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Guaidó tries to turn screw on Maduro but needs military

The president of Venezuela's opposition-controlled national assembly, Juan Guaidó, is making a concerted effort to topple President Nicolás Maduro. Guaidó is ratcheting up the pressure on Maduro, pushing through legislation accusing him of usurping the presidency, and an 'amnesty law' urging the military to uphold the constitution and remove him from power. Guaidó has firm backing from many governments in the region, as well as the US, but they are little more than cheerleaders around an uneven playing field. The principal players are on the government's side: the military is professing unswerving loyalty, and the supreme court (TSJ) is taking steps to countermand the legislation and proceed to prosecute those behind it.

President Maduro was inaugurated for a second term in office on 10 January. Setting aside the constitutional stipulation that the swearing-in ceremony should take place in the national assembly, Maduro received the presidential sash instead from the president of the TSJ, Maikel Moreno.

"The world is bigger than the US empire and its satellites. Here the world is present," Maduro said. His would make for a fairly shrunken world. The roll call of heads of state attending the investiture was short: Bolivia's President Evo Morales, Cuba's President Miguel Díaz-Canel, El Salvador's President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, and Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega. There were 50 international delegations present, including from China, Russia, and Turkey. Uruguay's ambassador attended and the Mexican government sent a commercial attaché, not the most exalted personage but President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's refusal to go along with the recent Lima Group statement declaring Maduro's presidency illegitimate earned a rousing "Long live Mexico" from Maduro during his speech (despite the fact that he attended López Obrador's inauguration in person last month).

The permanent council of the Organization of American States (OAS), for many years a forum in which Venezuela's petrodiploacy could ensure the country a solid majority, responded to Maduro's inauguration by voting by 19 votes to six with eight abstentions not to recognise the legitimacy of his presidency. Peru's government recalled its chargé d'affaires from Venezuela in protest at Maduro's investiture. Argentina's President Mauricio Macri accused Maduro of "making a mockery of democracy", adding that "Venezuela is living under a dictatorship". But only Paraguay's government took the decision to sever diplomatic relations with Venezuela.

The OAS secretary general, Luis Almagro, hailed the outcome of the vote, which he said provided some reassurance to the Venezuelan people that "[they] are not alone, we will keep working to restore democracy and freedom". Almagro stood by that promise the very next day by hailing the interim presidency of Guaidó, who seized upon the recognition extended by much of the international community to the national assembly as the only

Mexico's move

Mexico's President López Obrador has thrown a regional diplomatic lifeline to President Maduro. Stating his commitment not to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, López Obrador says Mexico favours a negotiated solution to Venezuela's 'difficulties'. A national dialogue process, especially one sponsored by a regional heavyweight like Mexico, is precisely what Maduro wants. Numerous past precedents, most recently in the Dominican Republic, show that his government uses dialogue processes to give the impression of acting democratically, while perpetuating itself in power, and offering no meaningful compromise.

legitimate democratic body in Venezuela by expressing his readiness to take over as head of state. The national assembly denounced Maduro's usurpation of the presidency and declared Guaidó, the next in line in the constitutional line of succession, to be interim president until free and fair elections could be held.

Since his election on 5 January, Guaidó has made clear his determination to secure more protagonism for the national assembly, which was rendered powerless by the TSJ in 2016 and its functions subsequently arrogated by the government-controlled national constituent assembly (ANC). Guaidó, a member of Voluntad Popular (VP), a more radical opposition party led by the imprisoned Leopoldo López, called for popular protests and military support to demand change.

Maduro's response has been dismissive, branding Guaidó "the president of the republic of Wikipedia" after the rewriting of his profile on the online encyclopaedia named him interim president. But the brief detention of Guaidó on 13 January by agents of the national intelligence agency (Sebin) while he was on his way to a rally in Vargas state caused an international outcry. Even the Uruguayan government, whose measured response to Venezuela's unfolding political crisis has been slammed by the domestic opposition, denounced the "intimidation" of Guaidó for failing to contribute to "the essential climate of respect to allow the serious institutional crisis facing Venezuela to be overcome", and called for a broad and inclusive national dialogue process. The reaction prompted Venezuela's communications minister, Jorge Rodríguez, to denounce the "unilateral" action of the Sebin agents, who he said had been dismissed.

Guaidó went on to address the rally in Vargas, saying that "the regime tried to stop me, but nothing and nobody will stop us". He has certainly got deputies in the national assembly moving. On 15 January the national assembly formally accused Maduro of having usurped the presidency, declaring the Maduro administration to be a *facto* government whose actions were now null and void, and promised to establish a legislative framework for the temporary transfer of political and economic powers from the executive to the legislative branch of government ahead of the staging of fresh elections. The national assembly also decreed an 'amnesty law' for public and military officials who collaborate in "the restitution of the constitutional order" in Venezuela, with Guaidó promising to disseminate the text to all military barracks. It invokes Articles 233, 333, and 350 of the constitution in an attempt to present the military with the legal and constitutional cover to act against Maduro.

But neither the public nor the military seem inclined to act if only out of fear of government reprisals (the US NGO Human Rights Watch released a report on 9 January with Venezuelan NGO Foro Penal claiming that many of the political prisoners being held in the country at present are military personnel accused of conspiring against the Maduro administration, some of whose family members have also been arrested). It was noteworthy that, in an unprecedented event, Maduro proceeded straight from his swearing-in ceremony on 10 January to Fuerte Tiuna, the main military base in Caracas, to take an oath as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The defence minister, General Vladimir Padrino López, called upon all 4,900 officials, soldiers, and cadets present to swear their "loyalty and absolute subordination" to Maduro.

Padrino López has lost no opportunity to swear his fealty to Maduro, perhaps mindful of an article in the *Washington Post* on 9 January citing a US intelligence official as saying that he had told Maduro last month to step down or accept his resignation. Padrino López also denounced the national assembly's attempt to reach out to the military as making a mockery of the constitution. During a meeting with Maduro broadcast on state television and radio, Padrino López said members of the armed forces were "ready to die" to defend "Maduro as the constitutional president".

Protests

Teaching unions dismissed the latest increase in the minimum wage, promising “total national paralysis” of teaching activities on 17 January to demand better salaries. The opposition is planning a big march on 23 January which will mark the 51st anniversary of the fall of the dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1952-1958). The president of the ANC, Diosdado Cabello, promised to flood the streets of Caracas with government supporters on the same day. He predicted that “nothing” would happen and “Maduro will still be president on 24 January, there is no way the opposition can form a transition government”. He also said the ANC might bring forward legislative elections to this year, accusing opposition deputies of “usurping the will of the people” who re-elected Maduro.

The OAS was joined by the US in expressing support for Guaidó’s actions. In part of the transcript of a phone call between Mike Pence and Guaidó read out on 15 January, the US Vice President praised the national assembly president’s “courageous leadership” and encouraged him to “build unity among political groups”, pledging continued US support “until democracy is restored”.

