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Colombian peace accord imperilled by Duque

Colombia’s peace accord faces the most serious threat to its survival since being signed in 2016. President Iván Duque issued a partial veto on 10 March of the statutory law regulating the transitional justice system (JEP), the rock upon which the peace accord rests. The law now goes back to congress where its fate is highly uncertain. Duque’s decision played well to his right-wing Centro Democrático (CD) but it lacks a majority in congress to approve the objections he raised. The political opposition (joined by the Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común [Farc] and national and international actors) expressed profound concern but it lacks a majority to reject the objections he raised. In the event of an impasse, Duque would win as the entire JEP law would have to be renegotiated. In the meantime, with legal safeguards undermined, demobilised guerrillas could take up arms again.

In a televised speech, President Duque said that he had concluded that the law would not guarantee the application of the principles of truth, justice, reparation, and non-repetition that form part of the signed accord. Duque stated an ‘objection of inconvenience’ to six of the 159 articles in the JEP statutory law. The six articles to which Duque is seeking a modification pertain to sensitive issues such as extradition, sentencing, and compensation for victims.

Duque plans to send a constitutional reform to congress to exclude from the jurisdiction of the JEP sexual crimes against minors. He also wants the JEP law to stipulate clearly that the Farc must repay its victims out of its assets; stiffer rules over sentencing for war crimes; and greater clarification that demobilised guerrillas would forego all the benefits afforded by the peace accord and go before the ordinary justice system if they are found to have committed the same crime after the signing of the peace accord in 2016 for which they were accused before it. This appears to target Seuxis Paucias Hernández Solarte (‘Jesús Santrich’), a former Farc commander, directly.

The government denied that rejecting part of the JEP law was tantamount to disavowing the peace accord. Duque’s decision was supported by the attorney general, Néstor Humberto Martínez, who expressed his “deep conviction” that it would neither compromise peace nor harm the JEP. Martínez has been fiercely critical of the JEP and it was his office that alleged, days before Duque’s partial veto of the law, that one of the body’s prosecutors, Carlos Julio Bermeo, had accepted a US\$500,000 bribe to help prevent Santrich’s extradition [WR-19-09].

The Farc issued a statement saying that it would appeal for “the political intervention” of the international community and the United Nations

Duque with upper hand?

The votes of the right-of-centre Cambio Radical (CR) could prove to be decisive in congress. The party led by Germán Vargas Lleras had withheld support for the JEP statutory law but eventually approved it reluctantly after receiving assurances from the constitutional court of its legality. The CR, which has 16 seats in the senate and 30 in the lower chamber, could switch camps now. If some members of the Partido de la U (PU) also backed President Duque, he would secure a majority in both chambers of congress.

Security Council (UNSC) to ensure that “the painstakingly constructed peace is not destroyed”. The Farc argued that Duque’s partial veto amounted to “political objections without any legal foundation whatsoever”.

Separately, the president of the Farc, Rodrigo Londoño, and six other Farc peace negotiators, as well as the government’s former chief peace negotiator and defeated presidential candidate for the Partido Liberal (PL), Humberto de la Calle, and seven other fellow negotiators, including former foreign minister María Ángela Holguín, and former high commissioner for peace Sergio Jaramillo, signed a letter to UN Secretary General António Guterres, accusing Duque of trying to “erect new obstacles and revive debates that have already been dealt with”. The letter, which was signed by more than 100 prominent personages, including politicians such as left-wing senators Iván Cepeda and Gustavo Petro, as well as academics, journalists, and other members of civil society, argued that changes to the JEP law “would not only amount to a unilateral variation of the peace accord but also undermine the constitutional laws that underpin the fundamental principles that regulate the JEP”.

The letter argued that Duque’s move was “especially disturbing” as it countermanded a ruling by the constitutional court (CC). The president of the CC, Gloria Ortiz, said that it would have to “analyse” Duque’s decision, saying that “in the 28 years since the 1991 constitution there has not been a single case of an ‘objection of inconvenience’ after a statutory law has been revised [by the CC]”.

The letter also sent to the UNSC and the International Criminal Court (ICC). The ICC has been fully supportive of the JEP and had warned the Duque administration that failure to sign off the statutory law would be a step backwards. The UN verification mission in Colombia called for the peace accord to be respected as well as the judicial independence of the JEP. It expressed disappointment that two years on from the signing of the peace accord the JEP still lacked a “solid legal framework” guaranteeing its full autonomy and independence, which “the UN...has repeatedly indicated to be indispensable”. The UN mission pointedly added that it respected and recognised the JEP’s “exceptional work to contribute to the consolidation of peace”.

Duque reacted to this by dispatching his foreign minister, Carlos Holmes Trujillo, to Washington to explain to Guterres in detail why he had decided to send the statutory law back to congress despite the CC’s approval of its content. Holmes expressed his confidence that when “explained in context” the international community would “understand and support” the proposed modifications, which Duque said he was “inviting” congress to debate “constructively”. The debate, however, is likely to be protracted and polemical.

What happens now?

The JEP began operating in March 2018 but the statutory law regulating it underwent a tortuous passage through congress before finally being approved in 2017 and securing the legal backing of the CC. The composition of congress has changed since then with a greater number of opponents of the JEP. Congress will have to decide whether to approve Duque’s ‘objection of inconvenience’ or reject it by a simple majority. Both sides require 55 votes in the senate and 87 in the lower chamber for majority. On paper neither the Duque administration nor defenders of the peace accord enjoy this (*see sidebar*).

Even without the requisite congressional support, Duque could emerge victorious. Unless a decision is reached one way or another by this December the JEP law will be archived. Or if one chamber of congress were to approve of Duque’s objections and the other reject them the law would be archived immediately and a new bill to regulate the JEP would have to be drawn up and go through congress.

Maduro rocked by new “coup” attempt**Guaidó**

“There are tough days ahead because of the regime,” Juan Guaidó said at a meeting attended by several thousand people in western Caracas on 9 March, blaming the Maduro administration for the country’s power outages. Guaidó also announced that he would shortly start a national tour to rally support against the Maduro administration.

There have been many different kinds of coup attempts denounced by Nicolás Maduro since he was sworn in as Venezuela’s president in April 2013. Most commonly condemned has been an “economic coup” but in September 2013, just five months after taking office, Maduro coined the term “electricity coup” after what at that stage was one of the worst power outages in Venezuelan history. Fast forward five-and-a-half years and this has been updated to “electromagnetic coup” after a week-long blackout affecting the whole country that surpassed the severity of anything preceding it. The lapse of time between these (far from isolated) incidents underpins opposition claims that the Maduro administration is guilty of longstanding neglect of the electricity system; the Maduro administration accuses the opposition-controlled national assembly, assisted by the US, of advanced sabotage.

