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CONTENTS

LEADER	1
Maduro lashes out with a purpose	
ANDEAN COUNTRIES	
ECUADOR	3
Traditional parties make comeback	
PERU	4
Vizcarra completes a year but has little to show for it	
BRAZIL & SOUTHERN CONE	
CHILE	6
Prosur comes to life but to what end?	
BRAZIL	8
Clash of 'old' and 'new' politics imperils reforms	
ARGENTINA	10
Judicial rulings put Macri on back foot	
MEXICO	11
MEXICO	11
López Obrador wrestling with violent past and present	
MEXICO	12
López Obrador ally disbanded	
TRACKING TRENDS	
CENTRAL AMERICA & CARIBBEAN	
NICARAGUA	14
Mounting pressure on Ortega over human rights	
GUATEMALA	15
Aldana's candidacy under threat	
POSTSCRIPT	16
Uruguayan opposition seizes on FA security woes	
Quotes of the week	

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Maduro lashes out with a purpose

Venezuelan intelligence agents conducted a dawn raid on the home of one of Juan Guaidó's closest allies, Roberto Marrero, on 21 March. Marrero, the chief of staff of the country's opposition figurehead and interim president, was taken into custody accused of fomenting an insurrection. The timing of Marrero's arrest suggests that intimidation was not the primary motivation. The government led by Nicolás Maduro needed to distract attention from two devastating developments just hours earlier.

Some 50 agents from the intelligence service (Sebin) took part in the operation, breaking down the front door to Marrero's home and that of his neighbour Sergio Vergara, a legislator for the opposition Voluntad Popular (VP) in the national assembly. Marrero, the lawyer of imprisoned VP leader Leopoldo López, had accompanied Guaidó on his recent regional tour. Marrero was taken away along with his bodyguard. He was subsequently accused by the interior minister, Néstor Reverol, of leading "a terrorist cell" and plotting "acts of sabotage", such as the recent nationwide power outage. Hours before the arrest, on his late-night programme *Con el mazo dando*, government strongman Diosdado Cabello had mentioned Marrero repeatedly. Journalists, human rights activists, and opposition politicians named on Cabello's programme tend to be arrested soon after.

Guaidó refused to be cowed, responding to Marrero's arrest on Twitter: "What is their message? That they are coming for me? Those showing weakness are those conducting dawn raids and committing a vile kidnapping." Despite the communications minister, Jorge Rodríguez, later providing 'evidence' tying Guaidó to "terrorist plots" the government fears the domestic and international reaction of moving against him. The US special envoy for Venezuela, Elliott Abrams, promised "immediate and tough consequences" after Marrero's arrest. They duly followed in the form of sanctions on Venezuela's economic and social development bank (Bandes) and subsidiaries. The US Department of State claimed the Maduro government was using Bandes to "move money from the Venezuelan people outside of [the country]". The Venezuelan foreign ministry accused the US of "unilateral illegal, arbitrary, and coercive measures" and "a direct attack on the heart of the Venezuelan people's finances".

Maduro had appeared on national television to justify Marrero's arrest, insisting that his government would "not hesitate" to act as "this is not politics, it is terrorism". But why did his government take this headline-grabbing action against Guaidó's right-hand man at this precise time after weeks of treading carefully? The answer appears to reside in events that took place hours beforehand subjecting the Maduro government to the full glare of negative publicity.

Trump

US President Trump met Juan Guaidó's wife, Fabiana Rosales, in the White House on 27 March. Trump called on Russia "to get out" of Venezuela after some 100 Russian military personnel were flown into Caracas this week. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo responded to the Russian military's arrival in Venezuela by phoning his Russian peer Sergei Lavrov and calling on the country to "cease its unconstructive behaviour" in propping up Nicolás Maduro. Lavrov accused the US of trying to organise a coup in Venezuela in violation of the United Nations charter.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, accused by critics for months of failing to condemn abuses committed by the Maduro administration because of her leftist political beliefs, laid bare the scale of its mis-governance with a meticulous precision rendered all the more powerful by the balanced and measured tone in which her report was presented.