Venezuela’s foreign minister, Jorge Arreaza, responded, during an appearance in the United Nations (UN) headquarters in New York on 16 January, by denouncing an attempt to oust Maduro and accusing the US of trying to disguise a coup as compliance with the country’s constitution. Russia’s foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, meanwhile, offered the most vocal foreign support for the Maduro administration, condemning “all intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states”, and asserting that one of the US government’s top priorities remained “toppling governments it does not like”.

At a domestic level, the vice president of the national assembly, Edgar Zambrano, insisted that deputies were not promoting a coup but rather calling on the military to fulfil its constitutional obligations by removing an illegitimate president from power. The most telling response, however, and steer on what might transpire now came from the president of the ANC and government strongman Diosdado Cabello, who it will be recalled, personally drove Leopoldo López, previously the radical opposition’s most prominent figurehead, to the military prison Ramo Verde in 2014. Speaking on his weekly television programme on 16 January, Cabello said TSJ president Moreno had “designated judges and prosecutors” to open a formal investigation into “everything that is happening”. This suggests the Maduro administration is planning to use its control of the judiciary to stamp out any threat from the national assembly.

Economic plan

It was against this political backdrop that Maduro chose to spell out an economic strategy and programme of governance on 14 January to convert Venezuela into “a powerhouse”. Speaking before the ANC, which ratified him as president, Maduro decreed a 300% increase to the minimum wage from BS4,500 to BS18,000 per month (the equivalent of US\$6.70 on the black market) to take immediate effect. Crippling hyperinflation will render the increase meaningless within days.

Maduro decreed a change to the value of the country’s non-functioning cryptocurrency, with one petro henceforth to be worth BS36,000. This amounts to a massive devaluation as last August one petro, pegged to the price of one barrel of oil, was valued at BS\$3,600. Maduro also increased the reserve requirements of banks “so that the rise of the criminal dollar stops pressuring us”. José Guerra, an economist and opposition deputy, said the new measures would merely deepen Venezuela’s recession, with the minimum wage increase and reserve requirements constituting “an explosive cocktail” that would cause a liquidity crisis without stopping the currency’s freefall. Guerra said he was unaware of “a single example of a draconian monetary restriction, like this brutal increase in the reserve requirements, stopping a currency depreciation without an accompanying fiscal adjustment”.

Maduro heralded successes during his four-hour address to the ANC, claiming that extreme poverty had decreased from 4.4% in 2017 to 4.3% in 2018, greater socio-economic equality had been achieved, and 2.5m houses built. He recognised some “problems” with the health system, blaming opposition “terrorist attacks”, but made no mention of outbreaks of diphtheria, malaria, and measles in many states, or chronic shortages of medicine or medical equipment. “We passed the test with flying colours,” he said, announcing a new mission, ‘Misión Especial Venezuela Bella’, to give a facelift to the country’s 50 most populous cities.

Odebrecht case takes fresh twist

The image of waste water flooding hundreds of houses in the Lima district of San Juan de Lurigancho (S JL), which adorned the front pages of the Peruvian press this week, provided a potent symbol of the repercussions of the bribery scandal involving Brazil's construction firm Odebrecht and senior Peruvian politicians, including the country's last four presidents. The cause of the flooding was a ruptured pipeline installed by Odebrecht as part of a contract it allegedly won through bribes: the construction of a metro line in Lima during the presidency of Alan García (2006-2011).

The flooding on 13 January in S JL, the capital's most populous district, has so far claimed one life, affected nearly 2,000 people, damaged some 232 buildings, and led to 182 people being evacuated. The housing, construction, and sanitation minister, Javier Piqué, promised that victims would receive full economic compensation. The state drinking water and drainage company Sedapal will repair the damaged pipelines, and seek to ascertain whether faulty materials or shoddy workmanship by Odebrecht were to blame for the flooding, while the defence ministry has begun a clean-up operation in the area.

The stench of corruption will take much longer to dispel. José Domingo Pérez, a special prosecutor in the Odebrecht corruption case, is expected to sign a plea-bargain deal with the Brazilian firm imminently which could lead to more damaging revelations of bribery and corruption. In the meantime, the political and judicial sparring goes on. On 14 January the congressional subcommittee of constitutional accusations approved four of the six accusations presented against Pedro Chávarry, who resigned as attorney general on 8 January [[WR-19-01](#)]. These include obstructing the investigation into the leader of the main opposition Fuerza Popular (FP, Fujimoristas), Keiko Fujimori; alleged links to the Cuellos Blancos del Puerto judicial corruption network; and Chávarry's aborted dismissal of Pérez and his colleague Rafael Vela.

On 12 January Chávarry was barred from leaving Peru for nine months by the interim attorney general, Zoraida Avalos, for his alleged role in the irregular removal of boxes of documents from an office on the ninth floor of the attorney general's office building three days before his resignation. The office in question belonged to an adviser of Chávarry, Juan Manuel Duarte, and had been sealed off on 4 January by Pérez as part of the investigation into the attempted cover up of the laundering of US\$1.2m from Odebrecht for Fujimori's 2011 election campaign. Most security cameras had been disabled but one captured footage of Chávarry and others on the ninth floor. Pérez said that for the risk Chávarry was prepared to take there must have been compromising information in the office.

FP is still trying desperately to turn the tables on Vizcarra. On 16 January the congressional audit commission, controlled by FP and allies, used its majority to vote in favour of investigating links between Odebrecht and Vizcarra's former consultancy firm C y M Vizcarra. Vizcarra last week denied this firm (in which he was a shareholder until last March) had a contract with Odebrecht related to the construction of a section of the Interoceanic highway between 2006 and 2008 but clarified this week that the contract was with a consortium, Conirsa, which included Odebrecht, as well as three other firms. There is no suggestion of any impropriety but FP is accusing Vizcarra of a lack of transparency and is determined to get as much mileage out of the issue as possible.

Vizcarra and Odebrecht

Deputy Yonhy Lescano, a member of the congressional audit commission for the centrist Acción Popular (AP), accused the five FP and Partido Aprista Peruano (PAP) deputies of using their majority in a purely political move to try to drag President Vizcarra down. Lescano claimed that the vote was unconstitutional, saying Vizcarra could only be investigated for treason, preventing elections, or conspiring against the normal functioning of other branches of government.

New UN mission head

On 8 January Mexico's Carlos Ruiz Massieu arrived in Colombia to take up his post as the new head of the UN peace verification mission in Colombia. Ruiz, a Mexican who was appointed by the UN Secretary General António Guterres on 10 December 2018 to replace France's Jean Arnault, conducted his first visit to a reinsertion and training centre (ETCR) for demobilised Farc guerrillas on 14 January when he visited the Llano Grande ETCR located in Antioquia department. According to a press release by Ruiz's office, during his visit Ruiz discussed "the concerns and challenges" of the peace process with the former Farc members. Ruiz is due to visit more ETCRs around Colombia this week before issuing his first report.