The longest power cut in Venezuela’s history began on 7 March, with at least three-quarters of national territory affected, due to a fault involving one of the power lines from the country’s principal hydroelectric plant, Guri, in Puerto Ordaz, located in the eastern state of Bolívar. At present the Guri dam plant supplies some 80% of the country’s energy. Six full days later, on 13 March, the communications minister, Jorge Rodríguez, claimed that the grid was fully operational again and that electricity had been restored nationwide except for “a few places” due to “local sabotage”. He called for employees to return to workplaces but delayed the resumption of school classes for another 24 hours.

The government has strenuously shielded Caracas from electricity rationing over the years, but the last week’s power outages caused transport chaos in the capital (and in states across the country), ruined refrigerated food, and, according to the opposition, resulted in at least 17 hospital fatalities because it was not possible for generators to keep all essential equipment in operation, as well as drinking water shortages. Many people reliant on paying by debit cards, in a country where bank notes are increasingly worthless, struggled to buy food because card machines could not obtain a signal.

Sabotage or mismanagement?

Maduro blamed “a cyber-attack” for the power outages. “We discovered...hi-tech, electromagnetic attacks against electricity transmission lines, only the US government has this high level of technology,” Maduro said, pointing the finger at “the Pentagon and the US Southern Command”. He tweeted that there was “a macabre strategy” in motion “to set Venezuelan against Venezuelan, but this will not happen”.

Four days into the blackout, Maduro took to the balcony of the Miraflores presidential palace where he maintained that “the time for justice has come”, and that those behind the “electromagnetic coup” would be found. He accused the “oligarchic national assembly” of being behind the sabotage “to cause a state of desperation [and] confrontation...to justify North American military intervention and occupation of our country”.

Maduro provided no evidence for the allegations, but hours later the attorney general, Tarek William Saab, accused the opposition figurehead Juan Guaidó, widely recognised as the country’s interim president, of being “one of the intellectual authors of this electrical sabotage against the country”, and said that an investigation into his involvement had been opened. Saab also said that military exercises would be held to protect the national electricity system

Chinese and UN assistance

The Chinese government announced on 13 March that it would offer to provide “aid and technical assistance” to the Venezuelan government to help fix the power grid. Meanwhile, Stéphane Dujarric, the spokesperson for the United Nations Secretary-General, promised more aid to respond to the emergency situation in Venezuela. “We are very concerned about the serious humanitarian impact that the power outage is having in Venezuela, as well as about reported incidents of looting and violence throughout the country,” Dujarric said.

(SEN) and that to prevent new attacks members of the military and militias (Colectivos) would be deployed to 114 electricity power stations.

It is worth noting that the military has been deployed at the Guri dam, and power stations across Venezuela, for years in response to government fears of sabotage. Back in 2013, Maduro created ‘Misión Eléctrica’ to guard and improve the grid. Rafael Ramírez, oil czar under former president Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) but ostracised by Maduro, supported the opposition’s interpretation of the causes for the latest outages as mismanagement and deficient infrastructure. “Guri has collapsed because of a lack of maintenance, just like the thermoelectric plants and the transmission and distribution lines,” Ramírez tweeted.

Addressing several rallies across Caracas on 12 March, Guaidó dismissed Saab’s promised probe. “I am to be investigated by a prosecutor? Which prosecutor? The one who said I couldn’t leave the country when we toured South America?” Guaidó asked rhetorically. “Venezuela knows who sabotaged the country, Venezuela knows that an electricity emergency was decreed a decade ago, and that US\$100bn has been stolen,” he added, alleging massive embezzlement of funds meant for investment in improving electricity infrastructure.

The national assembly authorised Guaidó to declare a state of exception in Venezuela for 30 days as a result of the power outages. As part of this, it also announced the suspension of oil shipments to Cuba (which in practice it is powerless to enforce). Guaidó called for assistance from the international community to stop Venezuela gifting 100,000 barrels per day of crude to Cuba at a time of ever-declining national production, compounded by the lack of electricity over the last week. He said this would also cut off the influence of Cuba’s military intelligence and counterintelligence apparatus on Venezuela’s armed forces.

Cuba’s role in Venezuela

The US government partially activated Title III of the 1996 Helms-Burton Act last week, allowing lawsuits in US courts against companies using properties expropriated after the Cuban Revolution [[WR-19-09](#)]. US National Security Advisor John Bolton linked the decision to “Cuba’s role in usurping democracy and fomenting repression in Venezuela”. This prompted criticism from the spokeswoman for the Russian foreign ministry, Maria Zakharova, who, on 7 March, accused the US of “asphyxiating Venezuela now, while simultaneously and in its customary style, setting its sights on Cuba [...for] undermining democracy in Venezuela”.

“The Kremlin is standing with its Venezuelan cronies against the will of the people of a sovereign nation to protect a Moscow-friendly regime,” the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, shot back on 11 March. “The nations that support Maduro are, by the nature of this illegitimate regime, carrying out the very foreign interventionism of which they accuse others,” he added. Pompeo, who also announced the withdrawal of all US diplomatic personnel from Venezuela, saying threateningly that they had become “a constraint” on US policy, branded Cuba “the true imperialist power in Venezuela”.

Pompeo also accused Russia’s state-owned oil company Rosneft of violating US sanctions by buying oil from its Venezuelan counterpart Pdvsa, helping to “throw a lifeline to the regime”. Russia’s foreign minister Sergey Lavrov responded by accusing the US of violating international law. He argued that Rosneft’s interests in Venezuela long predated the “unilateral sanctions” imposed one month ago by the US government, which he accused of seeking to “monopolise” the Venezuelan energy sector for its own companies.

Vizcarra appoints new prime minister in shake-up

Peru's President Martín Vizcarra conducted an extensive cabinet reshuffle on 11 March. Salvador del Solar, a lawyer, actor, film director, and former culture minister, comes in as prime minister. Vizcarra will be banking on Del Solar bringing his creative flair and charisma to his new political role in order to preserve his popularity, amid signs of a first slip in the opinion polls, as well as overcoming obstacles thrown in the way of his government's judicial and political reform proposals by the main opposition right-wing Fuerza Popular (FP, Fujimoristas).

Del Solar replaces the experienced César Villanueva, who assumed the post shortly after President Vizcarra's predecessor Pedro Pablo Kuczynski was removed from office in March 2018. Villanueva, who endured a fractious relationship with FP, had tendered his resignation and will return to congress as a deputy linked to the centrist Alianza para el Progreso (APP).

Del Solar had served as culture minister under Kuczynski. He resigned in December 2017 days after Kuczynski controversially granted a pardon to former president Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000). This has fuelled speculation that Vizcarra is adopting a combative stance with FP by appointing Del Solar, but the new prime minister appears determined not to rock the boat but to seek consensus with FP.

