on 31 July.

Bartlett

Manuel Bartlett is reviled by the Left for appearing on national television on electoral night in 1988 to announce a computer system failure, with the PRD's presidential candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas ahead. When the system came back up, the PRI's Carlos Salinas de Gortari was winning. In response to Bartlett's appointment, Tatiana Clouthier, part of President-elect López Obrador's transition team, whose father Manuel Clouthier had competed in the 1988 elections, confined herself to saying "there were better choices". She added: "the fact that one person is not well received does not mean the country is finished already". Bartlett, meanwhile, said he would not be "a scapegoat" for Salinas, who he said was responsible for burning the 1988 ballot papers in 1991. López Obrador said he could understand the criticism but insisted that Bartlett had defended the national electricity industry for 15 years and was well qualified for the job.

López Obrador has designated as coordinator for Jalisco none other than Carlos Lomelí, the defeated gubernatorial candidate for his Juntos Haremos Historia (JHH) coalition, with whom Alfaro repeatedly clashed during the electoral campaign. "My position is clear: my relationship with the government will be directly with the president and cabinet ministers, there will be no intermediary authorities in Jalisco because this infringes core constitutional principles and damages the spirit of the federal pact," Alfaro wrote on social networks. Alfaro said he would run an austere government, taking a wage cut as governor to earn less than López Obrador.

The right-wing opposition Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) expressed its concern that the state coordinators all had the profile of "political operators" and could compete directly with the governors, encroaching on their power. "This is an offence to federalism and the sovereignty of the federal entities," the PAN said in a statement. "On the list of state coordinators are direct rivals of recently elected governors, making it seem like an attempt to impose those who did not win elections democratically," it added.

In addition to Lomelí in Jalisco, other former gubernatorial candidates for López Obrador's Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena) will also become coordinators to states where they were defeated: Joaquín Díaz Mena, who lost to Mauricio Vila Dosal (PAN-PRD) in Yucatán in gubernatorial elections on 1 July; Delfina Gómez, who lost to Alfredo Del Mazo of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in the Estado de México (Edomex), and Miguel Ángel Navarro who lost to Antonio Echevarría (PAN-PRD) in Nayarit, both in gubernatorial elections last year; and Amílcar Sandoval, who lost to Héctor Astudillo (PRI) in Guerrero's state elections in 2015.

Another prominent political appointment is that of Rodrigo Abdalá as coordinator to Puebla. Abdalá, a federal deputy who had sought the Morena gubernatorial candidacy in Puebla, is the nephew of Manuel Bartlett Díaz who, on 30 July, López Obrador controversially named as the future head of the state-owned electricity firm Comisión Federal de Electricidad (CFE). Bartlett served as interior minister under the PRI government led by former president Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988), and has long been accused by Mexico's Left of masterminding the alleged electoral fraud in 1988 which saw the PRI retain its stranglehold on power (see sidebar).

Elsewhere, those appointed nearly all hold prominent political positions for Morena in the respective states where they will become coordinators. These include Juan Carlos Loera, Morena's secretary general in the northern state of Chihuahua; Gabino Morales, Morena's state coordinator in the central state of San Luis Potosí; Nancy Ortiz, Morena's state president in the southern state of Oaxaca; and Mauricio Hernández, Morena's national secretary of political organisation, in the central state of Guanajuato.

Concentration of power?

While López Obrador's intentions might be entirely genuine – to reduce corruption and costly bureaucracy – it is not difficult to see why his proposal has aroused suspicion. López Obrador has expressed his commitment to decentralisation and his admiration for the liberal former president Benito Juárez (1858-1872), but handpicked, political, coordinators answerable directly to him evoke comparisons with the 'jefes políticos' (political chiefs) appointed by the authoritarian former president Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911), with centralising intent.

A more contemporary parallel, upon which López Obrador's detractors are yet to seize, might be with the concept of 'geometry of powers' pushed through in 2008 by Venezuela's then-president Hugo Chávez (1999-2013),

Federal intervention

The perception of unwarranted interference by the Mexican federal government in the affairs of the states is always a sensitive issue. President Enrique Peña Nieto was criticised in January 2014 when he appointed a ‘federal commissioner’, Alfredo Castillo, in Michoacán, as the state was overrun by violence. The opposition accused Castillo of being a *de facto* governor. The-then party president of the left-wing PRD, Jesús Zambrano, claimed Castillo was “a viceroy...with no counterweight and with no legal responsibility to any established power”, saying he had been appointed solely because of his ties with Peña Nieto (he had served as attorney general in the Estado de México when Peña Nieto was governor) rather than his qualifications for the job.

allowing him to appoint a number of unelected regional vice-presidents. The role assigned to these vice-presidents was to synchronise development projects at a national and regional level (not unlike López Obrador’s state coordinators), but they served the purpose of centralising power and, through their control of federal government resources, emasculating regional governors.

While López Obrador’s JHH coalition will hold sweeping majorities in both the federal lower chamber of congress and senate, opposing forces will control the majority of Mexico’s state governorships. Morena won five of the nine gubernatorial elections held on 1 July (*see box below*), but when the victors take office, 25 of the remaining 27 state governorships will be held by traditional parties – the PRI (12), the PAN (12), the PRD (one) – with the other two held by the MC and an independent.

It is worth noting that not all Mexican state governors are opposed to López Obrador’s plan. Quirino Ordaz, the PRI governor of the north-western state of Sinaloa, said it was “interesting” and would cut bureaucracy. Meanwhile, Marco Mena, the PRI governor of the central state of Tlaxcala, requested “all the legal details of the new arrangement”, although he stressed that all of the state governors had shown “a widespread willingness to work genuinely with the new president”.

Morena takes five of nine state governorships

Morena’s biggest wins in the state elections on 1 July came in Ciudad de México (CDMX) and Veracruz. Claudia Sheinbaum Pardo, an environmental engineer, became the first elected female head of government in CDMX (Rosario Robles served from 1999 to 2000 on an interim basis). This was the first time it had been out of the hands of the PRD since the elected post was created in 1997 (previously selecting the mayor of Mexico City was in the gift of the president).

Sheinbaum won just over 2.5m votes, well ahead of Alejandra Barrales, the PRD party president, with 1.6m.