Márquez re-emerges to criticise peace deal

"The peace deal has been betrayed by the Colombian state, which opted for perfidy and for not upholding what had been agreed in good faith." This is the damning assessment of the implementation of the historic peace deal that the Colombian government sealed with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc) in 2016 from Luciano Marín Arango ('Iván Márquez'), the Farc's former second-in-command and chief peace negotiator. The criticism issued by Márquez, who went into hiding last year after formally demobilising and making an attempt to reintegrate into society, sparked concerns that other former Farc members might abandon the peace process.

Márquez, who adhered to the Farc demobilisation process and even secured one of the seats reserved for the Farc in the national legislature in last year's legislative elections, went into hiding in July 2018 amid growing complaints over the slow pace of the implementation of the peace accord, which had sparked tangible discontent among demobilised Farc guerrillas who found themselves unable to reintegrate into society fully due to a lack of government assistance and protection. However, Márquez re-emerged on 12 January when he released a 12-minute video in which he talks about the "disappointing" progress that the government led since August 2018 by President Iván Duque has made in implementing the peace deal.

Márquez complains that the government has failed to provide full security and legal protection for demobilised Farc guerrillas, including the commitment that they would not be extradited to face criminal charges in the US. He pointed to the murder of 400 social leaders and 85 former Farc members since the signing of the peace deal as evidence of this, as well as to the extradition process being conducted against Seuxis Paucias Hernández Solarte (Jesús Santrich). Márquez goes on to accuse the Duque government of "changing the original text" of the peace accord and failing to live up to the international commitments it had assumed as part of the deal.

Taking into consideration all of this, Márquez reflects that surrendering all of the Farc's weapons under the demobilisation process was a "mistake". He said the Farc's late historic leader Pedro Antonio Marín Marín ('Tirofijo') had always warned that holding on to weapons would offer the best guarantee to ensure the compliance with any peace agreement. "We made many mistakes, such as agreeing to turn in our weapons before ensuring the full political, economic, and social reincorporation of the guerrillas," Márquez stated, "we will not cry over spilt milk. But no guerrilla believes the story that everything is fine, and that the government is complying," he added. Despite these criticisms, Márquez concluded his message by saying that "We will fight on to try to fix the things and repair the damage...but always holding up the flag of peace."

Márquez's criticism was rejected by the government. The high commissioner for post-conflict, Emilio Archila, said they did not "reflect reality" or contribute to "the construction of peace". Archila went on to say that the United Nations peace verification mission (*see sidebar*) has commended Duque for his commitment to implement the peace deal and uphold its side of the deal. Archila said that by refusing to take up his legislative seat and going into hiding, Márquez could lose the benefits he enjoys under the peace process. Archila called on the transitional justice system (JEP) to determine whether Márquez has now abandoned the peace process. Duque accused Márquez of "trying to fracture the peace process" and of seeking to "bring back outbreaks of violence to the country".

Macri's hectic start after return from holiday

Argentina's President Mauricio Macri met his Brazilian peer Jair Bolsonaro in Brasília on 16 January, having missed his investiture on New Year's Day. This first meeting of the two as heads of state was the headline-grabbing event of the week for Macri but his first port of call after a three-week holiday could hold more domestic political importance in this electoral year: Macri visited the province of Santa Cruz, the cradle of Kirchnerismo, on 14 January for the first time since he took office in December 2015.

Presidents Macri and Bolsonaro used their first meeting to turn up the heat on Venezuela. Macri branded President Nicolás Maduro "a dictator intent on perpetuating himself in power through fictitious elections". Bolsonaro nodded agreement. He underscored the commitment of the Argentine and Brazilian governments to "defend freedom and democracy in the region", highlighting bilateral cooperation on "the Venezuela issue".

Bolsonaro also sought to allay some Argentine concerns about his government's commitment to the Southern Common Market (Mercosur). He hailed the "importance" of Mercosur, while calling for it to be "perfected". He called for urgent moves to eliminate internal trade barriers and remove red tape to reduce protectionism. Macri agrees in principle but in practice these talks could be more complicated. Bolsonaro also called for Mercosur to seize trade and investment opportunities, urging "the rapid conclusion of the most promising negotiations", in allusion to talks with the European Union (EU). This will have been music to the ears of the Uruguayan government led by President Tabaré Vázquez, in particular, long frustrated by Mercosur's interminable negotiations with the EU.

Macri expressed the willingness of both heads of state to work together, while Bolsonaro praised the "frank" talks with "no ideological agenda" or "taboo subjects", while stressing that the economic reforms being undertaken by both countries were fundamental to revitalising bilateral ties. Macri and Bolsonaro have a mutual ally in US President Donald Trump and while they might not share a strong rapport, relations will remain cordial. Bilateral ties could turn poisonous if former president Cristina Fernández (2007-2015), a close ally of Brazil's former president Lula da Silva (2003-2011), were to win in October's presidential election.

Into enemy territory

It was eye-catching that while Senator Fernández prepares for a likely tilt at the presidency, Macri elected to end his three-week Christmas holiday by visiting her home province of Santa Cruz for the first time since coming to power. Macri accompanied the governor, Alicia Kirchner, Fernández's sister-in-law, to two hydroelectric dams being constructed on the Santa Cruz river, which he said would be "a turning point for Patagonia and Argentina" in terms of energy production. The US\$4.7bn investment project being financed by China is providing 2,000 jobs (which will double in March). When they come on-stream, with a combined capacity of 1,310MW, the equivalent of 5% of peak time national consumption, the two dams will be the largest complex in the country after Yacyretá, the shared dam on the border with Paraguay, and Salto Grande, bordering Uruguay.

The visit had clear political motives. In November Macri signed a decree restoring the original names of the dams, 'Cóndor Cliff' and 'La Barrancosa', which Fernández had re-baptised 'Néstor Kirchner' (after her late husband,

Soaring inflation

Argentina registered inflation of 47.6% in 2018, the national statistics institute (Indec) revealed on 15 January, more than tripling the annual target of 15%. The one positive for the Macri administration was that inflation in December fell for the third straight month to 2.6%. This marks the first time monthly inflation has fallen beneath 3% since last May. But a 28% increase to public transport fares this month and an up-to-55% increase in energy tariffs between February and August will drive inflation. These increases were the cause of a protest in Buenos Aires on 10 January by the two rival factions of the country's second-largest trade union movement, Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina (CTA). They will join other unions in demanding big wage increases in pending collective salary negotiations.