Del Solar said that Vizcarra was convinced that Peru had entered "a new phase" where dialogue and consensus would prevail over intransigence and confrontation. This will be tested when his government seeks to push through congress reform proposals in the coming months, especially those associated with last December's referendum. It was noteworthy that Del Solar stressed the importance of public participation in politics, which he described as "a very hostile activity". A high level of public support has been fundamental in Vizcarra's political victories over FP over the course of the last year. Vizcarra does not have a party of his own and Peruanos por el Cambio (PPK), which he inherited from Kuczynski, is weak and fractured.

Strong female presence

Del Solar announced eight cabinet changes, seven involving females. Flor Pablo was appointed as education minister; Rocio Barrios as production minister; Ulla Holmquist, culture; Gloria Montenegro, women and vulnerable peoples; Paola Bustamante, inclusion and social development; Lucía Ruiz, environment; and Fabiola Muñoz, who moves to agriculture from environment. Carlos Bruce reprises the position of housing minister he held under former president Alejandro Toledo (2001-2006).

Del Solar said that Peru now had nine first-rate male and female ministers, insisting that gender parity in the cabinet did not come at the expense of "competence or political ability". This is just the second cabinet with gender parity after that of prime minister Juan Jiménez Mayor, during the government led by Ollanta Humala (2011-2016). Del Solar said it sent out a very powerful message to Peruvian girls that "they can reach positions of authority".

All of these changes, however, were to the more social part of the cabinet. The heavyweight ministries are all in the hands of men and remained unchanged: Néstor Popolizio, foreign affairs; José Huerta, defence; Carlos Oliva, economy; Carlos Morán, interior; Vicente Zeballos, justice; Edgar Vásquez, foreign trade and tourism; Francisco Ísmodes, energy & mines; and Edmer Trujillo, transport and communications.

Femicides

President Vizcarra has prioritised combating domestic violence in Peru since taking office nearly one year ago. There have already been 30 reported femicides in the country in 2019, however, which if the same rate were maintained over the course of the year would surpass the 149 registered in the whole of 2018.

Welcoming Venezuelans

In an attempt to reduce the burden on Roraima state public services, Brazil's federal government has been pursuing a voluntary relocation programme for Venezuelan migrants known as *Operação Acolhida* ('operation welcome'). On 11 March, the government announced the transfer of a further 330 Venezuelan migrants from Roraima to other Brazilian states, bringing the number of re-located migrants to over 5,000. Tens of thousands of Venezuelans remain in shelters in Roraima. In January, the government announced the extension of *Operação Acolhida* for another year, and in February it allocated R\$14m (US\$3.7m) to the defence ministry for the provision of assistance to Venezuelan migrants.

Venezuelan crisis spills over into Roraima

Brazil's northern border state of Roraima, one of the country's poorest, has endured much of the economic and social impact of the Venezuelan exodus to Brazil. As the political crisis continues to deepen in Venezuela, the effects are felt in Roraima, where daily life and business have been disrupted by the closure of the border for the past three weeks and the cut-off of the state's electricity supply from Venezuela. These problems also pose challenges for the federal government led by President Jair Bolsonaro, which is being called upon to respond to the situation, particularly where the provision of energy is concerned.

Venezuela's Bolivarian national guard (GNB) has maintained its side of the border with Brazil closed since 21 February on the orders of Venezuela's government as the power struggle between Nicolás Maduro and Juan Guaidó deepens. Brazil's federal government recognises Guaidó rather than Maduro as Venezuela's legitimate president and played a part in (ultimately unsuccessful) international efforts to deliver humanitarian aid to the struggling country last month. Roraima's state governor, Antônio Denarium, therefore caused a stir when it emerged that he had met members of the Maduro administration and Bolivarian paramilitary groups to try to negotiate a re-opening of the border in late February.

Denarium, who was elected last year and belongs to the same Partido Social Liberal (PSL) as President Bolsonaro, insists that the meeting was not political in nature and that he supports the federal government's line on Venezuela, but also noted that he was acting in his state's interests. "The border closure only affects Roraima. This is the truth and I am trying to defend Roraima's interests, as we depend more on Venezuela than they depend on us," Denarium was reported as saying by local daily *Folha de Boa Vista*.

The border town of Pacaraima especially is feeling the impact of the border closure on its economy, as local businesses depend on daily visits from Venezuelans. While people are still coming through clandestine border crossings, they are few and far between and some local shopkeepers have reported a 90% drop in trade. On 11 March, Pacaraima tradesmen and local Brazilian businessmen from Roraima and the neighbouring state of Amazonas who export to Venezuela signed a petition asking Maduro to open the border, with a few hundred people taking part in a protest on the streets of Pacaraima.

Roraima's energy dependency

An important concern for Roraima's state government has been the guarantee of its electricity supply from Venezuela. Roraima is the only Brazilian state that is not connected to the national electricity grid, the Sistema Interligado Nacional (SIN), and up until recently the state depended on Venezuela's Guri hydroelectric plant for around 80% of its electricity. The rest is provided by local diesel-powered thermal plants – which are both costly and polluting.

Increasingly unreliable energy supply from Venezuela had led Roraima to depend more heavily on its thermal plants over recent months. Denarium feared that if increasing tensions between the Maduro administration and Bolsonaro's government came to a head, Roraima's already patchy energy supply would be the first victim. His fears became reality on 7 March when the transmission lines between Guri and Roraima went down, seemingly due to a failure at the Guri hydroelectric plant which is causing ongoing blackouts across Venezuela.

Indigenous denounce military atrocities

Members of the Waimiri-Atroari tribe have testified in an unprecedented court hearing, denouncing military attacks against indigenous people during the construction of the BR-174 road linking Manaus and Boa Vista between 1968 and 1977, under Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985). Around 120km of the BR-174 cuts through indigenous land. Federal prosecutors reportedly estimate that between 600 and 3,000 Waimiri-Atroari died during this period. The details were reported by *The Associated Press*, one of two media outlets allowed in the hearing, on 8 March. The Waimiri-Atroari are now opposing the construction of a transmission line which would run alongside the BR-174.

Since the evening of 7 March, Roraima has been entirely dependent on its thermal plants for its electricity supply. Roraima Energia, the local energy provider, has said that there is no question of rationing electricity as the thermal plants have the generation capacity to supply the entire state. The system is not viable, however, in the long term. According to the national electricity agency (Aneel), Roraima's thermal plants cost an annual R\$1.2bn (US\$313m) to run – the same as the construction of a transmission line connecting the state to the national grid. The ministry of mines and energy (MME) estimates the annual cost of running the thermal plants to be even higher, at R\$1.7bn.