In Veracruz, the third most populous state in Mexico, Morena’s candidate, Cuitláhuac García, narrowly beat Miguel Ángel Yunes Márquez, the son of the incumbent governor, Miguel Ángel Yunes.

Morena’s Adán Augusto López Hernández obliterated the opposition in President-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s home state of Tabasco, with 61.5%, or 732,372 votes, more than any previous candidate for governor in the state, soundly defeating the PRD’s Gerardo Gaudio Roviroa.

Morena’s Rutilio Escandón Cadenas won the southernmost state of Chiapas, benefitting from the fact that the Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM) and the PRI fielded separate candidates. López Obrador’s JHH coalition also took Morelos from the PRD. Cuauhtémoc Blanco, a former footballer and mayor of the state capital Cuernavaca, who joined the JHH, won the state governorship.

Three of the other four state governorships were won by the PAN-PRD-MC. In Guanajuato, held by the PAN for 25 years, the PAN-PRD-MC candidate, Diego Sinhué Rodríguez Vallejo, won 1.14m votes, twice as many as the JHH candidate Ricardo Sheffield Padilla (a former Panista).

In Puebla, the PAN-PRD-MC candidate Martha Erika Alonso Hidalgo, wife of the incumbent governor Rafael Moreno Valle, narrowly defeated Morena’s Miguel Barbosa, a former PRD senator, by 1.15m to 1.03m votes, a difference of under four percentage points. Barbosa denounced electoral fraud and is appealing to the electoral tribunal (TEPJF).

The PAN-PRD-MC candidate, Mauricio Vila Dosal, won in Yucatán, defeating the PRI candidate, Mauricio Sahuí Rivero, by fewer than 40,000 votes.

Finally, the MC’s Enrique Alfaro, the mayor of Guadalajara, the country’s second most populous city, won comfortably in Jalisco with 1.35m votes, ahead of the JHH candidate Carlos Lomelí, who won 837,000 votes.

Vizcarra raises the political stakes

Faced by continuing revelations of wrongdoing in the judiciary and elsewhere Peru's President Martín Vizcarra took the bull by the horns, using the traditional state-of-the-nation address on independence day, 28 July, to announce a wide-ranging referendum on key anti-corruption reforms. It could be held as early as October. But Vizcarra could overreach: relations with congress will be tricky.

It is easy to see why President Vizcarra may have felt the need to act decisively. Since his predecessor faced corruption charges and was forced to resign earlier this year, Vizcarra has been in office for less than five months. The ruling Peruanos por el Cambio (PPK) has only a few seats in congress, where the right-wing and populist Fuerza Popular (FP), led by Keiko Fujimori, is the largest force. Vizcarra's popularity has begun to erode. The scandal in the judiciary – with audiotapes of judges offering “not guilty” verdicts to alleged child rapists, and offering to sell appointments for US\$10,000 – has triggered genuine public outrage. There is a real sense that Peru's institutions are ailing and major surgery is necessary.

So Vizcarra has decided to appeal directly to public opinion with a referendum, if necessary sidestepping both the judiciary and the legislature to seek a mandate for change. Vizcarra said he was aware his government had been born out of political instability, and therefore felt an obligation to stabilise the country, creating strong, corruption-free institutions that would be “close to the citizens”. It was necessary to “defeat the mafias of the delinquent and the corrupt”.

Vizcarra proposed a referendum first, on wide-ranging reforms to the judiciary. These would include a complete overhaul of the Consejo Nacional de la Magistratura (CNM), the discredited body that appoints and fires judges. Full details have not been revealed but Vizcarra said he wanted judges to be appointed by open competition.

Vizcarra said the electorate would also be consulted on the desirability of private financing of political parties and election campaigns; on whether, without increasing the number of representatives, the single chamber legislature should once again be divided into lower (chamber of deputies) and upper (senate) houses; and on whether the ban on re-election, which currently applies to the president, to city mayors, and to regional governors, should be extended to also include members of congress.

Prime Minister César Villanueva has said that, with congressional cooperation, the government believes a referendum could be called on 7 October, to coincide with the country's municipal elections. He justified making changes by referendum because “the political class is deeply mistrusted, and it can't be allowed to reform itself, with the same old protagonists playing key roles”.

But the way ahead will be tricky. One problem is that opinion is potentially divided on whether the measures sought by Vizcarra will actually deliver the anti-corruption results he seeks. Former attorney general José Ugaz has said that the evidence of widespread corruption within the CNM does not necessarily mean the “model” for its operation is flawed. The suggestion is that the government might replace its seven members without necessarily having to re-invent its entire structure.

Banning re-election

The benefits of extending the ban on re-election to members of congress are debatable. While it does prevent the entrenchment of particular corrupt individuals and parties, it can also be said that it will limit the valuable and necessary accumulation of experience and law-making skill – and make each legislature a collection of novices. This is already something of a problem in regional government, where incoming elected officials are frequently said to lack budgeting and project management skills, leading to big initial budget underspends and project delays.

Reaction

Deputy Yonhy Lescano, of the centrist Acción Popular (AP), said a referendum would not on its own counter the dramatic loss of congressional prestige, nor could the loss be specifically attributed to re-elected members. Lescano's conclusion was that President Vizcarra had genuinely tried to tune in to the state of feeling in the country, but had done so "without taking good decisions."

There are also questions about the other referendum issues. Under the terms of a new plan passed by congress, corporate funding of election campaigns was recently banned. It is not yet clear what further measures might be put to the vote – one possibility being whether to exclude all private contributions, including those made by individuals.

Perhaps the most controversial issue is the potential division of the legislature back into an upper and a lower chamber (as it was before 1992). It is not immediately clear how this will help combat corruption. If this is done as promised while limiting the total number of members of congress to 130, as at present, there may have to be changes in the geography of electoral districts that will benefit some parties at the expense of others (there might, for example, be a reduction of small party representation). This could lead to a politically fraught debate. Finally, some politicians say Vizcarra has missed out a fifth issue for a referendum: a proposal to lift the immunity from prosecution conferred on members of congress and other elected officials.

Politically, the Fujimoristas – some of whose leaders have been named in the audiotapes and linked to suggestions of corruption – are on the defensive. Their initial comments have been to suggest the process of reform has not been properly thought through and will be long and complex. FP deputy Carlos Domínguez described Vizcarra's address as "tepid and populist in content, proposing reforms without a proper constitutional basis, but more encouraging on the subject of reforming the CNM".