Kirchnerismo and Santa Cruz

The federal interior minister, Rogelio Frigerio, said the relationship between the Macri administration and Santa Cruz governor Alicia Kirchner was “good in institutional terms”. Frigerio said Kirchner had signed up to the federal government’s ‘fiscal pact’ and the 2016 accord paved the way for later fiscal consensus with other provincial governors. This accord was the financial bailout Kirchner was compelled to negotiate with the federal government, in exchange for significant spending cuts, in the face of a fiscal deficit of almost US\$470m.

a former governor of Santa Cruz and president 2003-2007) and ‘Jorge Cepérnic’ (the Peronist governor who first pushed for the dams in 1974). Macri is determined to show that the dams were completed on his watch after decades of Peronist procrastination.

Macri is also conscious that Fernández’s image has been severely damaged in Santa Cruz, where her family has held sway directly or indirectly for 30 years of uninterrupted rule by the Partido Justicialista (PJ, Peronists). An electoral victory here would carry huge symbolic resonance for Macri. Santa Cruz will hold provincial elections this year, probably in line with the presidential contest in October, but favourable local polls for Macri’s centre-right Cambiemos coalition would give him a boost nationally and harm Fernández.

Macri will need to repair strained relations with the federal senator representing Santa Cruz, Eduardo Costa, a member of the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR), part of Cambiemos. Costa was the only member of Cambiemos not to vote for the Macri administration’s budget in December, publicly denouncing the suspension of public works in his province and privately bemoaning a lack of support for his gubernatorial candidacy in Santa Cruz.

Macri met Costa, and other prominent leaders of Unión para Vivir Mejor, the local Cambiemos outfit, during his visit to Santa Cruz. But there was disquiet among the provincial opposition, which has been fiercely critical of Kirchnerista corruption for causing the province’s financial problems, over his photo op with Alicia Kirchner. In April 2017, Kirchner and Fernández were on the receiving end of an ‘escrache’ (the name given for violent personally directed protests) when hundreds of demonstrators gathered outside the governor’s house.

Macri faced an impromptu escrache of his own from a group of protesters criticising the recent increase in public transport fares and energy tariffs (*see sidebar*) while moving on from Santa Cruz to Chubut, where he met the PJ governor Mariano Arcioni, with whom he inaugurated the wind farm ‘Chubut Norte’. Macri also met the PJ’s Mariano Fernández, the deputy governor of La Pampa in the city of Puerto Madryn in Chubut during his Patagonian tour, as well as the PJ’s Juan Carlos Arcando, the deputy governor of Tierra del Fuego, which he visited for the first time as president.

Kirchnerista social leader sentenced for corruption

The judiciary of the north-western province of Jujuy this week convicted Milagro Sala to 13 years in prison for illicit association, embezzling some Ar\$60m (US\$1.6m) meant for social housing projects, and extortion.

Sala, a diehard Kirchnerista leader of the social organisation Tupac Amaru, had been held in preventive detention for three years before the sentence. She was also barred from holding public office in the future. It follows a suspended three-year sentence handed down against Sala last month for organising an escrache in 2009 (eggs and stones were thrown), against then federal senator now governor of Jujuy, Gerardo Morales, during a public debate over the concession of radio frequencies to Kirchnerista social organisations.

Sala’s husband Raúl Noro was sentenced to three years in prison, while nearly 20 other members of Tupac Amaru were given various sentences of between two and eight years in prison for their role in what the judge described as “the systematic defrauding of the provincial public administration”.

Sala reacted to her 13-year sentence by accusing Morales of “co-opting judges”. Former president Fernández tweeted her support for Sala, saying she was the victim of “brutal persecution” and accusing Macri as well as Morales, a member of the UCR and hence a coalition partner of Macri’s, of being behind the ruling. The Macri administration has been adamant from the outset that it has nothing to do with the Sala case which it said was a provincial judicial matter.

Homicide increase puts pressure on FA

Uruguay's political opposition has concentrated its attacks at the start of this electoral year on the government's refusal to declare the presidency of Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro to be illegitimate after his investiture on 10 January. But it has another front on which to attack: public security. Homicides appear to have surged in Uruguay in 2018 on the previous year, which was already the most violent in recent history, confirming the failure of the ruling left-wing Frente Amplio (FA) to improve security, the primary source of public concern.

Homicides increased by as much as 35% in 2018 to 382, according to statistics released by the NGO Fundación Propuestas (Fundapro). This equates to a national homicide rate of 11.2 per 100,000, and as much as 15.4 per 100,000 in Montevideo where more than half (201) of the homicides occurred. "This is an unprecedented situation in Uruguay, we have a new historic record: during 2018 there were more murders than days of the year," the director of Fundapro, Guillermo Maciel, said. He blamed "an absent state" and "criminal impunity".

It should be noted that the government is yet to release the official homicide figures for 2018 and that Fundapro is aligned with the opposition right-of-centre Partido Colorado (PC, Colorados). Indeed, Maciel served as director general at the interior ministry in the PC administrations of Julio María Sanguinetti (second term, 1995-2000) and Jorge Batlle (2000-2005). But Maciel contended that precedent suggests that, if anything, Fundapro's statistics underrepresented the increase in homicides as they are based on newspaper reports and do not pick up, for instance, on victims of violent attacks who die of their wounds later in hospital.

BRAZIL | POLITICS & SECURITY

Bolsonaro moves forward on security policy

President Jair Bolsonaro's new government has few concrete measures to show for its first two weeks in office, which have been marked by controversies over appointments, continued violence in the North-East, and sustained market optimism based largely on speculation. On 15 January, Bolsonaro acted on one of his campaign promises, that of combating insecurity through giving "good" citizens the means of self-defence, when he signed a presidential decree loosening Brazil's gun-ownership regulations.

"To guarantee [the Brazilian people's] right to legitimate defence, I, as president, will use this weapon," Bolsonaro said in reference to the pen with which he was about to sign the decree after a meeting with cabinet ministers on 15 January. Bolsonaro has often argued that the legislation for personal possession of guns does not put the welfare and protection of "good citizens" first, especially after Brazilians voted against a total ban on the sale of guns in a 2005 referendum. The referendum was a provision of a 2003 law known as the 'disarmament statute' which introduced tighter regulation on gun ownership. Bolsonaro, who supports a revocation of the disarmament statute, framed this week's decree as upholding the will of the people by giving back to citizens the right to defend themselves.

The decree relaxes existing regulation slightly, extending the validity of gun licences to 10 years and removing the requirement that citizens prove their "effective need" to own a gun. It maintains other requirements however, including the lower age limit of 25, proof of psychological aptitude, and a clean criminal record. The decree does not consider the right to carry a gun

Taurus shares

The value of the shares of Brazil's largest arms manufacturer, Taurus, tumbled after President Bolsonaro signed a decree easing gun ownership laws. Speculation as to Bolsonaro's likely policies saw Taurus' value skyrocket during the first days of 2019, but ordinary share values then fell by 21.34% on 15 January. This is believed to be both a result of shareholders cashing in and a reaction to the likely opening up of Brazil's arms market to more competition. Analysts also note Taurus' high debt and overall poor financial health.

