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Maduro orders crackdown after alleged assassination attempt

Two loud explosions were heard during a military parade attended by Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro in Caracas on 4 August to mark the 81st anniversary of the national guard. The government claimed they were caused by two drones laden with explosives used in a failed attempt to assassinate Maduro perpetrated by the Venezuelan Right, "terrorist" former members of the military, and the Colombian government. The Venezuelan political opposition claimed that it was a staged incident to justify further government repression and to divert attention from the country's real problems. Footage of the event does not provide conclusive evidence. It does, however, show participating soldiers scattering to the four winds. The abiding impression of the Bolivarian armed forces (FANB) was not the one of redoubtable loyalty and bravery purveyed by the government but one of weakness and pusillanimity.

State television shows President Maduro break off during a speech and look upwards after a loud bang. He is quickly surrounded by bodyguards, while soldiers flee. Confusion reigned. Smoke could be discerned billowing out of windows in a nearby tower block. Some firefighters suggested to the media that it was a gas explosion, but residents denied this.

Maduro wasted little time in accusing his Colombian counterpart Juan Manuel Santos of being behind a plot to assassinate him. The interior minister, Néstor Reverol, provided the government's first official summary of the events. Reverol said that two DJI M600 drones, "designed for industrial work" and carrying a kilo of C4 explosives each, were used in the alleged attack during which seven members of the national guard were apparently injured. He said that government jamming signals had foiled the attack by one drone approaching the presidential stage, which malfunctioned and crashed away from the scene, while another spun out of control and struck the apartment building.

Reverol revealed that, within 24 hours, a noteworthy level of efficiency, authorities had apprehended the six material authors and amassed "very important evidence of this desperate attempt...to change the legitimately constituted government by unconstitutional means". Soon afterwards, the de facto attorney general, Tarek William Saab, revealed that details of their "international connections" had been established. Saab said they were guilty of "an attempted massacre" as senior public officials also attended the parade along with the military top brass.

A little known group calling itself the Movimiento Nacional Soldados de Franela (MNSE, lietrally 'T-shirt soldiers') claimed responsibility for the attack on *Twitter*, saying "the objective wasn't achieved today but it's only a matter of time". It maintained that the drones had been shot down by

Banesco intervention

From 7 August, the government extended its intervention at the Venezuelan private bank Banesco for a further 90 days. The government appointed an administrative council to run Banesco in early May for 90 days after the bank was accused of assisting “a systematic attack on the national currency”. The president of Banesco, Juan Carlos Escotet, criticised the extension of the intervention as “absurd, unfair, and without any legal foundation”.

snipers in the presidential guard of honour. On its website Soldados de Franela says it was created in 2014 “to unify all of the resistance groups nationwide to make our fight against the dictatorship more effective”. As on its *Twitter* feed, it includes numerous links to articles describing the parlous state of the economy, food shortages, and figures highlighting the collapse of the health system, along with a picture of Oscar Pérez and other ‘freedom fighters’, emblazoned with the message ‘They gave everything for Venezuela: And You?’

Pérez was a rogue officer from the investigative police (CICPC), who was killed in a security operation of overwhelming force in January this year [WR-18-02]. Pérez was believed to have been behind, inter alia, an assault on the Paramacay army base near Valencia, the capital of the north-western state of Carabobo, on 6 August last year, during which weapons were stolen. One of the rebel soldiers who took part in the Paramacay attack was apparently one of the six “material authors” of the drone attack picked up so far.

In a broadcast on state radio and television on 7 August, Maduro alleged that José Monasterio Venegas, a retired sergeant, had been contacted by allies of Colonel Juan Caguaripano, who led the Paramacay assault, and offered US\$50m and US residency to carry out the drone attack. Monasterio Venegas was attempting to operate the second drone from a car, according to Maduro, when “a group of women [living nearby] proceeded to capture him and other terrorists, and hand them over to the authorities”.

Maduro said that Monasterio Venegas had confessed that he had led the training of two groups to operate the two drones between April and June this year in Chinácota in the Colombian border department of Norte de Santander. Maduro alleged that Monasterio Venegas had received assistance from Juan Requesens, a deputy for the opposition Primero Justicia (PJ) to enter Venezuela, by order of Julio Borges, a former PJ deputy, president of the national assembly in 2017, and head of the opposition negotiating team in the failed dialogue process with the Maduro administration in the Dominican Republic. “Everything points to Julio Borges [currently in exile in Bogotá], supported by the outgoing government in Colombia,” Maduro claimed. Requesens was arrested by members of the intelligence agency (Sebin) in his Caracas apartment on 7 August. The following day the supreme court ordered that he face trial and that Borges be arrested on charges of intentional homicide.

Maduro claimed that the drone operation had been financed by Osman Delgado Tabosky, who he said was living in Florida, and Rayder Russo Márquez (whereabouts unknown). Both men were accused on *Twitter* last December by Pérez of infiltrating “the resistance” and selling information to the government. Finally, Maduro referred to Salvatore Lucchese, a former VP member who left the party because he saw dialogue with the Maduro administration as pointless. Lucchese, also a former Venezuelan municipal police chief, claimed in an interview in Bogotá to have helped to organise the operation. He also posted a tweet of a drone being shot down in midair, accusing Venezuelans of being “doubting Thomases”. He received a torrent of abuse in response, principally from critics of the Maduro administration, for orchestrating such a botched operation and being “just as incompetent as the dictatorship”.

Respite for Maduro

The PJ issued a statement rejecting political violence but expressing hope that the incident would “awaken the conscience of the nation to put more pressure on the government to hold free and genuinely democratic elections”. It also called for “a serious investigation”. Claiming to know nothing about the incident “except social media and government propaganda”, the more radical opposition party, Vente Venezuela, insisted “we want Maduro alive so that he can face the law and respond to the country’s citizens”. It also warned that the Maduro administration would use the incident “to attack all

Recall referendum

More than 20% of voters in any given electoral district would need to sign a petition calling for a recall referendum on the national assembly deputies representing them. If this figure were met, the number of voters who elected each deputy would need to be surpassed for the recall referendum to be successful. It is unlikely the authorities would play by the constitutional rule book as this would result in an electoral setback.

of those who dissent or who dare to raise their voices against the tyranny of this regime". The umbrella opposition group Frente Amplio said it would "divert attention from the true problem affecting the country which is the humanitarian tragedy".