Another FP deputy, Ursula Letona, said banning the re-election of members of congress would require constitutional reform and therefore take at least a year. She also claimed that the constitution allows referenda to be held only on existing legislation, not to resolve some of the issues listed by Vizcarra. This was contested by other parties. Patricia Donayre of the PPK noted that under the constitution a referendum can be called through congress to validate or reject an existing law but it can also be done by collecting signatures – a total of 0.3% of the registered electorate is required.

However the referendum issue plays out, there is a possibility of a deadlock emerging between the executive and the FP-dominated legislature. The government believes public opinion may be lining up on its side. Writing for the national daily *El Comercio*, María Alejandro Campos noted that, although no recent opinion polls have been conducted on the matter, past experience suggests there will be popular backing for reform proposals. According to a recent Ipsos poll, congress has an extremely low – 18% – approval rating. A poll held in April 2014 showed 75% of respondents opposed the re-election of provincial governors, leading Campos to suggest the public is also likely to favour a ban on re-electing members of congress.

In the context of the bribery scandal involving Odebrecht, the Brazilian civil engineering company, earlier this year 62% of respondents said they opposed corporate funding of political parties, suggesting the electorate might favour further tightening up. However, in terms of returning to a two-chamber legislature, opinion seems divided. A survey conducted in May this year had 45% approving the change and 48% opposing it.

Should Vizcarra and the FP in congress end up in total opposition to each other over the referendum proposals, each side would have to consider the 'nuclear option'. This is that the government invites a confidence vote in congress; if it is defeated the president can ultimately call new elections to resolve the matter. In the next few months each side may be assessing the electoral costs and benefits of compromising or being intransigent on the question of anti-corruption reform.

Timochenko gives Uribe benefit of the doubt

On 30 July the former leader of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc), 'Timochenko' (Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri), commented on the case brought against former president Alvaro Uribe and called for due process to be respected. Uribe is one of the staunchest critics of the Farc, who advocates prosecution and exemplary punishment for all of its leaders. However, Timochenko said of Uribe's case, and the allegations that he funded right-wing paramilitary groups, that "it is very important to respect due process and the presumption of innocence...we need to remember that Alvaro Uribe Vélez is one of the main protagonists of Colombian politics". Timochenko added that his position "is the same that he would assume in any judicial case against any Colombian citizen".

Uribe U-turn on momentous decision

It was the political announcement that shocked Colombia: the most influential figure in national politics, Alvaro Uribe, former president (2002-2010) and main leader of the right-wing Centro Democrático (CD), had decided to abandon his senate seat in order to fight off a court case being brought against him by the supreme court. But just over a week after the announcement [[WR-18-29](#)], and with observers still trying to calculate the effects that Uribe's withdrawal from frontline politics could have, the political grandee has decided to backtrack. The reasons behind the U-turn are not clear but everything suggests that Uribe is determined to retain influence on the incoming CD government due to take office on 7 August.

"I have asked Senator Ernesto Macías, the senate president, to retain my resignation letter without consideration". This is how Uribe announced his change of heart in a 1 August tweet. "For reasons of honour it was never in my mind for the supreme court not to hear the case in which I have been indicted," Uribe's tweet added.

Following Uribe's announcement that he was resigning from the senate there was some speculation that the move was an attempt to avoid the case being heard by the supreme court but by the lower courts (only the supreme court can try elected officials), in which he might receive more lenient treatment. Uribe claimed that he was being politically persecuted by the supreme court, which he said was doing the bidding of the outgoing government led by President Juan Manuel Santos.

Against this backdrop, Uribe's announcement that he will not resign his senate seat and is prepared to fight his case before the supreme court looks like a bold effort to defy his critics and dispel any questions about his integrity. However, local press reports suggest that this may all be part of a manoeuvre by Uribe to escape conviction.

Even prior to Uribe's announcement that he was putting his resignation on hold, he had asked for the recusal of one of the supreme court justices investigating him on the grounds that he had violated due process in the case. The request is based on public declarations made by Santos's former housing minister Luis Felipe Henao (2013-2016).

In a recent radio interview, Henao revealed that Justice José Luis Barceló had told him that the case against Uribe is "solid" and based on secretly made video and audio recordings made of meetings between Uribe representatives and witnesses. Uribe's lawyers argue that the recordings were illegally obtained and that by sharing confidential information about an ongoing case with Henao, Barceló had violated procedure.

Uribe's defence also claims that this shows that the case is part of a political plot to discredit Uribe being promoted by the Santos government. According to the local press, Uribe's defence has more supporting evidence of this, all of which they now intend to present before the supreme court during a hearing scheduled for 3 September.

Whatever happens with Uribe's trial, for the moment it looks like the man that received the most votes in Colombian electoral history in March's legislative contest will remain in the senate from where he will continue to exert influence over the incoming government led by his political protégé, President-elect Iván Duque. Immediately after announcing his resignation,

Pdvsa corruption

At the tail end of last year, President Maduro blamed Venezuela's deepening economic crisis in part on an alleged corruption network involving executives of the state-owned oil firm Pdvsa [WR-17-47]. Maduro appointed Major General Manuel Quevedo to "clean-up" Pdvsa. Quevedo assumed the posts of both Eulogio del Pino and Nelson Martínez, the oil minister and president of Pdvsa respectively, both of whom were arrested in the purge.

and amid calls from CD legislators and even Duque for him to reconsider, Uribe had said that his departure from the senate was "inconsequential" and that it would not affect the CD or the Duque administration.

Yet the general view is that the CD with Uribe in the senate is one thing, and the CD without Uribe quite another. The CD will be stronger and more cohesive with Uribe in the senate and this could go a long way to ensuring that the Duque administration can advance its legislative agenda.

VENEZUELA | POLITICS & JUSTICE

Maduro implicated in billion-dollar corruption scheme

Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro is under investigation as part of a US probe into a US\$1.2bn scheme to divert money from the state oil company Pdvsa into European and US bank accounts and South Florida real estate, media reports have claimed. Prospects of prosecution are very low – but the claims are a significant embarrassment for Maduro, who late last year conducted a purge of Pdvsa ostensibly to root out corruption, and who seems incapable of resolving the country's worsening economic crisis.