Anti-terrorism law

An anti-terrorism law which was approved in 2016 by then-president Dilma Rousseff drew a lot of criticism from social movements, who thought the original text risked criminalising their activities. Rousseff revised some aspects of the text before passing it into law. Brazil's anti-terrorism law considers as terrorist certain acts which are committed for "reasons of xenophobia, discrimination, or preconception of race, colour, ethnicity, or religion...with the aim of provoking social or generalised terror."

outside of the home, which Bolsonaro also defends and is currently subjected to more stringent legislation. This has been a source of discontent amongst defenders of looser gun regulations who consider the decree to be timid, although many admit that it is a step in the right direction.

The promotion of gun ownership and the use of guns against criminals was a central part of Bolsonaro's tough-on-crime discourse during his campaign. It even took on symbolic proportions, with the now-president adopting the pistol finger sign as signature, a gesture widely mimicked by his supporters.

However, contrary to what Bolsonaro and his followers' enthusiasm for firearms might lead some to believe, this policy does not find widespread support amongst the Brazilian population. A poll conducted by Datafolha in December 2018, a few weeks before Bolsonaro took office, shows that only 30% of Brazilians are in favour of making legal access to firearms easier. In contrast, 84% agree with bringing the age of criminal responsibility down to 16, another of Bolsonaro's proposed security policies. Public security experts are very critical of the easing of gun ownership regulations in a country where 70% of the 63,880 homicides recorded in 2017 were committed with firearms. They point out that there is no evidence to support claims that more gun ownership in the home will help improve security, and many fear an increase in domestic incidents.

In practice, this decree alone is unlikely to make guns more readily available for ordinary citizens, due to the retained restrictions and the cost of purchasing a firearm. But the amendments to gun regulations please Bolsonaro's hard-line supporters and show him to be moving forward on some of his promises on the security front, however incrementally.

This is particularly relevant as violent attacks committed by criminal gangs continue to plague the north-eastern state of Ceará and shine a light on the power of organised crime, the weakness of the prison system, and the resultant insecurity suffered by the general population. These are problems which affect the country as a whole, even if they are especially acute in Ceará at the moment. The implementation of new state laws and federal reinforcements to state security forces have done little to contain the violence so far, with a total of 206 attacks recorded by news outlet *G1* between 2 and 16 January.

The situation in Ceará is paving the way for a re-opening of the discussion on Brazil's anti-terrorism law (*see sidebar*). Bolsonaro's most recent reaction to the violence was to defend the classification of attacks on private and public property as terrorism, praising a bill proposing an expanded definition of terrorism that has been stuck in congress since 2016. This echoes another of his security-related campaign promises, that of classifying invasions of private property as terrorism. The bill that Bolsonaro praised was put to congress in 2016 after then president Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) signed off on an anti-terrorism law but vetoed several clauses within it, including two which defined terrorist acts in a way which Rousseff deemed to be imprecise and unnecessarily broad.

Bolsonaro is by no means the first to defend classifying attacks by criminal organisations as terrorism. Indeed, Camilo Santana, the re-elected governor of Ceará who belongs to the same left-wing Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) as Rousseff, also argues in favour of this. Santana, who faced similar waves of violence during his first term as governor (2015-2019), said on 16 January that the current arson attacks and explosions being orchestrated in Ceará should be treated as terrorist acts and that federal law should be changed to reflect this.

The concern, however, is that Bolsonaro might push for an ample understanding of terrorism which would criminalise social movements. He has

Battisti

Cesare Battisti's extradition to Italy is not quite the victory for which President Bolsonaro might have hoped. The orders of arrest and extradition were issued in December before Bolsonaro was sworn in as president, and the failure of the federal police (PF) to prevent Battisti's escape reflects poorly on Brazil's security forces. The fact that Battisti was captured in Bolivia and flown directly to Italy without transiting through Brazilian soil, as had initially been suggested by Brazilian authorities, means that Bolsonaro and his government can claim little credit in the whole affair. Nevertheless, the PF's involvement in the final capture has helped redeem the Brazilian police force, and the case denotes a renewal of good relations between Brazil and Italy, as both countries celebrate their governments' new ideological convergence.

previously said that the land invasions practiced by Brazil's landless movement Movimentos dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) are terrorist acts. While nothing has been done towards this so far, his government's gradual attacks on NGOs increase concerns about the weakening of safeguards. The most recent move against NGOs came from Bolsonaro's environment minister, Ricardo Salles, who, on 16 January, announced the temporary suspension of all of his ministry's contracts with NGOs.

The extent to which Bolsonaro is able to satisfy his supporters and push forward on some of his more controversial flagship security measures will depend on the backing he has in government and in congress. Bolsonaro knows he can count on the so-called 'bullet caucus' in congress, but it is not clear if he has a committed ally in the person of his justice minister, Sérgio Moro. Moro, who does not support the criminalisation of the MST's activities, appeared lukewarm at best about Bolsonaro's suggestion that after this week's decree, the next step will be the loosening of legislation on the right to carry a gun.

Bolsonaro celebrates Battisti capture

Italian national Cesare Battisti was arrested on 13 January by the Bolivian police with the collaboration of Italian and Brazilian forces in the eastern Bolivian city of Santa Cruz. Battisti had been on the run from Brazilian authorities since 14 December 2018, when then president Michel Temer (2016-2019) ordered his extradition following the issue of an arrest warrant by Brazil's supreme court (STF) the previous day. Battisti has been repatriated to Italy where he faces a sentence of life imprisonment for four counts of murder.

Battisti, a former member of Italy's far-left militant and terrorist group Proletari armati per il comunismo (Pac), fled Italy in the 1990s and was sentenced in absentia for murders and terrorist activity dating back to the 1970s. He was briefly detained upon arriving in Brazil in 2007, but an order for his extradition was controversially overturned by former president Lula da Silva (2003-2011) on 31 December 2010, the last day of his term, and Battisti was granted asylum, a move which soured relations between Brazil and Italy.

Jair Bolsonaro seized upon the politically symbolic Battisti case during his presidential campaign as an example of the ideologically motivated policies which he accused the country's past left-wing PT governments of pursuing. Bolsonaro promised the Italian government his complete commitment in helping to extradite Battisti once elected, which earned him praise from Italy's right-wing deputy prime minister, Matteo Salvini. Following Battisti's capture and repatriation to Italy, Salvini and Bolsonaro have exchanged messages of mutual congratulations and support on *Twitter* (see sidebar).

TRACKING TRENDS

BRAZIL | Bolsonaro approves budget. President Jair Bolsonaro signed off on Brazil's 2019 budget on 16 January. The R\$3.38tn (US\$900bn) budget was put together by the administration of former president Michel Temer (2016-2019) and approved by the outgoing senate and chamber of deputies in a joint session on 19 December. The budget maintains a target of R\$139bn (US\$37bn) for the fiscal deficit and allocates R\$1.42tn (US\$378bn) to refinancing public debt and paying off interest and other obligations.