Linhão de Tucuruí

On 11 March, 10 state deputies from Roraima joined Amazonas state's legislative assembly (Aeam) in signing a letter asking Bolsonaro to launch the construction of the Linhão de Tucuruí transmission line as a matter of urgency. The extension of the Tucuruí line would add around 720km of transmission lines following the BR-174 road between Manaus in Amazonas and Boa Vista in Roraima, serving to connect Roraima to the SIN.

The construction of the Tucuruí line has been stalled since 2011, when the Transnorte consortium acquired the rights to the project, as companies have failed to obtain the necessary environmental licences. The Waimiri-Atroari indigenous people have opposed the plans for the transmission line, which would cross through their reserve and require the construction of up to 250 towers on their land.

Prior to the blackout and the state deputies' request, the risks posed by Roraima's energy dependency on Venezuela had already led the federal defence council (CDN) to declare the extension of the Tucuruí line a matter of national importance on 27 February. This allows for the acceleration of the project, with the aim of beginning the 30-month construction period on 30 June this year. Government officials have said that environmental questions and indigenous rights will be considered but cannot supersede national interests.

Indigenous rights vs. development projects

The Linhão de Tucuruí project brings to the fore the ongoing challenge that the Brazilian government faces in balancing indigenous rights with infrastructure projects. Bolsonaro has already made clear that he considers indigenous demands (often linked to environmental considerations) as secondary to the pursuit of development plans and that he is in favour of speeding up licensing procedures for energy projects, a position reinforced by the government's recent statements on the Tucuruí line.

He faces opposition, however, and not only from indigenous groups and NGOs. On 7 March, the federal public prosecutor's office (MPF) released a note declaring the government's indigenous policy to be unconstitutional, as well as violating Convention 169 of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) on the rights of indigenous peoples. The MPF's remarks relate to the reallocation of the responsibility for dealing with indigenous issues away from the justice ministry and indigenous rights agency (Funai), as well as to Bolsonaro's stated aim of wanting to integrate indigenous peoples into Brazilian society.

The urgency of the situation in Roraima, with no end in sight to the blackouts in Venezuela, will likely make it the scene of the Bolsonaro government's first serious conflict with the country's indigenous. The Amazonas and Roraima state deputies have for their part acknowledged the need for dialogue with the Waimiri-Atroari, who block the BR-174 daily as a sign of protest. "The Roraimenses deserve to receive reliable energy to escape this dependence on [Venezuela], but this cannot be an imposition, as it would hurt indigenous peoples' autonomy, which guarantees prior consultation," Roraima state deputy Lenir Rodrigues was reported as saying by *Folha de Boa Vista*.

Foreign policy debate rages

Guidó on Bachelet

Juan Guidó responded to Michelle Bachelet's statement that the situation in Venezuela "has been exacerbated by sanctions" by urging her to come to the country and visit hospitals, morgues, and schools, in order to judge for herself "without ideology" but rather "in the interests of the Venezuelan people". Guidó pointed out that the sanctions on the Venezuelan government that she cited had only been applied one month ago and could not have created such a multitude of severe problems in such a short time. "The sole cause of the crisis," he added, "is Nicolás Maduro".

Venezuela's multi-layered crisis is fuelling tensions between the government led by President Sebastián Piñera and the left-wing opposition over Chile's traditionally apolitical foreign policy. Exacerbating these tensions, Piñera is due to host a summit in Santiago on 24 March to launch a new regional integration initiative to replace the Union of South American Nations (Unasur), accused of serving the interests of the Venezuelan government led by Nicolás Maduro. Piñera says that the re-envisioned bloc, known as Prosur, would focus on strengthening integration, economic development, and regional trade.

Shortly before President Piñera set off for the Colombian city of Cúcuta on the border with Venezuela on 22 February to be present for the big push to force humanitarian aid into the country, prominent members of Chile's opposition Partido Socialista (PS) signed a letter accusing him of "breaking a Chilean tradition" by putting foreign policy "at the service of domestic political interests". The signatories, who included in their number Senators Isabel Allende and Juan Pablo Letelier, and former foreign ministers Mariano Fernández and José Miguel Insulza, stated that "the threat of an armed intervention [in Venezuela] by the government of [US President Donald] Trump is completely inadmissible".

Piñera responded by maintaining that his position was consistent with Chile's foreign policy tradition of "respect for human rights, democracy, and freedom". And, on 3 March, he struck back by taking aim at his predecessor Michelle Bachelet (2006-2010; 2014-2018), a member of the PS, in an interview with the national daily *El Mercurio*. Piñera accused Bachelet, in her current capacity as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, of failing to condemn "the Maduro dictatorship for violating human rights in Venezuela". Piñera said Bachelet's silence was "insufficient", and went on to intimate that it could be construed as a political stance as her predecessor in the post, Zeid bin Ra'ad Zeid al-Husseini, had been much more forthright on Venezuela.

Three days later Bachelet delivered a speech recognising that "the situation in Venezuela clearly illustrates the way violations of civil and political rights – including failure to uphold fundamental freedoms, and the independence of key institutions – can accentuate a decline of economic and social rights", but she did not single out Maduro for blame and added that "this situation has been exacerbated by sanctions, and the resulting current political, economic, social and institutional crisis is alarming" (*see sidebar*).

The head of the PS bench in the lower chamber of Chile's congress, meanwhile, criticised Piñera's "obsession with destroying Bachelet's image", which he said was "unbefitting for a head of state". The PS party president, Carlos Montes, said that "unfortunately the president thinks that this bellicose attitude towards Bachelet plays well in the polls, but the truth is that it distracts from cooperating in the construction of a political solution in Venezuela".

During a seminar of former Chilean foreign ministers last week, Heraldo Muñoz, who served as foreign minister for the whole of Bachelet's second term in office, expressed "profound regret" that Chile's foreign ministry had not responded positively to the call by the European Union (EU) to form part of a contact group to find a negotiated solution to allow "free and transparent elections in Venezuela".

Unlike the rest of Chile's left-leaning opposition parties, Muñoz, the president of the centre-left Partido por la Democracia (PPD), has come out in

Muñoz on Guaidó

“We will always be on the side of those who defend democracy and respect for human rights, especially in a country like Venezuela which in the past sheltered those fleeing the dictatorship of [Augusto] Pinochet,”

Heraldo Muñoz, the president of Chile’s centre-left PPD, said on 28 February after meeting Guarequena Gutiérrez, a diplomatic representative of Juan Guaidó. Muñoz acknowledged the distinct positions among Chile’s left-leaning parties on Guaidó but stressed that the PPD had always been “consistent and unambiguous” in backing restoration of democracy and respect for human rights.

support of the Piñera administration’s recognition of Juan Guaidó, the Venezuelan opposition figurehead, as interim president (*see sidebar*), while emphatically rejecting military intervention in the country.