According to the *Miami Herald*, President Maduro and his three stepsons are being investigated for the Pdvsa fraud. A case filed with the US attorney general's office does not mention him by name, but officials told the newspaper an individual referred to in the papers as 'Venezuelan Official 2' was in fact Maduro.

The papers link Maduro and his stepsons to illicit wire transfers of Pdvsa funds to accounts connected to the main defendant in the US action, Venezuelan billionaire Francisco Convit Gुरुceaga, a member of Venezuela's ruling elite often referred to as the 'bolibourgeoisie'.

Funds are also reported to have gone to 'Conspirator 7', said to be Raúl Gorrín, owner of the Globovisión TV network. Gorrín's lawyer has denied any wrongdoing by his client. Another defendant is Matthias Krull, a German citizen resident in Panama who is said to manage banking activities for a number of Venezuelan officials. Krull was arrested in Miami on 24 July.

There have been consistent reports of large-scale corruption in the country generally and at Pdvsa in particular for a number of years (*see sidebar*), so in that sense the story is not new. What is new, however, is the direct implication of Maduro. According to Venezuelan lawyer and crime expert Alejandro Rebolledo, the bolibourgeoisie group has used its political position to benefit from direct transfer payments from Pdvsa. The country's multiple exchange rate system has also been manipulated for fraudulent purposes.

Neither Maduro nor any other officials have responded or commented on the charges. In the past such claims have in any case been dismissed as US-inspired propaganda allegedly designed as a form of psychological warfare against the Bolivarian revolution. However, the claims come against the backdrop of the government's inability to pull the country out of its state of permanent crisis, and growing labour protests.

Following a four-hour electricity outage in Caracas on 31 July, Maduro claimed once more that the power system had been subject to sabotage. Speaking on state television after a ministerial meeting Maduro thanked the 6m inhabitants of the capital (many of whom had to walk home because of the shut-down of the Caracas metro) for what he said had been their "support and understanding". He insisted with the familiar line that the power cuts were the work of the opposition.

Blackout

The power outage on 31 July left all five municipalities in metropolitan Caracas and the three surrounding states of Aragua, Miranda, and Vargas without electricity. The electricity minister, Luis Motta Domínguez, claimed on Twitter that the intelligence agency, Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia (Sebin), had uncovered sabotage at a substation on the outskirts of Caracas, where cables had allegedly been severed. If true, the saboteurs would appear to be more competent than the authorities. Shortly before Domínguez's tweet, the communication and information minister, Jorge Rodríguez, maintained that the swift restoration of electricity had been rendered "impossible" by the heavy rain and because the area in which the substation was located was "difficult to access".

Ironically, the power cut (*see sidebar*) interrupted a debate at the opposition-dominated national assembly, rejecting the government's currency re-denomination decree (which involves removing five zeroes from the existing Bolívar currency and is now supposed to commence on 20 August) and calling instead for more meaningful measures to counter hyperinflation.

The call came after the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had estimated that Venezuelan inflation would reach 1,000,000% by the end of this year. The Maduro administration ignores the national assembly, working instead with the pliant constituent assembly it established to supplant the body.

The fourth congress of the ruling Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV), meanwhile, ratified Maduro as its leader on 30 July (although only after the live coverage of the event was delayed by a power cut). Maduro acknowledged the difficult economic situation, saying: "The productive models we have tried out so far have failed and the responsibility is ours and mine". He went on to say that at least two years would be needed to achieve an economic recovery "with a high level of stability".

Officials claim the currency redenomination is part of the wider recovery plan. Other steps include tweaking exchange rate regulations, reducing tariffs on imports of capital equipment and carrying out a census on vehicle use to promote "rational use" of petrol. Independent analysts believe the measures will do little or nothing to roll back the economic crisis.

TRACKING TRENDS

BOLIVIA | GDP up in first quarter, but drought causes concern. Economic growth in the first quarter of the year reached 4.44% year-on-year, Bolivia's economy minister, Mario Guillén, revealed. This compares to 3.3% growth in the same period in 2017. The first quarter growth was driven by increases in activity in the four main sectors of the economy: agriculture (up 6.6%); financial services (6.4%); petrol, crude & natural gas (6%); and construction (5.7%).

Guillén said that the second annual pay bonus ('aguinaldo') would be paid this year if GDP growth exceeded 4.2% in the second quarter of the year. Since 2013 the government has decreed that workers would receive a second aguinaldo if annual GDP growth exceeds 4.5%. But business leaders have criticised Guillén's announcement, noting that certain industries are in crisis despite good national economic growth figures.

One example is the agricultural sector, which is being badly affected by drought in Santa Cruz department. According to a 31 July report from the Asociación de Productores de Oleaginosas y Trigo (Anapo), production of wheat, sunflowers, corn, sorghum, and chia is down by 33%. Anapo estimates that the industry will suffer losses amounting to US\$110m following 60 days without rain in one of the most important agricultural areas in Bolivia.

Guillén admits that the drought could start to affect GDP figures in the third quarter but believes that accumulated growth will still top the 4.5% necessary to pay the second bonus regardless.

PERU | Mining and energy investments. In his state-of-the-nation address on 28 July to mark Peru's Independence Day, President Martín Vizcarra announced a US\$15bn package of private investment in eight large mining projects. Vizcarra also vowed to support small-scale miners and formalise their operations, with a focus on security and the environment. Vizcarra backed the increased private investment to stimulate Peru's national economy and vowed to encourage new projects on the condition that they are socially and environmentally responsible. He also revealed plans for continued investment in natural gas supply networks to diversify the country's energy matrix.

Facebook targets MBL over fake news

Facebook, the US-based social media giant, announced on 25 July that it was de-activating 196 pages and 87 accounts in Brazil that were part of a coordinated network that was misleading users and “sowing division and spreading misinformation”. The move came amid growing concern over the role of ‘fake news’ in the campaign running up to Brazil’s general elections in October.

Facebook did not name the network it was targeting, but it has been widely identified as being formed by members of the right-wing activist group Movimento Brasil Livre (MBL). In a statement on Twitter, MBL confirmed that some of its organisers had been affected. MBL was active in anti-government demonstrations and protests in 2015 and 2016, leading up to the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016).