Bolsonaro vetoed two clauses in the budget before approving it, at the request of the economy ministry, on the basis that they did not respect a spending cap implemented by the previous government. Despite the budget being approved, more amendments are expected to be made through presidential decrees in light of the new government's different structure. A presidential decree has already modified the increase to the minimum wage. One of Bolsonaro's first moves as president was to raise the minimum wage by 4.61% to R\$998 (US\$265) rather than the 5.45% increase planned for in the Temer budget.

First crisis for López Obrador?

With many Mexican states still suffering from a lack of petrol resulting from the introduction of a new government strategy designed to combat oil theft [\[WR-19-01\]](#) and public discontent over this mounting, there is a growing feeling in Mexico that the situation is turning into the first major test for the new government led by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The political opposition is keen to take the government to task over the situation.

The López Obrador government has responded to the public shows of discontent, the accusations of mismanagement, and the complaints that the lack of fuel is negatively impacting the domestic economy by insisting that combating oil theft ('huachicoleo'), which costs the state M\$65bn (US\$3.39bn) a year, is necessary; that the new strategy is producing results; and by appealing for understanding. In a 12 January press conference President López Obrador said that the measures implemented by his government were working and that there has been a fall in oil theft since their introduction, particularly those resulting from the tapping of pipelines from the state-run oil firm Pemex. According to Pemex, oil theft has fallen from 126,000 barrels per day (bpd) to around 3,000 bpd.

López Obrador also revealed that the authorities were investigating the involvement of public officials in corruption rings dedicated to stealing fuel from Pemex, which appear to have siphoned off some M\$10bn. He said that his government was determined to continue implementing its strategy and put a definitive stop to oil theft despite the temporary fuel distribution problems that it has been causing (according to Pemex it is currently distributing 93,000 bpd less than it normally does). López Obrador insisted that Pemex and the government were working hard to normalise fuel distribution across the country through the deployment of more tankers and the gradual re-opening of pipelines after these are secured by the federal security forces.

General Arturo Velázquez, the man in charge of coordinating the national anti-oil theft efforts, who accompanied López Obrador in his press conference, explained that the federal security forces have been expelling huachicolero groups from critical areas in which clandestine taps into pipelines have been discovered. Velázquez said that there are 56,000km of oil pipelines in Mexico and the security forces have identified 13,000km as being vulnerable, with 6km considered to be critical areas. He said 5,092 federal security officers had been deployed to patrol these critical areas regularly to ensure that the huachicoleros do not return.

In concluding his press conference, López Obrador asked the public to exercise patience and give the government time to resolve the situation. "There is annoyance and this is natural. There are long queues at petrol stations, people are worried.... But if you continue supporting me and trust me that this will be resolved, we will resolve it and then we will all feel very satisfied when we put an end to oil theft," López Obrador said.

#AsíNoAmlo

But despite López Obrador's reassurances there were further signs of public discontent, with demonstrations being held in some of the states most affected by the lack of fuel, such as Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Mexico City, on 13 and 14 January. The protesters – who have adopted the tag '#AsíNoAmlo' ('#not like that Amlo, in reference to the nickname by which López Obrador is known) to

Stolen tankers

Highlighting one of the potential pitfalls of the new anti-fuel theft strategy implemented by the government, on 14 January the authorities in Guanajuato reported that a Pemex tanker had been stolen by criminals in the state. The Guanajuato authorities said that the tanker, containing 25,000 litres of petrol, was held up by unidentified armed men at the Celaya-Juventino Rosas highway, who forced the driver to surrender the vehicle. The state authorities said that they had launched an investigation but requested assistance from the federal authorities. Meanwhile the Mexican association of automobile freight operators (Canacar) reported that five fuel tankers from its members have been stolen since the introduction of the new fuel distribution strategy.

Savings

In a bid to reassure the public that the new anti-fuel theft strategy adopted by his government will produce benefits, President López Obrador stated in an 8 January interview with local daily *El Financiero* that thus far, the strategy had allowed his government to save M\$2.5bn (US\$132.3m) that otherwise would have been siphoned off. “This means that the price of gasoline will not increase, it also means that we do not have to increase taxes, all of which will benefit the people,” López Obrador said.

express their discontent on local social media platforms – complain that while combating fuel theft may be necessary, any strategies used to tackle the problem should not be economically harmful to the general public.

The protesters note that the fuel shortages have not only created inconvenience but also led to many being unable to carry on with their daily lives, resulting in a sharp increase in the price of various basic goods that have become scarce in some areas due to the freight sector’s inability to get fuel. All of this has led the protesters to demand that the López Obrador administration review its current strategy and adopt other measures that are less problematic.

Local analysts have criticised the strategy adopted by the government on the grounds that it is antiquated and ineffective. They point out that use of tanker trucks is more ineffective and expensive and that this is precisely why Pemex pipelines were built in the 1970s, to improve fuel distribution across the country. Meanwhile others have likened the strategy to the failed ‘war on drugs’ launched by the Felipe Calderón administration (2006-2012) against drug trafficking organisations. They argue that deploying the armed forces to combat fuel theft will not solve the problem and could lead to huachicoleros becoming more violent (*see page 11 sidebar*), while there are not enough armed forces personnel available to patrol Mexico’s entire fuel distribution system.

The public discontent and the criticisms of the strategy against oil theft implemented by the government has spurred the opposition into action. Opposition legislators summoned Energy Minister Rocío Nahle and Pemex director Octavio Romero Oropeza to appear before the federal congress’ permanent commission on 15 January to provide explanations about the fuel distribution problems and efforts to normalise it. After Nahle and Romero cancelled their appearance at the last moment stating that they were too busy dealing with the fuel distribution problems, opposition legislators accused the officials of shirking their responsibilities before the legislature and insisted that the López Obrador government must be held accountable for its actions.

TRACKING TRENDS

MEXICO | Inflation. Monthly inflation in December was 0.70%, bringing the 2018 inflation rate to 4.83%, the national statistics institute (Inegi) reported last week. This compares with a monthly rate of 0.59% in December 2017 and annual inflation of 6.77%. The fall in inflation in 2018 brought the rate back to the central bank’s long-term target of 3% +/- one percentage point. The high inflation rate in 2017 was caused by the so-called ‘gasolinazo’ or sharp increase in domestic fuel prices decreed by the government in January of that year. Then-president Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) and his administration raised fuel prices following the liberalisation of the sector. However, since the start of the year, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has said that his government will not increase fuel prices to avoid stoking inflation and to reduce the cost of living.

Consumer confidence in Mexico reached its highest level in 12 years in December, according to figures released by Inegi, jumping by 2.7 points to 43.8 last month. Petrol shortages and the slower growth rate of economic activity in the fourth quarter of 2018, however, could affect consumer confidence.