A dissident general, Hebert García Plaza, a former minister of popular power for food for four months in 2014, accused the government of being behind "the drone show" to provide a pretext "to martyr itself, blame the Right in Venezuela and Colombia, and decree a state of commotion to suspend the right to protest and strike", at a time when labour protests have been picking up momentum. "To attack Nicolás Maduro when he is on the verge of being pushed out by the route of social disobedience makes no sense," García Plaza wrote on *Twitter*.

Such scepticism is understandable. Maduro has denounced 20 plots to topple him since 2013, and this would not be the first time that the government has justified repression in response. But, equally, ruling out an attack because it "makes no sense" does not take into account the fact that as the situation in Venezuela grows more desperate, some opponents are likely to consider violent options.

Economic recovery?

Maduro actually supported the desperation hypothesis, but not because of the current situation rather the bright future ahead. He said the economic recovery programme his government plans to launch on 20 August had led some "to despair" because "they know that it will work". At the heart of this plan is a decree by the government-controlled national constituent assembly (ANC) on 2 August repealing the exchange crimes law, which imposes fines and prison sentences of up to 15 years for currency trading on the black market, and a central bank law barring foreign exchange transactions in the country.

The government failed to clarify whether this would mean an end to currency controls. A succession of exchange rate systems have been launched to much fanfare over the years – Sitme, Sicad, Sicad 2, Simadi, Dicom to name five – purporting to end currency restrictions while perpetuating them. These skewed systems, in place since 2003 when then-president Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) introduced draconian controls in an effort to prevent capital flight, allowed some to grow very rich while leading to a burgeoning black market. The official exchange rate is currently set at BF172,800/US\$1 but on the black market the going rate is in excess of BF3.5m/US\$1 due to unremitting hyperinflation.

Maduro confidently predicted "early victories in the economic recovery that Venezuela needs". But without root-and-branch reform, for which the government lacks the political will or (if precedent is a reliable guide) the economic competence, it will not usher in any meaningful improvement.

Constituent assembly targets opposition deputies

One year on from its installation, the government-controlled constituent assembly (ANC) has not drafted a single article of a new constitution, the purpose for which it was ostensibly set up. Neither has the ANC "definitively defeat[ed] the economic war", as President Maduro promised when it was set up. Of the 90 actions it has taken, according to a report by *Runrun.es*, a website once loyal to Chavismo but critical of the Maduro administration, 33 have been directed at the opposition-controlled national assembly, confirming that its real purpose was to usurp this body's powers. Indeed, on 8 August, at the behest of the president of the ANC, Diosdado Cabello, delegates stripped opposition deputies Juan Requesens and Julio Borges of congressional immunity for their alleged involvement in the drone plot against Maduro.

This is one way to take out opposition deputies in the national assembly. Another was announced by Cabello on 16 July: a recall referendum. The constitution does allow for a recall referendum after deputies have served half of their term in office, which is fast approaching (*see sidebar*).

Duque takes over amid expectancy

Iván Duque was inaugurated as Colombia's new head of state on 7 August. Duque, who at 42 is the youngest president in Colombia's modern history, is the first member from the right-wing Centro Democrático (CD) to hold the country's top office. All of this makes Duque an unknown quantity and there is a lot of interest in trying to figure out what sort of president he will be, in what direction he will steer the country, and whether he can fully deliver on his campaign promises.

During the electoral campaign, Duque made a series of pledges relating to the economy, government transparency, and public security. These included things like doubling GDP growth by 2025 via the promotion of various structural reforms, such as tax and pensions reform; improving public health provision through a major overhaul of the sector; and reinforcing public security by focusing efforts on combating drug trafficking and criminal organisations following the signing of a peace deal with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc).

The pledges have generated a lot of expectations. But Duque will face a series of challenges that could undermine his efforts to achieve his objectives. Local analysts have identified some key issues. First and foremost, he will need to maintain the cohesion of the CD and build a decisive congressional majority with the help of the right-of-centre and centrist opposition parties, such as the Partido Conservador (PC) and the previously ruling Partido de la U (PU) to ensure the ease of passage of some of his key reform proposals.

Building and maintaining such a congressional majority will be critical and it is no wonder that Duque appealed for national unity during his inauguration speech, calling for the development of a 'great national pact for Colombia' based on common objectives shared by all political forces. But while Duque's speech was conciliatory and largely devoid of criticism of the outgoing government led by Juan Manuel Santos, the same cannot be said of that delivered on the same day by Ernesto Macías, the new president of Colombia's senate.

Macías, a fellow member of the CD, was scathing in his criticism of the Santos administration, which he said had left Colombia in "a sinkhole" with some of the "worst social and economic indicators in the country's history" (see sidebar). Macías, who praised the 'democratic security policy' implemented by the administration led by the CD's main leader Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010), urged Duque to reprise this strategy. Macías's speech was so divisive some opposition legislators left their seats in protest.

The second challenge for Duque will be to deliver on his promise to improve public security, while at the same time honouring his pledge to revise the peace deal signed in 2016 with Farc to ensure that no crimes committed by the guerrillas go unpunished and that victims receive full compensation. Revising the peace deal, which it sees as being too lenient with the demobilised guerrillas, is one of the CD's main objectives and has been identified as one of the main factors behind Duque's electoral win. But if the revisions to the peace deal result in tougher punishments for former Farc members, it would jeopardise the peace process.

More severe punishment for demobilised Farc guerrillas could stop them from seeking to reintegrate into society and could even push some to join the

Macías

Senator Macías tore apart the legacy of President Santos in a vitriolic speech criticising every aspect of his government. After praising President Duque, Macías warned that "today you receive a country with the most worrying figures in history: in the social, economic, and institutional spheres". Each separate criticism was preceded by the phrase "today you receive a country". After several legislators insisted that some of the more inflammatory statements be removed from the congressional website, a columnist for the national daily *El Espectador*, Rodrigo Uprimny, quipped that "Macías failed to warn President Duque that 'today you receive a country...where the presidency of the senate is in the hands of Ernesto Macías'".

Demonstrations

Iván Duque's inauguration was also marked by a series of demonstrations organised by leftist political opposition groups. These were staged in Bogotá and cities across Colombia, in support of the peace process, in demand of protection for social leaders and human right defenders, and calling for the new government to respect the peace deal with the Farc. Thousands of people took part in the demonstrations, which were also attended by some leftist political leaders including Senator Gustavo Petro, who Duque defeated in the second-round presidential run-off even though he received 8m votes. Petro said that the demonstrations were intended to send the message that "we are prepared to defend and fight for peace".

dissident Farc groups that have rejected the peace deal, or other criminal organisations. Such an outcome could further fuel criminality and violence in the country to the detriment of Duque's objectives.