MBL accused Facebook of failing to justify or explain its action. “Freedom of expression and democracy are pillars to the MBL. We will use all of the legal, political and media resources offered by democracy to recover the blocked pages and undo this persecution,” the group said. A federal prosecutor in the centre-west state of Goiás, known for his right-wing views, called on Facebook to list the pages it had closed and the reasons for its closure, within 48 hours.

Media analysts said the pages, which had over half a million followers, were a series of news feeds and discussion groups with a sensationalist and conservative slant, using names such as *Jornalivre* and *O Diario Nacional*. The idea appears to have been to spread coordinated messaging while making them seem independent of each other. Earlier this year this tactic had already been identified by a group of academics from the Universidade de São Paulo (USP), known as ‘Monitor do debate politico no meio digital’. Facebook did say its decision came after a “rigorous investigation” that had confirmed the pages and accounts were false or misleading.

MBL responded by demonstrating outside Facebook headquarters in the city of São Paulo. One of its leading members, Kim Kataguirí, said Facebook was removing pages that defended “liberal and conservative ideas” but had provided no proof of any wrongdoing. A number of MBL members are standing for congress in October’s elections and many are supporters of Jair Bolsonaro, the extreme-right presidential candidate.

Not looking good for Lula

A decision by Luiz Fux, president of the supreme electoral tribunal (TSE), suggests former president Lula da Silva (2003-2011) will, as expected, be prevented from running for a third term as president in October. Lula is in prison on corruption charges and is widely expected to be prevented from running under the terms of the *ficha limpa* (‘clean slate’) law which says those who have criminal convictions, upheld on appeal, cannot stand for election.

However, a formal decision can only be taken by the TSE when Lula registers as a candidate (that is expected to happen later this month). Fux rejected a request for an early declaration of Lula’s ineligibility on procedural grounds, but significantly, in his written ruling explaining the decision, he said Lula’s ineligibility to stand as a candidate was “evident” – perhaps a clue to how the TSE will eventually vote.

Fake news

There are other claims that MBL has used ‘fake news’ tactics. In March, after the assassination of Marielle Franco, a left-wing activist and councillor in the city of Rio de Janeiro, a website began spreading an untrue rumour that she was dating a drug dealer and was linked to one of the city’s criminal gangs. The Laboratorio de Estudos sobre Imagem e Cirbercultura (Labic), another digital media monitoring group, said the fake story had been shared 360,000 times and could be traced back to MBL.

Piñera falls short on key pledge

Chile's Interior & Public Security Minister Andrés Chadwick was last week forced to recognise an increase in "violent actions" in the impoverished southern La Araucanía region, long the site of unrest stemming from indigenous Mapuche claims to ancestral land. Chadwick's admission comes amid other doubts cast on progress made by the right-of-centre Chile Vamos coalition government led by President Sebastián Piñera with regard to a key pledge – restoring "peace to the Araucanía".

Chadwick made his remarks (without providing figures) on 27 July following a recent spate of arson attacks in the region. On 21 July José Villagrán, the president of Fedesur (the Southern Truckers' Association), said that 30 trucks had been set alight since the government took office in March, with a handful of arson attacks reported since then.

Chadwick's comments also followed recent criticism from legislators, such as Ricardo Celis, a deputy for the opposition Partido por la Democracia (PPD), over the policy pursued by President Piñera. Upon taking office, Piñera had cited a "national agreement for development and peace in the Araucanía" as one of five priorities.

While Piñera is promising to unveil a comprehensive development plan for the region at the end of this month, his policy so far has largely consisted of militarising security in the area, with the deployment of an elite group, announced on 28 June, which comprises 80 Carabineros (militarised police) who received training in Colombia and the US.

Representatives from the four Mapuche geographical regions (Meli Wixan Mapu) signed a statement in July, declaring Piñera "persona non grata". Piñera had previously upset the Mapuche community through moves such as his signing of a legislative bill in March to amend the anti-terrorism law. Slammed by the Mapuche community, the bill contains 11 proposed changes, such as the use of undercover agents, drones, and the wiretapping of suspected terrorists' phone lines, among other things.

The government has since sought to appear conciliatory. In what it trumpeted as a key concession to the Mapuche community, on 28 July Celestino Córdova, a Mapuche shaman (machi), who is serving an 18-year prison sentence issued in 2014 for a high-profile case related to Mapuche unrest (see *box*), was transferred to Padre Las Casas commune, in the Araucanía region, to visit his Rewe (sacred altar) as part of his traditional belief system.

The case had made headlines and attracted attention from international organisations, such as human rights NGO Amnesty International (AI), due to the fact that Córdova had been on hunger strike since 30 May in protest at the authorities' refusal to grant him the leave. In an open letter to Piñera, dated 25 July, AI's Americas director, Erika Guevara-Rosas, wrote: "The fact that he is imprisoned should not prevent the Machi from exercising his right to religious freedom and to practice his beliefs". She went on to accuse the Piñera administration of not trying "to find a solution which would allow them to guarantee his rights".

Arson attacks

A local private-sector lobby group, Multigremial de La Araucanía, released a report in January 2018 claiming that 60 arson attacks took place in the three regions that make up the Araucanía area in 2017, with a total of 89 lorries set alight.

CFK in new corruption case

On 1 August the federal police said a total of 12 people had been arrested as part of a new investigation into a bribery-for-public works corruption scheme during the presidencies of the late Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015). Federal judge Claudio Bonadio, who is already investigating Fernández on various charges, summoned the former president (and current senator) to appear before him on 13 August to testify as a witness in this new case.

Luchsinger-McKay case

Córdova had been sentenced under Chile's contentious anti-terrorism law over the deaths of an elderly couple (Werner Luchsinger and Vivianne McKay), killed in 2013 in an arson attack on their agricultural estate, located in Mapuche ancestral lands.

The case again made headlines in June after a local court in Temuco, Araucanía's capital, sentenced two Mapuche activists, Luis Tralcal Quidel and José Tralcal, to life imprisonment, while a third, Peralino Huinca, received a five-year prison sentence. The three men were convicted on 5 May 2018 in a ruling which saw other Mapuches acquitted.