Prosur

Muñoz was critical of the creation of Prosur, which he said had “a clear ideological bias under the leadership of Colombia and Chile”, while adding yet another regional organisation with all of the associated bureaucracy. Insulza, who served as Chilean foreign minister from 1994 to 1999 and secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS) from 2005 to 2015, accused Piñera during the seminar of causing division in Chile with his “fight between good and evil rhetoric”. Insulza, currently a PS senator representing Chile’s northernmost region of Arica, also savaged the proposal to launch Prosur, which he said would have “a distinct ideological hue”.

Rather than recasting the regional integration movement in a different ideological mould, reflecting the conservative ideals of the majority of South American governments at the present time, Piñera contended that Prosur would subordinate ideology and strip back bureaucracy. So far only South America’s most right-wing heads of state, Presidents Jair Bolsonaro, Iván Duque, and Mario Abdo Benítez of Brazil, Colombia, and Paraguay respectively, have confirmed their attendance at the event, an invitation to which Guaidó has also accepted.

ARGENTINA | POLITICS

Interpreting the Neuquén result

The 10 March gubernatorial election in Argentina’s Neuquén province, the opening contest of this general election year, produced a re-election victory for the incumbent governor, Omar Gutiérrez. While this outcome may suggest that the Neuquén electorate is content with the status quo, the country’s main political parties are trying to interpret what it means for the national poll due to take place in October. Given that Gutiérrez stood for the regional party, the Movimiento Popular Neuquino (MPN), and defeated candidates from the main national political parties, accurately interpreting the result is difficult and yet it is already having repercussions.

The south-western Patagonian province of Neuquén may not be among Argentina’s most populous electoral districts. But by being the first province to hold elections this year it has attracted significant attention as the main political parties fielded candidates in the hopes of securing a win that would help to gain momentum ahead of October. The fact that Neuquén is also home to the vast ‘Vaca Muerta’ shale hydrocarbon deposit, the development of which is widely seen as affording Argentina a once-in-a-lifetime economic windfall, also gave the election added relevance and ensured that it was closely watched by international markets.

The national centre-right Cambiemos coalition government led by President Mauricio Macri has been clear that it wants to promote the development of Vaca Muerta with the help of private domestic and foreign companies. In contrast, the main opposition Partido Justicialista (PJ, Peronists), and in particular the hard-line Kirchnerista faction, is reluctant to allow foreign firms to freely exploit Vaca Muerta and would prefer for it to remain under some sort of state control. Pointedly, this was why the previous Kirchnerista administrations led by former president Cristina Fernández (2007-2015) were unable to exploit the deposit. With Fernández widely expected to launch a new presidential bid this year, there were fears that victory for a Kirchnerista candidate in Neuquén would drive away potential Vaca Muerta investors.

Gutiérrez

The re-elected governor of Neuquén is a lifelong member of the MPN, which was founded in 1961 by a group of local mayors led by Amado Sapag after they decided to break away from Peronism. After winning the 1963 gubernatorial election, the MPN has retained the governorship with the Sapag family or their close allies always at the helm. Gutiérrez himself served as economy minister under former governor Jorge Sapag (2007-2015), who chose him as his successor. Since then Omar Gutiérrez has established a good working relationship with President Macri over his efforts to promote the development of Vaca Muerta and to restore macroeconomic stability through the reduction of fiscal deficits at the provincial and federal level.

These fears were fanned by opinion polls putting Gutiérrez in a technical tie with the PJ gubernatorial candidate, Ramón Rioseco, a member of Fernández's new Unidad Ciudadana movement, and the Cambiemos candidate, Horacio 'Pechi' Quiroga. But in the event, Gutiérrez won convincingly after obtaining 39.5% of the valid vote followed by Rioseco on 26.1% and Quiroga on 15.3%. Gutiérrez and the MPN, which has ruled Neuquén since 1963 (see sidebar), are supportive of the Macri government's plans to promote the development of Vaca Muerta. Indeed, Gutiérrez has developed a good working relationship with the Macri administration. This led some analysts to suggest that the Neuquén election was a positive outcome for the Macri executive even if Cambiemos failed to capture the province.

Gutiérrez's electoral win not only ensures continued support from the provincial government for the development of Vaca Muerta but by denying Kirchnerismo victory it helps dampen the prospects of Fernández's return to power (Fernández actively campaigned for Rioseco). Rioseco received fewer votes than in the 2015 election when he obtained 28.8%. This suggests that support for Kirchnerismo and its policies have fallen, in Neuquén at least, since the last general election when Macri and Cambiemos prevailed.

On the downside for Macri and Cambiemos, the share of the vote enjoyed by its candidate also fell, raising questions about the relative level of support that the ruling coalition now enjoys after almost four years in power. The poor showing by Quiroga, the incumbent mayor of Neuquén's eponymous capital, has been attributed to the growing disillusionment with the Macri government and its failure to deliver on its promises to restore macroeconomic stability and return Argentina to stable economic growth. Pointedly, moderate PJ factions that act as a counterweight to Kirchnerismo have been encouraged by the Neuquén result. They believe that it shows there is an opportunity for a third political option outside of Kirchnerismo and Macrismo that could win over the Argentine electorate.

Indeed, in the wake of the Neuquén election Senator Miguel Ángel Pichetto, the moderate head of the PJ bench in the federal senate and a PJ presidential pre-candidate, highlighted the need for PJ moderates to seize on the message sent by the Neuquén electorate and unite behind a consensus presidential candidate in order to defeat Kirchnerismo and Macrismo. "The masks are starting to fall, support for Cristina [Fernández]'s candidacy does not surpass 25%," Pichetto said alluding to the Neuquén result. Pichetto went on to argue that "Peronism must reinvent itself" and that the aim of the party, and in particular its moderates, must be to secure the votes of those wanting something different. "Polls show that 45% want to vote for something else, not for continuity under Macri and not for returning to the past with the former president [Fernández]," he said.

However, the first repercussions have been felt within Cambiemos. Following Quiroga's defeat, his party – the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR), a junior Cambiemos partner – complained that his prospects had been hurt by a lack of support from the federal government and the negative impact that the economic adjustment policies are having on the general population. The discontent within the UCR, which has disagreed with some of the economic policy decisions taken by the Macri government, was such that on 11 March it was announced that the negotiations between the UCR and Macri's Propuesta Republicana (PRO) for selecting a consensus candidate ahead of the 12 May gubernatorial elections in Córdoba province had broken down and that the UCR and the PRO would now each field their own candidates.