In addition, the Colombian authorities are already under international pressure to ensure the safety of social leaders and human rights defenders in the country. There is clear evidence that they are being targeted by criminal groups. There is also the issue of the safety of demobilised Farc fighters, several of whom have recently been murdered by criminal groups.

Priorities

Coming up with a comprehensive strategy of how to combat criminality that is also supportive of the peace process is a major challenge for the Duque administration. Pointedly, in his inauguration speech, Duque said that restoring peace and security to the country would be his government's top priority. In this light, Duque said that his government would focus on combating organised crime and drug trafficking in particular. Duque added that these efforts would not only involve using the armed forces to tackle organised crime but also the adoption of new legislation and tougher punishments for drug trafficking, as well as for linked corruption, including that implicating elected officials.

Indeed, Duque said that, as part of a wider political and judicial reform, his government would present a constitutional reform bill stipulating that drug trafficking and kidnapping can never be classified as political crimes (which carry more lenient sentencing). Similarly, Duque reiterated that his government will seek to revise the peace deal signed with the Farc, which has constitutional status. He promised that his government would protect all Colombians, including demobilised Farc guerrillas. But he stated that while his government would seek to advance the peace process with the guerrillas, it would be implacable with armed criminal groups, including Farc dissident groups.

As for the ongoing peace negotiations with the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), Duque said that his government would analyse the current state of the talks over the course of the next 30 days in consultation with the United Nations, the Catholic Church and the guarantor nations, and then make a decision on whether to continue with the process. But Duque was clear that his administration would not be as lenient with the ELN as the outgoing government (which was unable to secure a decisive breakthrough in Cuba during its final few weeks in power), and would demand that the ELN immediately end all criminal activity in order to continue with the talks.

Further discussing the plans to combat criminality, Duque said that his government would seek to deepen international cooperation in combating transnational drug trafficking; and that Colombia would also resume a more proactive eradication of illegal crops in its national territory.

Even before his inauguration, Duque had given strong indications that this would be a major aspect of his government policy. On 6 August Duque held a meeting with Ecuador's President Lenín Moreno, who was in Colombia to attend the inauguration, to discuss bilateral issues. The principal focus was on improving security cooperation along the shared border between the two countries, a major coca producing area.

Later that day Duque also met Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, with whom he discussed how to combat the trafficking of illegal drugs going from Colombia through Central America into North America. This general theme was repeated in the meetings that Duque held with the heads of state of Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico, and Panama, ahead of the inauguration ceremony.

Clan del Golfo

There is considerable doubt over the precise size of the Clan del Golfo. The organised crime chief of Colombia's prosecutor general's office, Claudia Carrasquilla, puts its manpower at approximately 7,000 throughout the country. This is four times bigger than the figure put out by the authorities, but the discrepancy could owe in part to the fact that it sub-contracts a lot of work. Given that the Clan del Golfo is not a rigidly hierarchical organisation, but a constellation of semi-independent groups, doubt surrounds whether Otoniel really has the authority to command the demobilisation and surrender of the entire structure.

Top Clan del Golfo leader seized

'Nicolás' (Carlos Antonio Moreno Tuberquia), second-in-command of Colombia's largest neo-paramilitary group Clan del Golfo, was captured on 5 August in an operation by the jungle command of the anti-narcotics police, in coordination with the attorney general's office, in the municipality of San Rafael in the northern department of Antioquia. There was a reward for Col\$500m (US\$170,000) on his head.

No shots were fired, according to the director of the anti-narcotics police, General Fabián Cárdenas, who said that 'Nicolás' had been taken completely by surprise in his relatively humble dwelling and had no opportunity to respond.

'Nicolás', who led a network of hitmen and extortionists in the municipalities of Apartadó, Carepa, and Chigorodó in the Urabá region of Antioquia, stands accused of aggravated criminal conspiracy, terrorism, and homicide. Cárdenas said he had been closely tracked since travelling to the departmental capital of Medellín in June to establish contact with Mexican drug trafficking organisations (DTOs).

The leader of the Clan del Golfo, 'Otoniel' (Dairo Antonio Úsuga), sued for peace in September last year, days after his then number two, 'Gavilán' (Roberto Vargas Gutiérrez), was killed in an operation by the security forces, closely followed by the number three in the command structure, 'Inglaterra' (Luis Orlando Padierma), in addition to several large drug seizures at the group's expense.

Congress subsequently approved a bill allowing for members of the Clan del Golfo to be collectively submitted to justice. The new law contains the offer of a reduction in prison sentences of up to 50% for demobilising members of illegal armed groups (but would not shield them from extradition to the US),

and other benefits depending upon the quality of information supplied to the authorities, such as full disclosure of drug-trafficking routes and the location of drug laboratories.

Days before leaving office, President Juan Manuel Santos said that lawyers for the Clan del Golfo had informed him that the group's members were "in the process of surrendering".

TRACKING TRENDS

PERU | Adjusting growth predictions. Peru's economy & finance minister, Carlos Oliva, announced on 2 August that the official economic growth projections for this year had been increased from 3.6% to 4%.

During a press conference, Oliva said that the new projections were made possible thanks to a raft of new measures implemented by the government led by President Martín Vizcarra aimed at increasing tax revenues. Tax evasion currently stands at 57% for income tax and 36% for sales tax, a major brake on Peru's domestic economy. Thanks to the new measures, tax revenues are expected to increase by 1% of GDP to PEN7bn (US\$2.14bn).

On 3 August, Peru's tax authorities started providing a free platform that issues digital payment receipts for every business. In addition to giving more accurate revenue information, the platform will expose individuals who are making purchases that cannot be justified by their declared salary.

Another measure forces businesses to clearly identify the ultimate beneficial owner of a company, a measure designed to reduce tax avoidance and money laundering.

A third measure aims to boost the construction sector by promoting property investment funds, while a final measure modifies the tax law covering transfers between parent companies and their foreign subsidiaries.

Oliva told the press that eight more initiatives are planned by the end of the year, some of which concern tax exemptions.

At the same time, the government has revised its fiscal deficit projections from 3.5% of GDP to 3% by the end of the year. Oliva revealed that a fiscal deficit target of 1% has been set for 2021, and declared his confidence that it would be achieved.