While a Temuco court had acquitted all 11 Mapuches in October 2017, an appeals court overturned this decision in late December, ordering the criminal court to reopen the case. Piñera hailed the sentences, which have been met with protests from Mapuche organisations, as a "powerful step against terrorism and impunity in the Araucanía".

ARGENTINA | POLITICS & JUSTICE

Blue versus green

The stage is set for an intense confrontation between rival cross-party coalitions next week, which will pit "greens" against "blues". The set-to will be a debate and vote on 8 August in the federal senate on whether to legalise abortion (supported by the "greens") or whether instead to maintain the existing ban (the cause defended by the "blues").

Everything indicates the vote will be closely fought. In June, after a 23-hour session and amid pro- and anti-abortion demonstrations, the federal lower chamber of congress voted 129 to 125 to approve the bill legalising voluntary abortion when chosen by women up to 14 weeks after conception. The debate came after President Mauricio Macri had allowed a free vote among members of the ruling Cambiemos centre-right coalition.

The vote in the lower chamber revealed that almost all of Argentina's major political parties and alliances are internally split over whether to allow legal abortion. The parties of the Left are the exception to the rule, as they are unanimously in the pro-legalisation (green) camp.

Outspoken members of the (blue) anti-abortion camp in Argentina include the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, the national daily *La Nación*, and former president Carlos Menem (1989-1999). President Macri also opposes legal abortion, but he has chosen to take a relatively low profile in the debate.

Initial indications are that the senate may live up to its reputation for social conservatism, making a green victory harder to achieve. Senators have been involved in a tense technical and procedural debate.

Prior to the full debate three senate commissions (health, constitutional affairs, and justice and penal affairs) met jointly to make a recommendation on how to vote. They gathered only 26 out of the required 27 signatures to achieve a 'majority view' in favour of approving the lower chamber bill. Without a recommendation from the commissions, the debate and vote will nevertheless go ahead on the floor of the senate on 8 August.

Newspaper reports suggest the anti-abortion blues have the upper hand with a likely 35 senate votes, against 32 pro-abortion green senate votes. Three senators say they have yet to make up their minds and two have said they will be absent (there are a total of 72 senators).

There are different variations of these numbers which in any case could still change. The pro-abortion camp was debating whether it could shift voting intentions in its favour by offering what has been called a 'light green'

Final ministerial appointment

On 30 July Paraguay's outgoing president, Horacio Cartes, made what is likely to be his final ministerial appointment before he leaves office on 15 August. Cartes appointed Mario León as interim agriculture & livestock minister to replace Luis Gneiting. Gneiting died along with his deputy livestock minister Vicente Ramírez after the plane that they were travelling in crashed on 25 July. León, until now the deputy agriculture minister, will be in charge of handing over the portfolio to Denis Lichi, who has been named as the future agriculture & livestock minister by President-elect Mario Abdo Benítez. Gneiting's death came as he was facing investigation over influence trafficking and corruption allegations that are believed to implicate Cartes.

option: tabling an amendment to reduce the time limit from 14 to 12 weeks after conception. If that were approved the bill would then need to go back to the lower chamber. Other potential amendments may also be tabled.

If the senate does approve the abortion bill – something which as we have seen the odds are narrowly against – Argentina would become the first large Latin American country to introduce time-limited legal abortion – similar to what is already on the statute books in neighbouring Uruguay. The health minister, Adolfo Rubinstein, has argued in favour of legal abortion, attending a senate session where he argued that the actual number of abortions is lower in countries where the procedure is legal than in those where it is banned.

Under existing Argentine law abortion remains illegal: women who have abortions are liable to face one- to four-year prison sentences, unless they can prove they were rape victims or that without termination their lives would be at risk. Health officials say that somewhere between 350,000 and 450,000 abortions are performed in Argentina every year.

PARAGUAY | POLITICS

Questions about electoral results resurface

A series of leaked audio recordings of conversations between an official in Paraguay's supreme electoral tribunal (TSJE) and political leaders have raised serious questions about the validity of the results of the 22 April general election. The official electoral results released by the TSJE, which gave a decisive victory to the Asociación Nacional Republicana-Partido Colorado (ANR-PC) in the presidential election, had been questioned by the political opposition, which at the time alleged electoral fraud in favour of the ruling party. The leaked recordings give renewed weight to the fraud allegations and create a serious headache for President-elect Mario Abdo Benítez even before he assumes office on 15 August.

The first batch of audio recordings emerged on 23 July. In these Miguel Ángel Iturburu, an information technology official at the TSJE, is heard boasting that he has managed to "inflate" the ANR-PC's vote count to ensure its electoral victory. Iturburu is also heard telling politicians from the ANR-PC and the right-wing Unión Nacional de Ciudadanos Éticos (Unace) that he could ensure their election to congress in exchange for cash.

Following the emergence of the audios, the political opposition led by the Partido Liberal Radical Auténtico (PLRA) called for the audios to be fully investigated, arguing that they provide further evidence of potential electoral fraud including in the presidential election against the defeated opposition coalition candidate, Efraín Alegre.

The TSJE leadership reacted to the audios by saying that while as an employee of the institution Iturburu did have access to the electronic vote-counting system he did not have the ability to alter the vote count, nor did he have access to the actual vote tallies on which final results are based. Nonetheless, the TSJE said that Iturburu has been suspended in order to face investigation by prosecutors. But the TSJE refused to make the final vote tallies public, as has been demanded by Alegre and the PLRA, arguing that these must be kept safeguarded for legal reasons.

Although the attorney general's office has opened an investigation into the case, the TSJE's refusal to present the final vote tallies prompted the opposition to decry that the authorities were intent on covering up the electoral fraud. It called for the three TSJE judges to be impeached by the national congress.

Just one bad apple

“We cannot question the credibility of the entire institution,”

President-elect Abdo Benítez said after the emergence of the

leaked audio

recordings of

conversations

between Miguel

Ángel Iturburu, an

official in Paraguay’s

supreme electoral

tribunal (TSJE), and

political leaders.

Abdo Benítez backed

the three TSJE

judges and their

assertions that the

electoral results are

valid despite the

concerns about

Iturburu’s actions.