The breakdown of the Cambiemos alliance in Córdoba came after the UCR gubernatorial pre-candidate, Ramón Mestre, accused the Macri executive of trying to impose the candidacy of UCR national deputy Mario Negri, the head of the Cambiemos bench in the federal chamber of deputies. But the

Mestre

Following the announcement that he will be the UCR's gubernatorial candidate in Córdoba, Ramón Mestre said in a 13 March interview with the local press that he was "hurt" by the breakdown of the electoral alliance with the PRO but insisted that he simply could not accept the imposition of Mario Negri's candidacy. According to Mestre the breakdown in the talks came after Negri refused to take part in an internal primary to decide who the candidate should be. Accusing the PRO of being "ungrateful" to the UCR, Mestre, who was one of the leading advocates for the creation of the Cambiemos alliance in 2014, said that the UCR must now carefully consider whether to back a Macri re-election bid.

local UCR leadership refused to accept this and announced that it would register Mestre, who has already served as Córdoba governor (1995-1999), as its candidate. Meanwhile Negri has said that he will run on a PRO ticket.

The Cambiemos split in Córdoba is worrisome for the ruling coalition and Macri's presumptive re-election bid. Córdoba is Argentina's second-largest electoral district, and a poor showing there would raise serious doubts over his chances of retaining the presidency (Macri carried Córdoba in the 2015 election, a result that at the time was seen as key). Moreover, the split has also exposed the growing divisions between the PRO and the UCR, with Mestre mooting the possibility of the UCR not backing Macri's re-election bid (see *sidebar*). While the next gubernatorial election is in Río Negro on 7 April, the Córdoba election now looks like a critical test for Macri's re-election hopes and yet the chances of it producing a positive outcome for the whole of Cambiemos now looks bleaker.

Macri reaches out to agricultural sector

In order to improve his chances of winning re-election, President Macri knows that he must try to retain the support of the country's influential economic sectors. A clear sign of this was his decision to attend the ExpoAgro, the agro-industrial sector's national exposition, on 13 March.

While initially supportive of the Macri administration, Argentina's influential agricultural sector has been losing faith in Macri due to the dismal performance of the domestic economy following the implementation of Macri's economic adjustment programme, and Macri's failure to live up to his promise to eliminate the contentious retention tax on agricultural exports. Notably, Macri addressed this during his 12-minute speech at the ExpoAgro. He reiterated that in his view the retention tax is a "bad tax" but that his government simply had to retain it as an "emergency measure" to shore up the public finances.

Then, in an attempt to mend fences with the agricultural sector, Macri announced three new measures in support of the sector: the opening of two new credit lines for the purchase of agricultural machinery with the state-owned investment and foreign trade bank (Bice); the extension of the 'Cosecha Segura' ('safe harvest') crop insurance programme; and the provision of high-speed internet to rural areas.

TRACKING TRENDS

PARAGUAY | IMF revision. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has released its concluding statement from the Article IV mission visit to Paraguay, in which it has revised its 2019 GDP growth forecast for the country down to 3.5%, from the 4.2% predicted in October 2018. The IMF cites a reduced soybean harvest due to a drought in the early planting season as negatively affecting domestic economic growth. The statement adds that a pickup in activity in tourism and cross-border trade, which slowed after the guaraní appreciated against the Argentine peso and the Brazilian real last year, should help to largely offset this, although Paraguay's economy will remain vulnerable to any developments in neighbouring countries.

The IMF hailed the government's current fiscal and monetary policy and its commitment to fiscal responsibility and maintaining macroeconomic stability. It notes that the monetary policy adopted by the central bank (BCP) is adequate and it expects year-on-year inflation to return to 4%, the middle of the BCP's target range, by the end of 2019.

Focusing on the long-term challenges faced by Paraguay, the statement notes that the domestic economy is still heavily dependent on the agricultural sector, even though global agricultural commodity prices are no longer booming, and the country needs to diversify its economy and promote the development of the non-agricultural and non-electricity sectors, which will require higher levels of private sector investment. In order to attract these investments, the statement recommends that the Paraguayan government adopts "policies that focus on improving transport infrastructure, the rule of law, and the quality of education".

López Obrador marks 100-day milestone

Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador gave a positive appraisal of his government's record over its first 100 days in office on 11 March. He also gave an optimistic assessment of the economic outlook and the prospect of delivering on his ambitious campaign promises, particularly his social welfare priorities. López Obrador claimed that important progress was being made in combating corruption and wasteful expenditure but he conceded that the same could not yet be said for reducing violent crime.

The federal legislators, supreme court magistrates, state governors, cabinet ministers, and representatives of the private sector who gathered for President López Obrador's 70-minute speech to mark the completion of 100 days at the helm were treated to the sight of a head of state brimming with confidence. "We will continue to build between us a beautiful utopia, and advance towards the great ideal of a new, free, fair, democratic, and fraternal country," said López Obrador, who enjoys an approval rating ranging from 67% to 86% in four recent opinion surveys (*see sidebar*).

Combating corruption

López Obrador's predecessor Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) suffered historically low approval ratings, primarily because of official corruption and violent crime and impunity. All the opinion surveys showed resounding public support for López Obrador's efforts to combat corruption, and it formed a significant part of his speech.

López Obrador claimed that tackling corruption, in conjunction with his Republican austerity policies, would net M\$700bn (US\$35.93bn) for state coffers this year. This, he said, would be ploughed into the budget to fund social welfare programmes, which he promised to sustain "even if we're left without a shirt on our backs, and pass from Republican austerity into Franciscan poverty". Foremost among these programmes are universal pensions for Mexicans over the age of 68, and grants and apprenticeships to provide opportunities for the younger generation.

López Obrador said that some 13m elderly Mexicans, 10% of the national population of 129m, had received a state pension in the first three months since he took office and this would expand to 18m in the first six months, while some 9m poor students would receive M\$60bn worth of grants in 2019. The Mexican tycoon Carlos Slim praised López Obrador's success against corruption as well as the extension of grants to poorer Mexicans, saying the country needed "a better qualified population with modern and quality education", although detractors would argue that López Obrador has conspired against this in his proposed education reform by removing the necessity for teacher evaluation as demanded by the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (CNTE) teachers' union, which backed his presidential bid [[WR-19-09](#)].

Violence unchanged

López Obrador argued that the increased opportunities for young Mexicans would contribute to crime prevention to improve public security and reduce violence, one area where he acknowledged much more work was needed. "We have only managed to contain the crime rate but not to reduce it significantly as we hoped," López Obrador said, adding that there were "the same number of homicides and vehicle thefts now as there were before we came to power". Between January and November 2018 there were 91.3 homicides a day and 669

Business sector

President López Obrador singled out the business sector for thanks during his speech for rowing in behind his national project. This is not entirely true. López Obrador formed a business advisory council last November comprising eight of the biggest names in Mexico's business world, and the private sector has lauded some of his policies, but it has been fiercely critical of others, notably as regards energy reform and the cancellation of the Mexico City international airport project (NAIM). It has also expressed scepticism about López Obrador's ambitious target of 4% annual GDP growth during his term in office (double the present growth rate).