Fernández in eye of corruption storm

A corruption scandal broke over the course of the last week that could put paid to any hope former president Cristina Fernández (2007-2015) has of seeking a third term in office in October 2019. Fernández, and her late husband and predecessor Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007), allegedly presided over a corruption network involving scores of businessmen and illicit payments linked to public works contracts. The whole scandal ought to be a boon for President Mauricio Macri, diverting attention away from his government's economic travails. To an extent it is but Macri has not emerged unscathed. His cousin, who inherited the business empire of Macri's father Franco, has admitted to involvement in what looks like Argentina's own version of the Lava Jato scandal, which began in Brazil and went regional.

More than 10 months ago Oscar Centeno, a driver for Roberto Baratta, the deputy federal planning minister between 2005 and 2015, handed some notebooks to Jorge Bacigalupo, an acquaintance in the federal police. Bacigalupo passed the notebooks over to Diego Cabot, a journalist at the national daily *La Nación*, in January this year. Cabot realised the notebooks were political and legal dynamite. They provide a meticulous record, short and concise with no extraneous description, of names and addresses of people he drove Baratta to visit, along with dates, and the amount of money they stumped up. Cabot made copies of the original notebooks and passed them on to prosecutors to investigate, while sitting on the story until last week. Centeno, a former army major, who appears to have kept the notebooks for extortive purposes as he feared losing his job, is now part of a witness protection programme.

Prosecutor Carlos Stornelli said this week that through extensive fact-checking and cross-referencing his team had succeeded in verifying many of the entries, and a lot of the data, contained in the notebooks, which he described as providing "a kind of x-ray of the system...to raise money illegally". So far, 16 businessmen and former officials in the Kirchnerista governments have been arrested in numerous raids.

Juan Carlos de Goycochea, the former regional director of the Spanish energy construction firm Isolux Corsán in Argentina, was the first person to sign a plea bargain deal on 3 August to exchange information for a more lenient sentence. He admitted payments to the Fernández administration, although he claimed these were smaller than those featuring in Centeno's notebooks in which he is mentioned as having paid a bribe of US\$6m to Baratta. De Goycochea sought to portray the payments not as bribes to secure public works contracts but rather "contributions" to Kirchnerista electoral campaigns extorted by Baratta.

President Macri could not resist commenting on the corruption case on 3 August, saying that it was essential that there be "no impunity". Speaking while attending an event in Bernal, a city in Buenos Aires province, to announce credits for pensioners and social benefits, Macri said that if it were not for the change of government in December 2015 (when he took office) the case would "never have come to light". "We don't want a society where some people believe they own the truth, still less power...but everyone acting within the law," he added.

Corruption

Some 200 people gathered outside the Argentine congress on 2 August armed with 194,000 signatures of a petition demanding the approval of an asset forfeiture bill, known as the Ley de Extinción de Dominio. This would empower prosecutors to confiscate the legal assets of public officials suspected of certain crimes to the equivalent or approximate value of assets obtained illicitly. The federal lower chamber approved the bill in June 2016 but it is mired in the senate. The ruling centre-right Cambiemos coalition wants to include crimes such as drug trafficking, corruption, and financing terrorism in the asset forfeiture bill, while the Kirchnerista opposition wants to include tax evasion, asset laundering, and influence peddling. Some senators argue that the lower chamber approved the bill precipitately because of the convent scandal involving former public works secretary José López at the time.

Boudou convicted

A black week for Kirchnerismo was completed when Amado Boudou, vice-president from 2011-2015, was sentenced to five years and 10 months in prison for corruption. Boudou was found guilty of passive bribery and conducting business “incompatible with public office”. He improperly acquired a 70% stake in the struggling money-printing firm Ciccone via The Old Fund, a shell company allegedly fronted by Alejandro Vandebroele, a friend of his, while he was in office.

No sooner had it seemed that the scandal was a win-win situation for Macri, damaging his principal adversary’s prospects of making a political comeback in next year’s presidential elections while moving the focus away from his government’s economic difficulties, than the spotlight fell on his father’s powerful business empire inherited by the president’s cousin, Angelo Calcaterra. On 6 August Calcaterra unexpectedly appeared before the Comodoro Py federal courts in the province of Buenos Aires to admit to making similar payments and negotiate his own plea bargain.

Javier Sánchez Caballero, the former CEO of Iecsa, a construction company Calcaterra owned until its sale in February this year, was mentioned on no fewer than 13 occasions in Centeno’s notebooks as paying out bribes to the tune of US\$8m between 2013 and 2015. Iecsa was part of the consortium awarded the US\$3bn contract to build the Sarmiento rail underpass in Buenos Aires. This project is already being investigated in connection with the Lava Jato scandal because of the presence of Brazil’s construction company Odebrecht in the consortium. Sánchez followed Calcaterra in negotiating a plea bargain.

Like De Goycochea before him, Calcaterra sought to portray himself as a victim of a system of extortion practiced by Kirchnerista governments, compelled to pay “contributions” to the Frente para la Victoria (FPV, Kirchneristas) in 2013 and 2015 to help fund its electoral campaigns. He said Baratta had pressured him. Calcaterra also claimed that the sums involved were much lower than Centeno recorded in his notebooks. Prosecutors claim that the illicit payments could amount to some US\$160m. It is worth noting that Baratta was only in charge of public works contracts related to the energy sector. José López, who was arrested in 2016 after being caught tossing bags containing US\$9m over a convent wall, was public works secretary (2003-2015) – and his driver did not keep notebooks.

Calcaterra’s involvement is far from ideal for Macri, but if he is seen to let justice run its course it will lessen the damage to his image in the eyes of the electorate. Macri survived being mentioned in the Panama Papers in 2016, with his popularity intact, albeit that was before the financial turbulence which compelled him to take the unpopular decision to return to the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Any damage to Macri, through his familial association with Calcaterra, should be dwarfed, however, by the political harm to Fernández. Judge Claudio Bonadio has summoned Fernández to appear before court on 13 August to testify in the case, although she cannot be arrested because of the congressional immunity she enjoys as a serving senator. Centeno records in his notebooks driving Baratta to Fernández’s apartment in Buenos Aires and the presidential residence Quinta de Olivos, to deliver some of the bribery payments. She is already being investigated by Judge Bonadio for alleged treason and irregularities in the sale of US dollar futures contracts by the central bank, but this would be the most damaging charge she faces.

BRAZIL | POLITICS

And then there were 13

The party conference season came to an end last Sunday (5 August). From a high point of 25 at one point, the number of Brazilian presidential hopefuls has now been almost halved, coming down to 13. But the race still remains hard to predict, something highlighted by the difficult choice of vice-presidential running mates.

Bolsonaro's dilemma

Jair Bolsonaro's dilemma is that he has gained free media coverage by seeking out controversy. While this gets Bolsonaro's name recognised it may be the wrong type of publicity to build beyond his current support base.