The furore caused by the emergence of the audios and the opposition’s allegations forced President-elect Abdo Benítez to address the issue on 25 July. In response to questions by journalists, Abdo Benítez denied that there had been an electoral fraud benefitting him or the ANR-PC.

Abdo Benítez said that while it was clear that Iturburu is “an irresponsible and corrupt” official he did not believe that he was capable of carrying out large-scale fraud in the vote counting process and that the impact of his actions would only be limited. Significantly, Abdo Benítez also expressed confidence in the TSJE, its control mechanisms, and the integrity of its judges (*see sidebar*).

However, the controversy refuses to go away. Noting that the difference of just 3.7 percentage points separating Abdo Benítez and Alegre is the narrowest margin in Paraguay’s electoral history, the PLRA and its allies insist that the TSJE must release the official vote tallies to dispel any doubts about the electoral results, and that the investigations into the allegations must be fully cleared up before Abdo Benítez’s investiture on 15 August. Otherwise, the opposition argues that a question mark will hang over the legitimacy of Abdo Benítez’s mandate.

TRACKING TRENDS

URUGUAY-CHILE | Extended FTA with Chile finally approved. On 31 July Uruguay’s chamber of deputies voted in favour of ratifying an extended free trade agreement (FTA) with Chile, which will now cover services as well as goods.

The new agreement, which was signed by the two governments in October 2016, will also update clauses related to labour rights, gender equality, and the promotion of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

It took almost two years for Uruguay’s ruling Frente Amplio (FA) coalition of leftist parties to get the agreement ratified by congress due to opposition from some FA member parties such as the Partido por la Victoria del Pueblo (PVP) and the Partido Socialista (PS), which had argued that the agreement would be harmful for Uruguay’s economy by exposing Uruguayan service providers to unrestricted competition from their larger counterparts. However, the PVP and PS benches ultimately voted in favour of the agreement after the FA leadership imposed “party discipline” on the matter.

The total value of trade between Uruguay and Chile has fallen from US\$482m in 2012 to US\$263m in 2017, with an average annual decline of 11%.

In 2012, Chilean exports to Uruguay were worth US\$205m but by 2017 that figure had fallen to US\$123m. The value of services exported fell from US\$128m to US\$51m over the same period.

Supporters of the new FTA hope that it will boost bilateral trade with Chile and send a message to other potential partners that Uruguay is open for business. The implementation of the updated deal now depends on its ratification by Chile’s congress, which is seen as a formality.

CHILE | Moody’s downgrades credit rating. On 26 July the international ratings agency Moody’s, downgraded Chile’s sovereign credit rating from ‘Aa3’ to ‘A1’, following similar downgrades by Fitch Ratings and Standard & Poor’s last year.

President Sebastián Piñera and his government had predicted that the rating would remain stable due to recent improvements in economic indicators. Moody’s claims that Chile’s credit profile has been worsening for some time, but the effect had been masked by high economic growth rates. The rating agency predicts that medium-term economic growth will be around 3%, compared to 3.7% predicted accumulated growth for 2018.

IACHR warns of “third phase of repression”

Paulo Abrão, the executive director of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), recently warned that the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) government led by President Daniel Ortega had now begun the “third phase of repression” in response to the crisis sparked by anti-government protests in mid-April – criminalising opposition leaders. This follows previous phases which Abrão identifies as excessive use of force against demonstrators and “Operation Clean-up” – attempts to eliminate the population’s self-defence barricades. Abrão’s remarks regarding the so-called “third phase” are in response to recent arrests of opposition figures who are due to be tried under the newly approved anti-terrorism law.

Following the approval of the anti-terrorist legislation by the FSLN-controlled 92-member unicameral legislature on 16 July, institutions such as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) were quick to warn that it could be used by the government as part of the bloody crackdown against opponents which has left at least 448 people dead on the latest (26 July) report from local human rights group ANPDH.

These fears regarding the new law, which defines the destruction or damage to public or private property as terrorist activity, punishable with a prison sentence of 15-20 years, would seem to have been borne out. At the end of July, the national daily *La Prensa* reported that at least 185 people had been arrested on terrorism charges. These include Cristian Fajardo, leader of the Movimiento 19 de Abril student movement; human rights defenders Medardo Mairena and Pedro Mena; Dora María Téllez; Hugo Torrez; Víctor Hugo Tinoco and other leaders of the dissident Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (MRS); and Kitty Monterrey, the leader of the opposition Ciudadanos por la Libertad (CxL), among others.

With President Ortega refusing to agree to either of the key demands of the opposition for dialogue to take place – namely an end to the violence which is being carried out by the police and paramilitaries, and early elections – the number of people fleeing the country continues to rise. On 31 July the UN Refugee Agency, the UNHCR, issued a statement calling for “international solidarity and support for [neighbouring] Costa Rica and other countries hosting Nicaraguan refugees and asylum seekers”. It noted an “exponential increase” in the number of asylum applications by Nicaraguans in Costa Rica, with a daily average of 200. Nearly 8,000 asylum claims by Nicaraguan nationals have been registered since April, according to Costa Rican authorities, while a further 15,000 have been given appointments for later registration as national processing capacities have been overwhelmed.

More downgrades

The credit ratings agency Standard & Poor’s (S&P) has downgraded Nicaragua’s sovereign credit rating from ‘B+’ to ‘B’, with a ‘negative’ outlook, citing the “intensification of local conflicts and persistent violence”. Another ratings agency, Moody’s, lowered its GDP growth forecast for Nicaragua to between

-1.0% and 1.0% this year, warning that its outlook could further change if the crisis continues. Nicaragua’s central bank (BCN), meanwhile, released economic indicators for May, showing a 4.9% decline in the monthly economic activity index compared with May 2017. BCN president Ovidio Reyes said the bank’s projection for overall growth in 2018 remained at 1%. In May, Reyes had told reporters that GDP projections for 2018 had been revised down from 4.5%-5.0% to 3.0%-3.6% as a result of the crisis.

ISIS

Having previously blamed anti-government paramilitaries who “obey political parties” and “some members” of political opposition parties for the violence [[WR-18-29](#)], on 31 July President Daniel Ortega suggested that it could actually reflect the influence of ISIS (Islamic State) which had “arrived in Nicaragua through its networks” – a claim he left unsubstantiated. Ortega also disputes the figures regarding the death toll, which he puts at 195.