MEXICO | Rise in car exports. Mexico exported 3.4m cars in 2018, a 6% increase on the previous year, the national automobile industry association (Amia) reported last week. Although there is uncertainty over the terms surrounding the new North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta), with US President Donald Trump pressing to steer more car production to the US, Mexico managed to ship 74.4% of its car exports to the US. On the other hand, the internal market saw a 7.12% fall in sales compared to 2017 (1.42m units sold in 2018 as opposed to 1.53m in 2017), according to figures from Mexico’s national statistics institute (Inegi).

Back on the brink**Cicig support**

Described by Human Rights Watch (HRW) as one of the most effective anti-corruption mechanisms in Latin America today, Cicig has enjoyed widespread acclaim since it began operating in Guatemala in 2007. Along with the attorney general's office (AG), it played a key role in forcing Otto Pérez Molina to resign over corruption. Other former presidents accused of corruption include Alvaro Colom (2008-2012) and Alfonso Portillo (2000-2004), who pleaded guilty to money laundering in the US in 2014. In its most recent annual report for 2018, Cicig said that after 11 years of operation in the country it had identified more than 60 corruption schemes, presented over 100 legal cases, helped indict over 600 people, helped secure 310 court judgements, and proposed 34 legal reforms.

President Jimmy Morales this week delivered his third and penultimate state-of-the-nation address. His presentation notably omitted mention of his headline-grabbing unilateral decision, announced last week, to end Guatemala's agreement with the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (Cicig). The culmination of tensions which have escalated since August 2017 when Cicig first called for Morales to be investigated over illegal campaign finance, his decision has left the country on the brink of a constitutional crisis after the constitutional court (CC) adjudged it illegal, prompting further inter-institutional clashes.

President Morales notably ran his 2015 electoral campaign on the pledge "not corrupt, not a thief" – a response to the public backlash over the various corruption scandals to shake the previous government (which ultimately forced President Otto Pérez Molina [2012-2015] to resign). However, tensions with Cicig have intensified over its calls for him to be investigated over illegal campaign financing involving his ruling Frente de Convergencia Nacional (FCN-Nación), as well as Cicig's efforts to prosecute his brother and son, respectively Samuel and José Manuel Morales, for corruption. Last August President Morales had already said he would not renew Cicig's two-year mandate (continuously extended since it first began operations in 2007) when it expires in September 2019. The following month he went a step further, barring Cicig's director, Iván Velásquez, from returning to the country after he left for a meeting in the US.

A recent row over the government's refusal last month to authorise visas for 11 Cicig foreign investigators seemed to be the tipping point for Morales' latest decision. As has previously been the case, he accused the United Nations-backed body of "exceeding its authority" and interfering in domestic political issues. However, some discern behind the urgency of Morales' latest move the fact that June's general elections (from which he is constitutionally barred from seeking re-election) are looming, along with his departure from office in January 2020 – at which point he faces the loss of immunity from prosecution.

Meanwhile, in a letter addressed to UN Secretary-General António Guterres, made public on 12 January, Velásquez attached a 10-page document refuting a dozen accusations made by the government. Among other things, these include a complaint about Cicig's alleged interference in Guatemala's internal affairs by promoting constitutional reforms in the area of strengthening justice; Velásquez points out "the Agreement establishing the Commission expressly includes in its powers the promotion of legal and institutional reforms that prevent the action and reappearance of illegal bodies and clandestine security apparatuses".

Local civil-society groups, along with human rights prosecutor Jordán Rodas Andrade, acted swiftly in filing an appeal before the CC. Having previously ruled against Morales in his continued stand-off with Cicig, on 9 January, the CC duly suspended his latest order. In its ruling the court outlined two ways in which the Guatemalan state's agreement with Cicig (which became domestic law following its approval by the legislature in 2007) can be terminated: either the UN can unilaterally end it, or the government can refuse to renew Cicig's mandate at the end of a two-year term. Thus, it found that Morales' unilateral termination of the agreement with immediate effect is in breach of the law. The court also notes that given the state's accord with Cicig

Overstepping the mark?

Mario Siekavizza, a spokesperson for the supreme court (CSJ) told reporters that the court had accepted an appeal filed by a group of lawyers which complained that the constitutional court (CC) magistrates had overstepped their mandates and interfered with foreign policy decisions taken by the executive. One example cited was a CC ruling which suspended President Morales' call for Sweden's ambassador to Guatemala, Anders Kompass, to be replaced. This call came last year after Kompass reportedly praised Cicig's work – remarks deemed by the Guatemalan government as an unacceptable intervention in the country's domestic affairs.

is an international one (and so governed by the rules set out in the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties to which Guatemala is a signatory), his decision violates international law.

Challenging the CC

The CC's ruling was hailed by civil-rights groups like US-based Washington Office on Latin America (Wola) as an "overwhelmingly positive step for the rule of law in Guatemala". Morales, however, has disregarded it. In a further twist, on 9 January the CC's own future was called into question after the supreme court (CSJ) revealed that it would allow the legislature to consider a petition for three of the five CC magistrates – Francisco de Mata Vela, Bonerge Mejía Orellana, and Gloria Porras Escobar – to be stripped of their immunity from prosecution for overstepping their mandates and interfering with foreign policy decisions taken by the executive (*see sidebar*).

The petition has been sent to congress where a 105-vote majority is necessary to approve it. It is worth recalling that while the FCN-Nación has just 37 legislative seats, it remains the largest bench and congress has protected Morales on previous occasions. For example, in September 2017 it voted twice not to strip him of his immunity from prosecution to be investigated for alleged illegal campaign financing. Some attribute this sympathetic stance to the fact that the threat of investigation over illegal campaign financing is not limited to the ruling party; opposition legislators have faced similar accusations and so might be keen for the issue to be shelved.

International response

Since Morales announced his latest decision, Matías Ponce, a Cicig spokesperson, told reporters that "international [Cicig] personnel have been asked to leave the country until further notice". Following the CC ruling, however, he said the team is "looking at ways to continue to carry out its mandate". The international community has also waded in. The US embassy; the 'G-13' group of donor countries (which includes the US, members of the European Union, and Canada); and international human rights advocacy groups like Wola, Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) have all expressed concern. Meanwhile, in a statement, US Appropriations Vice Chair Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT) warned that the US Congress "will respond accordingly".

Protests overshadow Morales address

President Morales' attempt to expel Cicig has prompted widespread protests. On 14 January, the day he was due to deliver his annual balance sheet, protesters took to the streets in Guatemala City and across the country in demonstrations organised by sectors ranging from university students' association (AEU), the umbrella workers' union Central General de Trabajadores de Guatemala (CGTG), and indigenous groups Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC) and Comité Campesino del Altiplano (CCDA). Indigenous groups reported at least 26 blockades across the departments of Quiché, Totonicapán, Quetzaltenango, Huehuetenango, Izabal, Alta Verapaz, Baja Verapaz, Escuintla, Suchitepéquez, San Marcos, Santa Rosa, Jalapa, and Chiquimula.