Numerically, Brazil's 'peak presidential candidates' point has now passed. The logic of the country's presidential elections is that in the early stages many people throw their hats in the ring and try to build their profile and network. This is then followed by a period of consolidation and deal-making where some parties agree to drop their candidates' presidential aspirations in return for other prizes, such as a vice-presidential nomination, or support for their candidates in the gubernatorial or legislative elections being staged in different regions of the country.

A good example of how this is playing out on the Left was given by the parallel party conferences of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) and the Partido Comunista do Brasil (PCdoB). As it had already anticipated, the PT proclaimed former president Lula de Silva (2003-2011) as its candidate, even though he is in prison on corruption charges and expected to be prevented from standing (*see box below*).

Lula continues to lead the opinion polls with the support of around one-third of voters. The PT says it will back him all the way, and that is there is no 'Plan B' to fight the elections without him. But it still struggled to reach a decision over the choice of vice-presidential running mate. It eventually selected former São Paulo mayor Fernando Haddad, whose main immediate role is to be 'the voice of Lula' on the campaign trail.

At the same time the PT reached a deal with the PCdoB. Manuela D'Avila, who the PCdoB had just proclaimed as its presidential candidate, agreed to relinquish that role so as to be available to run in the vice-presidential slot as part of a PT-PCdoB alliance. The terms of the agreement appear to be that, if Lula is allowed to run, Haddad will step down and there will be a Lula-D'Avila ticket. If, on the other hand, Lula cannot run, then the ticket would be Haddad-D'Avila. In other words, in reality the party has put a 'Plan B' in place while trying to deny that it is doing so.

Among the other party conferences, the extreme right-winger Jair Bolsonaro of the Partido Social Liberal (PSL), who is lying second in the opinion polls after Lula with around 19% support, has been struggling to make alliances and find a vice-presidential running mate. The latter issue was finally resolved with the selection of a retired army general, Hamilton Mourão, who achieved notoriety (and lost his active-service job) last year when he spoke out in favour of a coup d'état.

The choice will please Bolsonaro's hard core supporters, but will make it more difficult to cast the net wider and attract less extreme floating voters. Some analysts believe Bolsonaro's support has reached a plateau and may now begin to dwindle. Bolsonaro needs to attract women (53% of the electorate), particularly in the south of the country, but opinion polls suggest his misogynistic comments are alienating them.

In the crowded political centre the conference season appears to have given the biggest boost to Geraldo Alckmin of the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB). Although in the eyes of some, Alckmin is tainted by old-style politics and corruption allegations, and enjoys only a meagre 6% support in opinion polls, he has managed to make the greatest number of alliances, which augurs well in terms of the organisation and resources upon which he will be able to call.

No less than nine centre-right parties now support Alckmin's candidature. In a bid to strengthen his credentials as a pro-business candidate, Alckmin has picked Senator Ana Amélia, a conservative former television presenter linked to agri-business interests, as his running mate.

Airtime crucial

Analysts note that Brazil has had seven presidential elections since the end of the military regime in the 1980s; in four out of the seven the candidate with the greatest share of television and radio slots went on to win. In another two, the candidates with the second largest share of airtime went on to win.

Former finance minister Henrique Meirelles was nominated by the Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (MDB). But Meirelles is hampered – perhaps fatally – by association to the current deeply unpopular government of President Michel Temer, and because he is viewed as a stiff technocrat.

Based on her popularity ratings a much stronger contender for the centre is Marina Silva of Rede Sustentabilidade. But like Bolsonaro on the Right, she too lacks organisation and resources. She has managed to form a coalition only with the Partido Verde (PV). The PV's Eduardo Jorge becomes her vice-presidential running mate.

The election campaign officially starts on 31 August, and at that point political parties are allocated radio and television advertising slots for a 35-day period under a formula linked to their existing representation in the federal congress. This will give the congressional incumbents a major built-in advantage. According to research by the national daily *Folha de São Paulo*, Alckmin will take the lion's share – 44% of all available advertising slots. This will be followed by the PT on the Left, with 19%, and then by Meirelles/MDB with 15%.

Remarkably, the candidates that have led the opinion polls in the 'Lula excluded' scenarios will get the least airtime. *Folha* calculates Bolsonaro will get 1% of the available slots, and Silva will get 3%. The conventional view is that TV and radio advertising does make a difference, because a proportion of the population does not have ready access to the internet. Both Bolsonaro and Silva will, nevertheless, have to concentrate their efforts online.

The Lula lottery

Is Lula legally entitled to run as a presidential candidate or not? Opinions continue to differ. The PT will formally register Lula as its presidential candidate by a 15 August deadline. The supreme electoral tribunal (TSE) will then review all candidates, and is expected to bar Lula, invoking the Clean Slate ('Ficha Limpa') law of 2010. The law says that candidates with criminal convictions upheld by appeals courts are banned from standing for elected office. Since Lula has been in prison since 7 April serving a 12-year and one-month corruption sentence that has been upheld on appeal, there would appear to be a clear case for exclusion.

However, in the event of such a ruling by the TSE, Lula would also have the right to appeal to the supreme court. Cases of this kind are randomly allocated to one of the 11 members of the supreme court (STF), who could on their own issue a temporary ruling on his eligibility. The justices are known to be divided on the issue, with at least one recently saying that Lula's arrest was "undoubtedly" a violation of his civil rights. Others are expected to take a much tougher line against the former president. So there could be a 'lottery effect' depending on who gets the case.

Political website *The Brazilian Report* noted that a unilateral decision on the matter by one of the justices would in normal times be seen as an "affront to the rest of the court", but added "these are not normal times and such a decision is not unthinkable in an already fragmented court". Matters are further complicated by the fact that the STF will have a new chief justice, José Antonio Dias Toffoli, effective on 12 September. Toffoli is a former general counsel to Lula's government and also served under the former president as attorney general.

The net result is that it is possible that uncertainty over Lula's status could drag on past September to election day (7 October) and even beyond. Existing electoral regulations say all candidates have the right to campaign, even if their candidature is subject to legal challenge.

Lula's lawyers may be able to lodge enough appeals to lengthen the whole process. Were he to stand and win the presidential elections, Lula might still be disqualified if, before being sworn in on 1 January, the full appeals process is exhausted and a conviction is upheld in one of the various corruption cases he faces. Once sworn in, however, a re-elected Lula would at that point benefit from retroactive presidential immunity from prosecution.