Spreading violence

Mexico's northern city of Tijuana was the most violent city in the world in 2018, according to a new report by the Mexican NGO Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal released on 12 March. According to the report, which compiled murder data from 50 cities with more than 300,000 inhabitants across the world, the murder rate in Tijuana last year was of 138.26 for every 100,000 inhabitants, the highest in the world, ahead of Acapulco. The report also shows that 15 of the most violent cities last year were Mexican, including four of the five most violent (Tijuana, Acapulco, Ciudad Victoria, and Ciudad Juárez). This means that Mexico has, for the first time, overtaken Brazil as having the most cities on this list.

cars stolen per day, while between December 2018 (when López Obrador took office) and March 2019 there were 88.2 homicides and 636 cars stolen, he said.

López Obrador did not provide the source of these figures, which have been questioned by the national press, which claims that there have been more murders so far this year than any other year on record. López Obrador, who has previously shown himself to be very sensitive to media criticism that levels of violence are not coming down, said that "in reality, the public is defenceless". He confidently predicted, however, that when the national guard starts to operate it would "substantially reduce the number of homicides, thefts, kidnappings, and other crimes".

There has been more progress in combating oil theft. Average daily illegal oil taps by huachicoleros fell from 81,000 barrels in November to 15,000 within two months, according to the energy ministry (Sener). This is the result, Sener said, of the military crackdown ordered by López Obrador. Military operations against the huachicoleros have caused some fuel shortages but, according to the most recent opinion poll for the national daily *El Universal*, the public is not connecting the two issues. While 5% of respondents claimed that fuel shortages were the worst thing López Obrador has done since coming to power, a much higher percentage (13%) said that combating the huachicoleros was the best thing he had done, a fight which 76% felt the government was winning.

Guanajuato requests federal security assistance

The central state of Guanajuato has become the new 'hotspot' of organised crime related violence. Since early March there has been a sharp increase in violent murders attributed to a battle between the *Cártel de Santa Rosa de Lima* (CSRL) local huachicoleros and the *Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG) drug trafficking organisation (DTO) over control of the illegal business of petrol resale in the state.

The battle for control of Guanajuato intensified after the state and federal security forces launched an operation aimed at capturing the suspected leader of the CSRL, José Antonio 'El Marro' Yépez, who holds sway in the town of Santa Rosa de Lima, which is located just 30km away from the Salamanca refinery owned by the state oil firm Pemex, which supplies refined petrol to central Mexico. The CSRL was identified as being the main culprit for the various illegal taps found on the pipelines leading out of the Salamanca refinery. However, attempts by the security forces to capture Yépez elicited a violent reaction with the CSRL engaging in numerous gun battles with the security forces, producing some casualties. This prompted President López Obrador to announce the launch of a new operation by the security forces, codenamed 'Golpe de Timón' ('change of tack'), aimed at tracking down Yépez and dismantling the CSRL. An additional 10,200 federal security forces units were deployed to Guanajuato to carry out the operation.

But the violence reached a new high point on 9-10 March when the Guanajuato authorities reported that at least 15 people had been killed in an armed attack registered in the municipality of Salamanca. According to local prosecutors, the attack was perpetrated by CSRL members targeting CJNG members encroaching on their territory. Prosecutors believe that the CJNG senses that efforts to dismantle the CSRL offers it an opportunity to take control of the profitable illegal fuel trade in Guanajuato.

The concern of the Guanajuato authorities is that this may just be the start of a violent campaign that will escalate as the CSRL tries to defend its territory. On 12 March Guanajuato Governor Diego Sinhué Rodríguez called on the López Obrador government to deploy additional federal security forces to the state and in particular Salamanca to reinforce public security. This after Salamanca mayor Beatriz Hernández Cruz complained that the 300 state police officers in the municipality – which does not have a municipal police force after municipal police officers resigned en masse in June last year over concerns about their personal safety – are insufficient to ensure public security in the municipality at this time.

Bancorp

Having attracted major criticism for its recent approval of a tax reform widely slammed by the private sector and civil-society groups [WR-19-05], the Ortega government has attracted further criticism after the FSLN-controlled 92-member unicameral legislature authorised on 7 March the N\$743bn (US\$23m) government purchase of Banco Corporativo SA (Bancorp), a financial institution sanctioned by the US for its links to Venezuela's state oil company Pdvsa. On 8 February US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Kimberley Breier tweeted that "with a police state, daily arbitrary arrests & attacks on free press, Maduro ally Ortega continues his repression campaign in #Nicaragua. Sanctions on @PDVSA also target ALBANISA [the bi-national oil company owned by Venezuela's state-run oil firm Pdvsa and Nicaragua's Petronic], Bancorp & all majority owned subsidiaries. We will continue to hold the Ortega regime accountable."

Fragility of dialogue process laid bare

Days after the relaunch of dialogue between the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) government led by President Daniel Ortega and the Alianza Cívica por la Justicia y la Democracia (ACJD) [WR-19-09], the opposition pulled out. It conditioned its return on signs of "genuine will" on the part of the government at finding a solution to the crisis. These signs include the release of all political prisoners (which number over 700). While talks have again resumed after Ortega pledged to release a "significant group of political prisoners" (a promise as yet unfulfilled), doubts persist as to the likelihood of any real success given the government's intransigence with regard to another key ACJD demand – early elections.

Even when President Ortega first announced his willingness to take part in talks last month, which local commentators attributed to international pressure such as US sanctions as well as the situation facing his key ally Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro, distrust persisted as to his intentions amid suspicion that he was merely playing for time.

The credibility of the latest round of negotiations, which began on 27 February, already received a setback after Nicaragua's Episcopal Conference (CEN) – one of the country's most trusted institutions – declined an invitation from both the government and ACJD to act as observer. The CEN had acted as mediator in the initial talks and while Cardinal Leopoldo José Brenes Solórzano, Archbishop of Managua, and Bishop Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag, Apostolic Nuncio to Nicaragua, had attended meetings regarding the re-launch of dialogue, on 8 March the CEN issued a statement arguing that it was time for "lay people to find a solution".

Days before this statement, national daily *La Prensa* reported that Bishop Emeritus Bernardo Hombach had told a local radio station that the Church would not participate in the dialogue if it serves as a "form of buying time and if the conditions are not there to put the real problems on the table".

The ACJD's decision to pull out on 10 March followed the government's issuance of its own proposed dialogue agenda which stopped short of the opposition's demand that it release all political prisoners. Instead the Ortega government offered to "review" the cases of political prisoners already tried, and to free those "who have not yet been tried" while their cases are also reviewed, "ensuring this situation may not lead to impunity".