Morales' address notably avoided mention of the stand-off with Cicig – a defining point of his mandate. Instead, he claimed achievements with regard to tackling chronic malnutrition and improving health, education, and social protection, among other things. He claimed that 1.4m children were vaccinated and given micronutrients as part of efforts to combat malnutrition, while Q1.23bn (US\$159m) was invested in school meals. As regards the health sector, which he inherited in crisis, Morales claimed that hospitals now had supplies of 80%-82% of medicines and 84%-88% of medical surgical equipment.

Morales also boasted a reduction in the homicide rate – to 22.48 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2018, down from 26.4 in 2017, a tendency evident in Guatemala's Northern Triangle neighbours (Honduras and El Salvador) which have reported a similar decline.

Bukele extends lead in closing straight

Nayib Bukele could become the first presidential candidate in El Salvador since 2004 to win election outright in the first round, with the highest level of support since the signing of the peace accords in 1992. This is what the latest electoral poll by Cid Gallup suggests. Cid Gallup does not have an impeccable recent track record. It placed the eventual victor, Carlos Alvarado, third in the closing stages of Costa Rica's presidential race last February. But all opinion polls suggest Bukele enjoys a significant lead in the race despite his consistent refusal to participate in any electoral debates.

Bukele, the former mayor of San Salvador, who is standing for the centre-right Gran Alianza por la Unidad Nacional (Gana) but is very much his own man with a strong social media following, has carved out a large lead in polls ahead of presidential elections on 3 February. Cid Gallup put him on as much as 57% support, comfortably clear of the 50% plus one majority required to win without the need for a run-off. The nationwide survey was carried out between 4 and 10 January with some 1,200 respondents.

Other pollsters have Bukele hovering around 50%. In a poll published on 15 January, the Universidad Francisco Gavidia (UFG), for instance, put Bukele on 53%. Elías Antonio Saca won 58% of the vote in the 2004 presidential elections, with a lead of 22 percentage points over his closest rival. If Cid Gallup is right, Bukele would surpass this margin of victory as his nearest challenger, Carlos Calleja, of the right-wing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (Arena), lies in a distant second on 31%, with former foreign minister Hugo Martínez of the ruling left-wing Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) out of contention on just 11%, and outsider Josué Alvarado, of Partido Vamos, on 1%.

The Cid Gallup survey also found that President Salvador Sánchez Cerén is the least popular head of state since 1988 at this stage of his mandate, which explains why Martínez, for all his efforts to differentiate himself from the present government, is languishing badly in the polls. Sánchez Cerén has an approval rating of just 27%.

Bukele has eschewed debating with his rivals. While Calleja, Martínez, and Alvarado were participating in a televised presidential debate on 13 January (*see sidebar*), Bukele put out a broadcast on the social networking site Facebook and on television, delivered from the Fundación Empresarial para el Desarrollo (Fepade), presenting his electoral manifesto (Bukele said the broadcast was going to be live at the same time as the debate but was in fact recorded the day before).

Bukele said his government would construct four new hospitals and provide universal healthcare. He promised a pension reform putting the people first, the state second and private pension companies (AFPs) third, but offered no concrete proposal. He also said he would carry out a "digital revolution" to help combat corruption, and reiterated a proposal to set up an international commission against impunity (Cicies), along the lines of the bodies operating in Guatemala and Honduras, without providing any details [[WR-18-50](#)].

Bukele said his government would carry out some significant infrastructure projects, including quadrupling the capacity of the Puerto de Acajutla in the department of Sonsonate and constructing an airport in the department of La Unión. But his principal promise was to do things differently. "We want to move away from archaic cabinets to a cabinet where you [the people] are at the centre," he said to listeners, saying that cabinet ministries would operate "transversally" to resolve problems more effectively.

Public security

On the issue of public security, Nayib Bukele promised to place the emphasis on prevention rather than repression. "We will fight criminality head on...offering art, culture, sport...ballet, education, grants..." Bukele said. He also vowed to improve prison conditions, with the social reinsertion of inmates achieved through an active role in social projects, as well as making police uniforms. His main rival, Carlos Calleja, has also promised to focus on preventive measures to "attack the root cause" of crime, arguing that the current *mano dura* tactics have been found wanting.

Quotes of the week

“Is it enough to cling to the constitution in a dictatorship? No. It needs to be the people, the armed forces, and the international community that lead us to take over.”

Juan Guaidó, the president of Venezuela's national assembly.

“[By refusing to recognise President Nicolás Maduro] the OAS is conspiring against the Venezuelan people. The OAS, which should be seeking integration, has become an instrument of aggression and humiliation against popular self-determination. Democracy is the people not the empire.”

Bolivia's President Evo Morales.

“Studies show that the better armed the population is the less violence there will be.”

Brazil's chief-of-staff Onyx Lorenzoni.

Duque proposes new regional integration bloc

Colombia's President Iván Duque revealed his intention on 15 January to forge a new regional integration initiative to replace the Union of South American Nations (Unasur). Duque, who withdrew Colombia from the 12-nation Unasur last August on the grounds that it was buttressing the Venezuelan dictatorship through its “silence and complicity”, argued that the rebranded Prosur would subordinate ideology to pragmatism to improve regional cooperation. But his inchoate initiative looks more like an attempt to recast the integration movement in a different ideological mould, reflecting the conservative ideals of the majority of South American governments at the present time.

“Rather than a bureaucratic organisation it will [improve] South American coordination, public policies, defence of democracy, separation of powers, and the market economy...” Duque said. He added that he had discussed ending Unasur and creating Prosur with several regional heads of state, especially Chile's President Sebastián Piñera. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Peru have all suspended their membership of Unasur, ostensibly because of its failure to agree upon a new secretary general.

Ecuador's President Lenín Moreno has also been fiercely critical of Unasur, last July describing it as an abject failure and mooted evicting it from its grandiose headquarters outside Quito. Ecuador's foreign minister, José Valencia, reacted to Duque's Prosur proposal by admitting that Unasur had reached “a very difficult point, a complicated juncture”, while adding that his government stood ready to discuss solutions and alternatives to deepen South American integration with other countries.

Valencia insisted, however, that “regional integration is more important than any single member” in what looked like a veiled allusion to Duque's principal purpose behind Prosur: to deepen the isolation of Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro rather than the integration of the region through a common economic or political project. Without this, Prosur would have more in common with the Lima Group and would be unlikely to survive the next ideological tectonic shift in the region. For now, Prosur would serve to apply more symbolic pressure to Maduro, but it would fracture rather than deepen integration in the region. Venezuela and Bolivia, which inaugurated a state-of-the-art new headquarters for the Unasur parliament in the central city of Cochabamba last September, would be actively hostile to it, and Uruguay would be unlikely to welcome the idea.

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