Inauspicious start to public security forums**Delay judgement**

The future public security minister, Alfonso Durazo, argued that youth opportunities and social prevention of crime were essential to tackle insecurity in Mexico. “Until we address the economic, political and social causes generating insecurity we will not improve the situation even if we put a police officer on every corner,” Durazo said. Ahead of the forum, Durazo said that the incoming government’s security strategy should be judged after 180 days, to see if it needs amending, with a further evaluation after three years, by which time he said Mexico’s homicide rate should have fallen from 25 per 100,000 inhabitants to 4 per 100,000, in line with an average country in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and at the end of the sexenio in 2024 when he said a country in peace would be handed over.

Mexico’s President-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador was heckled during the opening on 7 August of the first of a series of nationwide consultative forums being organised by his Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena) to help formulate his incoming government’s public security strategy. It was a clear indication of the scale of the challenge López Obrador faces to achieve his promise of “pacifying” Mexico during his six-year term, and gave him food for thought on the day before the electoral tribunal (TEPJF) formally proclaimed him as president-elect, paving the way for the transition process to begin with President Enrique Peña Nieto ahead of the handover on 1 December.

The first forum for peace and national reconciliation was staged in the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez (UACJ) in the border city in the northern state of Chihuahua. Ciudad Juárez had made appreciable strides towards rebuilding its image after being dubbed the murder capital of the world – in 2010 it had a homicide rate of 253 per 100,000 inhabitants – but its reputation for violence and insecurity is returning. In the space of just 24 hours on 3 and 4 August a total of 26 homicides were recorded in the city. The killings were attributed to a bitter feud between rival drug trafficking organisations (DTOs) Los Aztecas and La Línea. They followed the murder of Juan Arturo Padilla (‘El Genio’), the second-in-command of the Los Aztecas, in a prison in the state capital Chihuahua on 2 August.

López Obrador arrived in Ciudad Juárez in the wake of the bloodletting, along with his future interior minister Olga Sánchez Cordero and public security minister Alfonso Durazo. They attended the forum in the UACJ with the governor of Chihuahua, Javier Corral Jurado.

While addressing the packed forum, Durazo argued that the amnesty law proposed by the incoming government had been misrepresented by detractors. Durazo stressed that it was not “a pact with organised crime” to free DTO leaders; that there would be no amnesty for those who had committed crimes against humanity and human rights violations; and that the only people eligible would be “those who have committed non-serious crimes, without violence”, such as youths imprisoned for holding small quantities of drugs, or dragooned into serving DTOs due to a lack of alternatives, or farmers who plant marijuana or opium poppies out of economic necessity, or intimidation from DTOs.

In defence of the amnesty proposal, the precise nature of which will take shape during the 40 forums planned for between now and October, López Obrador argued that “violence cannot be resolved just with ‘mano dura’, with prisons...I do not believe in an eye for an eye, evil must be confronted with good”. But victims of the violence attending the forum were unimpressed with López Obrador’s call to “forgive but not forget”, interrupting him and brandishing aloft photos of their missing relatives.

Some also took issue with the proposed national reconciliation pact, which borrows the ideas of transitional justice mechanisms, demobilisation and reinsertion of members of organised criminal groups, and guarantees of non-repetition, from the Colombian peace process. They argued that it conferred the status of political actor on criminals who had never had it or even sought it.

Criticism

Local analysts have warned that López Obrador's proposed strategy for Pemex is mistaken and would only leave the Mexican government incurring unnecessary debt. Carlos Serrano, chief economist at BBVA Bancomer bank, explained that López Obrador's plans represent a risk for the country, when it would be much cheaper to continue importing petrol fuels rather than attempting to increase refining capacity given the efficiency issues facing Pemex's refineries. By investing a planned US\$16.3bn to boost refining capacity in Mexico in a bid to avoid importing petrol fuels, Serrano claims that López Obrador would place the federal government and Pemex under increased financial pressure. "It is more efficient to import petrol than to invest in an inefficient industry, no one is building refineries," Serrano argued.

Private sector questions López Obrador appointments

Mexico's leftist president-elect, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, was viewed with suspicion by much of the country's private sector during the election campaign, but the relationship had been warming up since his resounding electoral victory on 1 July. Gustavo de Hoyos, the president of the influential Confederación Patronal de la República Mexicana (Coparmex) employers' association, had signalled a willingness to bury the hatchet and work with López Obrador. But tensions have re-emerged following two recent appointments at state-run firms considered key to the country's economy. The appointments are threatening to undermine López Obrador's fragile relationship with the country's business leaders.

The first controversial appointment made by López Obrador was that of Manuel Bartlett, a federal senator for the left-wing Partido del Trabajo (PT), as head of state-owned electricity firm, Comisión Federal de Electricidad (CFE). Bartlett's appointment has upset some of López Obrador's supporters on the Left given his chequered political past [\[WR-18-30\]](#). But business leaders have bemoaned the fact that Bartlett, a lawyer, lacks the technical expertise and experience of the energy sector to be made head of the country's main electricity providers. This led De Hoyos to issue a public call on 1 August for López Obrador to reconsider Bartlett's appointment.

Noting that the CFE is now facing increased competition from private electricity providers following the 2013-2014 energy sector reform that opened up the sector to increased private participation, De Hoyos said that it would be preferable to have someone with knowledge of the sector and with more business administration experience at the helm. Bartlett's recent comments that as CFE head he would seek to impose an electricity tariff structure that is affordable for consumers rather than one concentrated on profits may have sparked business sector concerns. However, López Obrador has come out in defence of Bartlett's record of protecting the national energy sector throughout his political career, including his opposition to the reforms promoted by the outgoing administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto.

Bartlett emphasised his experience in overseeing the electricity sector as interior minister (1982-1988) and governor of Puebla state (1993-1999). Speaking to local media on 3 August, he vowed not to bow to the pressure to resign and underlined his commitment to ending corruption at the troubled CFE, which recently reported losses of some M\$40bn (US\$2.15bn) in six months.

De Hoyos also spoke out against the appointment of Octavio Romero as head of state-owned oil firm Pemex. Romero is a personal friend of López Obrador, for whom he worked during his time as Mexico City mayor (2000-2005). This has led to complaints of potential nepotism. Romero has also been accused of nepotism, corruption, and illicit enrichment himself, leading to questions about his integrity. De Hoyos alluded to all of this but, much like in Bartlett's case, his main gripe was that Romero, a trained agronomist, is not well-suited to lead Pemex.