Third time lucky for Bukele

Despite various obstacles thrown in his way by the national electoral authorities (TSE), Nayib Bukele, El Salvador's most popular politician, will run for the presidency in 2019. Following the TSE's decision not to register Bukele's Nuevas Ideas party and then to exclude from the race the small left-wing Cambio Democrático (CD) which had endorsed him as its candidate [WR-18-28], the opposition right-of-centre Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (Gana), the country's third largest party, has now chosen Bukele as its candidate. This is a blow for the already unpopular ruling left-wing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) and main right-wing opposition Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Arena). It has raised eyebrows, however, given the apparent ideological dissonance between Bukele, a former FMLN mayor for Nuevo Cuscatlán (2012-2015) and San Salvador (2015-2018), and Gana which was formed out of Arena dissidents in 2010.

Bukele, who had remarked in December 2016 that he would "never be seen in the ranks of Gana or Arena...my heart is to the Left", was declared Gana's candidate on 29 July. Bukele's endorsement by the party followed primaries for which he signed up to run three days earlier and in which his only rival, a former mayor of San Miguel (2000-2015), Wilfredo Salgado, dropped out, leaving him as the only contender. While Bukele and his running mate Félix Ulloa, a former electoral court magistrate, trumpeted the fact that they took 91.14% of the vote, it is worth pointing out that the election was marked by 80% abstention – raising questions about Bukele's credibility within the party and what this will mean for its future.

It is not difficult to see the appeal of Bukele for Gana, which won 10 seats in the March elections for the 84-member unicameral national legislature, fewer than Arena (37) and the FMLN (23) – the only two parties to have held power since the end of the civil war (1980-1992). The most recent survey by the respected Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (Iudop) of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), published on 22 May, found that 51.1% of respondents cited Bukele as their preferred candidate, far ahead of Arena's Carlos Calleja, a businessman, on 20.2% and the FMLN's Hugo Martínez, a former foreign minister (2009-2018), on just 3.9%.

While Bukele may have cleared one hurdle, others persist. He faces the threat of various legal cases which could present more problems. These include the case which forced him to break with the FMLN in the first place – prosecution for an alleged act of aggression towards a party councillor, Xochilt Marchelli, at a municipal council meeting in September 2017. Former government spokesperson Eugenio Chicas (2015-2018) has also accused Bukele of calumny – claims which relate to a TV interview that Bukele gave last year to the TV programme *Frente a Frente* (broadcast in October) in which he accused Chicas of raping his foster daughter and then marrying her – allegations vehemently denied by Chicas. Bukele also faces an investigation, announced in April 2018, regarding some US\$850,000 in income which he did not declare during his time as Nuevo Cuscatlán mayor.

Right-wing alliance

On 26 July the other right-wing parties came together in a public ceremony to announce their alliance behind Arena's Calleja, and his running mate Carmen Aída Lazo, an economist. Those backing Calleja include the Partido de Conciliación Nacional (PCN), which took eight seats in the March election, and the Partido Demócrata Cristiano (PDC), which took three seats.

Support for Gana?

The most recent survey by the respected Instituto Universitario de Opinión Pública (Iudop) of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), published on 22 May, showed that Gana was on just 1% of voting intentions, behind Nuevas Ideas on 38.5%, Arena on 30%, and the FMLN on 8.9%.

Quotes of the week

“I don’t know of any governors who need an intermediary to speak with the president of the Republic.”

Enrique Alfaro Ramírez, the incoming governor of the Mexican state of Jalisco, slams the proposal by President-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador to appoint an all-powerful coordinator to each state.

“Don’t blame us, we are forging ahead, and we have a project, and nobody will shake us from this project, and our proposal is socialism.”

Diosdado Cabello, president of Venezuela’s constituent assembly.

“My government is making a decided bet on strengthening the state as a whole in order to defeat the criminal and corrupt mafias that feed off our country. We need the input of all citizens. That’s why we’re convinced that a referendum is healthy for our democracy.”

Peru’s President Martín Vizcarra.

Can López Obrador reduce violence in Mexico?

The scale of the public security challenge facing Mexico’s President-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador was laid bare this week by the release of figures showing that homicides reached a record high in 2017. López Obrador has given his incoming interior and public security ministers, Olga Sánchez Cordero and Alfonso Durazo respectively, a free hand to do “whatever is necessary to pacify the country”, but while there are some laudable aspects to the security proposals tabled so far no one knows how successful any of them would be at actually reducing the number of homicides in Mexico.

There were 31,174 homicides in the country in 2017, according to the national statistics institute (Inegi), the equivalent of 25 per 100,000 inhabitants. This was up from 20 per 100,000 in 2016. The Inegi figures differ from those released recently by the national public security system (SESNSP), which recorded 29,146 homicides in Mexico in 2017. According to Inegi, the highest homicide rates in 2017 by state were Colima (113 per 100,000), Baja California Sur (BCS) (91), and Guerrero (71).

The SESNSP, meanwhile, released figures showing 2,668 homicides in June, up 6% year-on-year, bringing the number of victims for the first half of 2018 to 15,973, up 18% on the same period in 2017. Some states registered disturbingly high increases. In Guanajuato, for instance, there were more homicides in the first half of this year than in the whole of last year. There were improvements in BCS and Veracruz, however, with the number of homicides in June down 86% and 40% respectively on the same month last year. Federal security forces have carried out a series of operations in BCS in recent months which could account for the fall there but it is less clear why a decline was recorded in Veracruz.

López Obrador’s security team has advanced various proposals amounting so far to an amnesty law, transitional justice mechanisms, regulation of certain drugs, and social prevention of crime. There is no evidence that legalising marijuana is linked to a fall in homicides. In Uruguay, for instance, there were 258 homicides in 2013, when legislation regulating the sale and distribution of marijuana was approved, and 283 in 2017. And the results from social prevention of crime will only be felt in the medium to long term. In his column in the national daily *El Universal* on 30 July, the Mexican security expert Alejandro Hope contended that “by the time this starts to take effect, the López Obrador administration will have been going for four years with more than 100,000 homicides having taken place”. He concluded: “hopefully more ideas will be forthcoming”.



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Latin America 2018

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