The latest offer announced on 13 March by the government (which had released 100 prisoners ahead of the start of the talks) to further liberate a "significant number of prisoners" led the ACJD to return to the negotiating table. However, questions persist as to the likelihood of any breakthrough given the government's proposed dialogue agenda is patently clear that it will not heed another key ACJD demand – that the presidential and legislative elections scheduled for 2021 be brought forward.

The statement regarding the dialogue agenda included the pledge to strengthen the country's electoral institutions through implementing recommendations made by the Organization of American States (OAS) electoral observer mission and proposals for electoral reform to "perfect free, fair and transparent electoral processes", but was clear that the elections are set for 2021.

A female race for the presidency

Torres

Sandra Torres is no stranger to involving the courts in her electoral battles. Her 2011 presidential candidacy was the subject of considerable wrangling and eventually disqualified by the electoral authorities (TSE) on the grounds that her divorce, designed to beat the constitutional ban (Art. 186) on the candidacies of any close relatives of the incumbent running for the presidency, was fraudulent.

With electoral campaigning for the June general election due to kick off officially on 18 March, three women are leading the presidential race according to the first electoral survey released last week by CID-Gallup Latinoamérica. With all three facing or having faced legal challenges to their candidacies, the refusal of frontrunner Sandra Torres, former First Lady (2008-2012) of the opposition Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE) (among others), to sign a pact of “transparency, ethics and peace” promoted by the electoral authorities (TSE), suggests the campaign period, as in previous elections, could get dirty.

Released on 6 March, the CID-Gallup survey showed Torres, who Jimmy Morales defeated in the 2015 second-round run-off, on 17.7% of voting intentions, followed by former attorney general (AG) Thelma Aldana (2014-2018), who is standing for the new centre-left Movimiento Semilla, on 10.7%. Third on 7.90% is Zury Ríos, the daughter of Guatemala’s late dictator Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983), who is running for the ultra-right-wing Valor. Yet it is worth pointing out that the survey, which interviewed 1,258 people and had a 2.8% error margin, showed that 34.4% of respondents were undecided while 6.5% said they would not vote for anyone.

The release of the survey comes as all three women have faced legal challenges to their candidacies. As in 2015, the TSE’s citizen’s registry blocked Ríos’s candidacy in line with Art. 186 of the constitution, which prohibits blood relatives up to the fourth degree of those found guilty of leading coups against the state from running for the presidency. However, as was also the case in 2015, the supreme court (CSJ) has upheld her candidacy. While the constitutional court (CC) has since ruled against it, on 13 March Ríos pledged that she would continue in her bid for the presidency regardless, telling reporters that the legal battle would continue. Meanwhile last month Juan Francisco Sandoval, a prosecutor from the AG’s special unit against corruption (Feci), filed a request for Torres to be stripped of her immunity from prosecution (which she enjoys as a presidential candidate) to be investigated for alleged illegal campaign financing – a request thrown out by the CSJ on 27 February.

Torres and her party have previously faced similar allegations from the AG [[WR-17-34](#)] – at the time headed up by Aldana. In turn Torres (whose 2011 presidential candidacy was the subject of much legal wrangling – see *sidebar*) has sought to retaliate against Aldana, who made her name as AG through her ground-breaking efforts, along with the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (Cicig), to bring key individuals to justice over corruption (including former president Otto Pérez Molina [2012-2015]). On 4 March Torres, who had previously accused Aldana of manipulating the investigation into the illegal campaign finance, filed a complaint before the AG’s office accusing her of using justice for electoral aims. This is not the only complaint against Aldana. On 28 February the CC accepted an appeal against her presented by Jorge Luis Donado, the head of the general procurator’s office and an ally of President Morales, who Aldana and Cicig had unsuccessfully sought to have investigated for corruption. The appeal relates to allegations regarding the irregular hiring of personnel under her watch as AG.

Ethics pact

On 11 March 18 of Guatemala’s 27 political parties signed the ethics pact promoted by the TSE. UNE general secretary Óscar Argueta justified the party’s refusal to do so on the grounds that the TSE had failed to provide certainty on the “rules of the game” and had committed “abuses”, complaining that a unit of 350 prosecutors were “pursuing us as if we were criminals” – an allusion no doubt to efforts by the AG and Cicig to investigate the party.

Quotes of the week

“We want a peace that genuinely guarantees truth, justice, reparation, and non-repetition.”

Colombia's President Iván Duque raises “objections” which could derail the peace accord altogether.

“Very shortly we are going to look for new offices in Miraflores.”

Venezuela's interim president Juan Guaidó on seeking permanent accommodation in the country's presidential palace.

“[Chile's] foreign policy has lost its direction and sense of state policy.”

Chile's former foreign minister Heraldo Muñoz.

POSTSCRIPT

Arrests made in Brazil's Franco murder case

On 14 March 2018, leftist Rio de Janeiro councilwoman Marielle Franco was shot dead, along with her driver Anderson Gomes, in what has been treated as a politically-motivated assassination. On 12 March 2019, two days before the one-year anniversary of this murder which shook Brazil, Rio's civil police arrested two men for killing Franco and Gomes, the first significant breakthrough in what has been a protracted investigation.

Ronnie Lessa, a retired military police (PM) officer, and Élcio Vieira de Queiroz, who was expelled from the PM in 2011 following an investigation by federal forces into police corruption, were arrested near their respective homes in Rio. Police also seized 117 M-16 rifles and 500 rounds of ammunition at the home of a friend of Lessa's. Lessa is accused of firing the shots that killed Franco and Gomes, while Vieira de Queiroz is accused of driving the car from which Lessa committed the murder. Both currently deny the charges.

Rio's public prosecutor (MPRJ) says that the crime was meticulously planned over three months. The MPRJ is now considering the hypothesis of a hate crime, based on evidence that Lessa harboured violent feelings about left-wing activists. Franco, a black homosexual woman from a favela, was a staunch human rights defender and an outspoken critic of police violence. Ginton Lages, the police officer in charge of the investigation, has, however, said that the possibility of there being an intellectual author of the crime has not been discarded, and that the investigation continues. Franco's family members have welcomed the arrests as a significant step but continue to demand the truth behind who ordered Franco's death. Local militia are suspected of being involved.

Following the arrests of Lessa and Vieira de Queiroz for Franco's murder, links between the suspects and the family of President Jair Bolsonaro have emerged. Lessa lives in the same upscale condominium as Bolsonaro, and one of his daughters reportedly dated one of Bolsonaro's sons, while a photo has emerged of Vieira de Queiroz posing with Bolsonaro. Bolsonaro family members have dismissed these admittedly tenuous links as insignificant and condemned speculation of any involvement in Franco's murder. The revelation earlier this year of Bolsonaro's eldest son Flávio's association with notorious members of Rio's militia believed to be behind Franco's murder have fuelled such conjectures.

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