López Obrador, who is critical of the opening up of Mexico's oil sector to increased private participation under the energy sector reform, which he has mooted repealing, has said that he wants to consolidate Pemex's financially troubled position. As part of this, López Obrador says his government will inject billions of US dollars of investment into Pemex in order to revamp its ageing refineries and build new ones. But these plans have come under criticism (*see sidebar*). There are fears that Romero has been appointed because he will follow orders rather than question López Obrador's Pemex plans.

Foreign investment enshrined in new constitution

The Cuban government has modified its laws and simplified the approval process for investment projects. A decree and three resolutions, published in the official gazette on 2 August, strip back red tape in an attempt to attract more foreign capital and boost the economy. Just two days earlier the government published a new draft constitution, which should take effect next year (after a lengthy process culminating in a popular referendum), that pointedly recognises and encourages foreign investment.

Potential investors have been deterred by a very slow, complicated, process for proposed investment projects in Cuba. The reform stipulates that a complete feasibility study will no longer be a prerequisite before presenting a business proposal to the foreign trade and investment ministry (Mincex). It will not be necessary to supply an upfront environmental impact assessment (EIA) either. Potential investors will define from the outset the timetable for how the investment project would be executed.

The Cuban authorities want to attract US\$2.5bn a year in foreign direct investment (FDI) to guarantee economic sustainability. The draft constitution, published on 31 July, defines FDI as “a necessity, and an important element of development” for Cuba.

The 1976 constitution underwent amendments in 1992 and 2002, but the latest version entailed a substantial rewrite. There are 224 articles in the new constitution (87 more than at present) divided under 11 headings, 24 chapters, and 16 sections. Only 11 articles were retained in their entirety; 113 were amended; and 13 were eliminated. The draft constitution will go to a popular consultation between 13 August and 15 November, before returning to the national assembly for final approval and then going to a popular referendum some time next year.

President Miguel Díaz-Canel said the changes were “deep”. At a political level, a limit of two five-year presidential terms was enshrined in the new constitution, and the position of prime minister re-established. The prime minister will run the cabinet on a day-to-day basis, as in Peru (with the obvious difference that the national assembly will accept whatever prime minister the president proposes without demur), while the president will concentrate on more strategic and developmental objectives. That said the constitutional reform, driven by former president Raúl Castro, looks like an attempt to circumscribe the power of Díaz-Canel despite the confidence invested in him as a true acolyte of the Revolution. Provincial assemblies will be eliminated and replaced by provincial governments, composed of a governor and a council, to run the 15 provinces. Greater autonomy will be conferred on municipal governments.

This far, and no further

The constitution omits the objective stated in the 1976 version of forging a “communist society”. This attracted widespread comment. But it owes more to economic pragmatism than a change of political dimensions. It is certainly not the prelude to a democratic transition. The constitution reaffirms the socialist character of the political and social system as “irrevocable, an unmovable pillar”, and the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC) as “the superior guiding force of society and the state”.

Social reform

The new constitution includes a key lexical change from defining marriage as a union between “a man and a woman” to one between “two persons”, which should pave the way to legalising same-sex marriage. High-profile support was fundamental to securing the change. Deputy Mariela Castro, the daughter of former president Raúl Castro, and director of the Cuban national centre for sex education (Cenesex), is an outspoken advocate of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) rights.

OAS ratchets up the pressure on Ortega

In a decision hailed as “unprecedented” by José Miguel Vivanco, the Americas director for the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW), the permanent council of the Organization of American States (OAS) has approved a resolution to create a working group on Nicaragua to “contribute to peaceful and sustainable solutions”. President Daniel Ortega has outright rejected the move, which is the latest sign of pressure by the international community on the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) administration as part of efforts to end the ongoing crisis which began mid-April stemming from the violent crackdown on anti-government protesters.

Presented jointly by Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, the US, Paraguay, and Peru, the resolution was approved on 2 August by 20 votes to four (from Nicaragua, Bolivia, Venezuela, and St Vincent and the Grenadines) with eight abstentions. Two members were absent. This is the OAS’s second resolution on Nicaragua following that issued on 18 July condemning the violence [[WR-18-28](#)] which has so far claimed some 450 lives. Comprising one representative from each regional group and other OAS member states, the new group is tasked with contributing to the process of national dialogue through “collaborative work with different regional and international actors”, and will present a monthly report to the permanent board about its progress.

With the OAS having already created a Special Monitoring Mechanism For Nicaragua (Meseni) and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), an autonomous body of the OAS, having set up the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts (GIEL, by its Spanish acronym) for Nicaragua, doubts persist as to whether the latest group will materialise: Ortega has already slammed the proposal regarding its creation – which Vivanco points out is unprecedented in the OAS’s history – as “interventionist”.

Widening the net

The OAS resolution regarding the creation of the new group comes amid signs that the Ortega government is targeting opponents in new ways. On 2 August the Nicaraguan medical association (AMN) reported that 135 doctors across the country had been sacked in an “illegal and arbitrary” manner, in reprisal for supporting citizen protests, with a further 28 doctors having reportedly left the country fearing political persecution. This led thousands to take to the streets across the country on 4 August in support of the doctors. Similar actions have been taken against teachers (although the number of teachers dismissed has yet to be reported), prompting students in Condega city, Estelí department, to refuse to attend classes on 6 August in protest.

This evidence of reprisals against state employees follows the recent warning by IACHR’s executive director Paulo Abrão that the Ortega government had now begun the “third phase of repression” – criminalising opposition leaders [[WR-18-30](#)]. Abrão identified as previous phases, the excessive use of force against demonstrators and ‘Operation Clean-up’ – attempts to eliminate the population’s self-defence barricades. Also indicative of efforts by the government to pressure its opponents, the private sector, which has ended its long-running alliance with the FSLN government (which had stemmed from Ortega’s pragmatic economic management), are complaining of land invasions by pro-government groups. At the end of July, a national trade group Unión de Productores Agropecuarios de Nicaragua (Upanic) reported that it had received 37 complaints of land invasions, equivalent to 7,358.5 manzanas (one manzana = 1.68 acres), of which 5,705 continued to be occupied in seven of Nicaragua’s 15 departments.

ANPDH closes

A further source of concern for the international community is the announcement by Asociación Nicaragüense Pro Derechos Humanos (ANPDH), a leading human rights group, that it was temporarily closing its offices after receiving “alarming information’ about threats to its employees. The group said it had information about plans to persecute its staff and its workers had received death threats over the phone. Its executive secretary, Álvaro Leiva, and other members of staff have left the country.

Addressing the judicial crisis

Costa Rica's supreme court (CSJ) president Carlos Chinchilla has become the latest casualty of the so-called 'Cementazo' scandal (involving Sinocem Costa Rica, the Costa Rican subsidiary of a Chinese cement exporter, and top public officials) which rocked the country last year. Last month Chinchilla was forced to step down in relation to accusations of influence peddling. The announcement that Fernando Cruz, a magistrate for the CSJ's constitutional chamber (Sala IV), had been chosen as his replacement has been well received although he faces a challenging task in terms of restoring credibility to the badly damaged institution.

Chinchilla announced he was retiring on 16 July after he and CSJ magistrates Doris Arias, María Elena Gómez, and Jesús Ramírez (since suspended), were reprimanded by the CSJ for influence peddling. The reprimand was in response to claims that they had thrown out a case against two now-former national legislators, Otto Guevara of the small right-wing opposition Movimiento Libertario (ML) and Víctor Morales Zapata, formerly of the ruling Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC) and latterly an independent. Both are accused of collaborating with Sinocem's director Juan Carlos Bolaños, one of the figures at the heart of the scandal which forced the departure last year of top officials such as attorney general Jorge Chavarría Guzmán; CSJ magistrate Celso Gamboa; and deputy finance minister Fernando Rodríguez [\[WR-17-48\]](#).

The latest revelations involving Chinchilla and his colleagues have already had repercussions; on 16 July, the president of the 57-member unicameral legislature, Carolina Hidalgo Herrera, a deputy for the PAC, presented a legislative initiative which aims to provide better transparency with regard to the disciplinary procedures facing CSJ magistrates. Meanwhile, President Carlos Alvarado, who took office in May, has said that he will promote reforms to strengthen the judiciary (albeit without specifying what these would be). Yet for all these concerns it is worth recalling that Costa Rica has one of the strongest rules of law in Latin America and the Caribbean. According to the Rule of Law index released in June 2018 by the World Justice Project (WJP), an independent, multidisciplinary organisation working to advance the rule of law worldwide, Costa Rica is the region's second top performer in the Index which ranks 113 countries according to different criteria (see *sidebar*). The Index showed Costa Rica in 24th place – second only to Uruguay (22) in the region.

Chinchilla's replacement – cause for hope?

These calls to strengthen the judiciary have also been echoed by Cruz, who was chosen on 1 August in the fourth round of voting, after beating another top court judge, Orlando Aguirre, by 13 votes to nine. Two other candidates, Luis Guillermo Rivas and Fernando Castillo, had quit in earlier stages of the contest.

The of appointment of Cruz, a Sala IV magistrate since 2004, has been welcomed by organisations like the Costa Rican association of judges (Acojud). Well known for his independent stance and defence of environmental issues, under the Oscar Arias administration (Partido Liberación Nacional, 2006-2010), Cruz had served as a prominent critic of government projects such as the Central American free trade agreement with the US and the Dominican Republic (Cafta-DR), implemented in 2006, and the controversial Las Crucitas open-pit gold mine. This also led to a run-in with the legislature in November 2012 which saw him removed from his post in Sala IV. (CSJ justices are elected for eight years and automatically re-elected for another term unless otherwise decided by a two-thirds majority in the legislature). The legislature's move, however, sparked outrage both from Cruz's peers and civil society groups and he was subsequently reinstated.

Rule of Law

Featuring primary data, the WJP Rule of Law Index measures countries' rule of law performance across eight factors: constraints on government powers; absence of corruption; open government; fundamental rights; order & security; regulatory enforcement; civil justice; and criminal justice.

Argentina retains abortion restrictions as Brazil embraces debate

Religious conviction trumped women's rights in Argentina's senate on 8 August as a bill legalising abortion up to 14 weeks after conception was rejected. Senators voted by 38-31 against the bill which had been approved by the federal lower chamber of congress in June. At the same time, Brazil's supreme court (STF) held an unprecedented debate surrounding a legal case over abortion that could pave the way for a similar bill to appear before the country's congress.

The result in Argentina's senate means that the 1921 law remains in place, with up to a four-year prison sentence applicable for any voluntary abortion with the exception of rape or if the mother's life is endangered. Thousands had gathered in the square outside congress under umbrellas to shelter from heavy rains. Advocates of abortion dressed in green (the colour of the pro-legalisation camp) on one side of the square; opponents in blue on the other side.

Ultimately, after a debate lasting a full 16 hours, the senate lived up to its reputation for social conservatism. In a free vote, a majority of every major party opposed legalising abortion, except the Kirchnerista wing of the main opposition Partido Justicialista (PJ). Senator Cristina Fernández (former president 2007-2015) said her mind had been changed on the matter by "the thousands of young girls who took to the streets", although there may have been an element of political expediency behind her switch behind a popular cause given the damaging corruption allegations against her (see pages 7-8).

Some pro-abortion senators said they had been bombarded with messages on WhatsApp from Catholic and evangelical churches putting pressure on them. Others argued that abortion was a reality. "Women are alone. The man aborts beforehand, disappearing... Abortions happen and the only debate is about legal or illegal abortion," PJ senator Norma Durango said. Senator Gladys González, of the ruling centre-right Cambiemos coalition, defended the current law passionately, calling for "a solution to illegal abortion", of which there are between 350,000 and 450,000 a year. Some 50,000 women suffer complications every year, around 50 of which prove to be fatal.

Meanwhile, Brazil's STF held hearings on 3 and 6 August, including testimony from doctors, experts, and religious leaders, as it considers decriminalising abortion up to 12 weeks after conception. The hearings are part of a case filed before the STF by Rebeca Mendes Silva Leite last year to terminate an unwanted pregnancy. If the STF comes down on her side it would force the federal congress to debate legalisation, although at present the only issue it is debating is whether to amend the law in order to ban abortion in all circumstances.



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Quotes of the week

"Don't worry. On Saturday, I was doing more important things, baptising my granddaughter Celeste."

Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos upon being accused by his Venezuelan peer Nicolás Maduro of masterminding a plot to assassinate him.

"The defence of democracy is not interventionist, it is an obligation that the countries assume when signing up to the Democratic Charter."

OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro responding to complaints by the Nicaraguan government that the new OAS working group on Nicaragua is "interventionist".

"The profound and incessant changes that we will have to make throughout this century will be a major test of our tolerance. Nobody will get everything they are looking for all of the time. We will always live in an uncomfortable place where something will not be quite the way we would like it to be."

Argentina's President Mauricio Macri shortly ahead of the abortion vote.

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