Bachelet expressed concern that US-led sanctions were aggravating the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, but she stressed that it predated them. She argued, inter alia, that "the extent and severity of the crises in food, health care and basic services, have not been fully acknowledged by the authorities"; that "the health system continues to deteriorate" with infectious diseases spreading; that "more than 1 million children no longer attend school"; that she was "deeply concerned about the shrinking of the democratic space, especially the continued criminalization of peaceful protest and dissent"; that there are "increasing restrictions on freedom of expression and of the press in Venezuela"; and that "numerous human rights violations and abuses by security forces and pro-government armed groups ('colectivos armados'), including excessive use of force, killings, arbitrary detentions, torture and ill-treatment in detention, and threats and intimidation" had been documented by her Office.

Visual confirmation of Bachelet's words appeared to be provided almost simultaneously in video footage shown at the headquarters of the Organization of American States (OAS) depicting the mistreatment of government opponents in a clandestine torture centre in Venezuela in a disturbing echo of the region's military dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s. During a Skype conference, Ronald Dugarte, an air force lieutenant who defected from military counterintelligence (Dgcm) after recording several videos on his mobile phone in the last three months, said that prisoners in the clandestine cells were subjected to "inhuman atrocities" and treated "like animals".

Dugarte said that Cuban agents were participating in the training of Venezuela's intelligence officials, a claim repeated by US Vice President Mike Pence in an article published by *The Miami Herald* on 22 March. Cuba's foreign minister, Bruno Rodríguez, tweeted that this was "a barefaced lie" and that relations between Cuba and Venezuela were based on "mutual respect and true solidarity".

Caricom rift deepens over Venezuela

The US slapped sanctions on Banes just as President Donald Trump met five Caribbean leaders in Florida: Dominican Republic President Danilo Medina, Haiti President Jovenel Moïse, St Lucia Prime Minister Allen Chastanet, Jamaica Prime Minister Andrew Holness, and Bahamas Prime Minister Hubert Minnis.

Trump promised that a high-level delegation from the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation (Opic) would visit their nations within 90 days. They were the only five states to vote with the US in support of a recent OAS resolution recognising Guaidó, in contrast to other states in the 15-member Caribbean community (Caricom), making the financial offer look like a reward, and a possible inducement for others to follow suit.

Prime Minister of St Vincent and the Grenadines Dr Ralph Gonsalves, the leader of the left-wing Unity Labour Party (ULP), described the meeting as "troubling" and an attempt to drive a wedge in Caricom whose official stance is one of "non-interference and non-intervention [and that] the solution to Venezuela's crisis must come from among the Venezuelan people". Gonsalves also accused the US of "a creeping coup d'état" in Venezuela. Antigua and Barbuda Prime Minister Gaston Browne said he felt "embarrassed for those weak-minded leaders, who allowed themselves to be used".

Caricom, which has for years been reliant on cheap oil imports under Venezuela's Petrocaribe initiative, made a point of inviting Guaidó to participate by videoconference in a meeting of the bloc's foreign ministers in Barbados on 23 March (attended in person by Julio Borges, Guaidó's representative to the Lima Group), to hear his views on "how to move forward in the search for peaceful solutions".

Traditional parties make comeback**Cuenca**

In Ecuador's third largest city of Cuenca, the capital of Azuay province, Pedro Palacios, who runs a local family business selling school supplies with no political experience, swept aside some seasoned politicians to secure the mayoralty. Palacios, of the local movement Alianza Azuay, won some 28% of the vote, ahead of Jefferson Pérez of Movimiento Renace, and veteran politicians Marcelo Cabrera and Paúl Carrasco.

Ecuador's traditional opposition Partido Social Cristiano (PSC) is back with a bang. For years derided by former president Rafael Correa (2007-2017), who promised to wipe it off the face of the electoral map along with the rest of the partidocracia, the right-of-centre PSC performed strongly in local and municipal elections held on 23 March. The left-wing Alianza País (AP), controlled by President Lenín Moreno after a debilitating internal struggle with Correa, lost ground. Despite Moreno's claims on the eve of the elections that Correa was intent on "destabilising democracy" in Ecuador, his predecessor is alive and kicking, with various political allies coming to power.

A record 278 political parties and movements registered candidates to compete in the elections. A total of 80,281 candidates took part in the various contests to elect 24 provincial prefects (governors), 221 mayors, more than 1,300 municipal councillors, and 4,100 parish councillors. This is the most, by far, in Ecuador's electoral history (up from just 28,000 in 2014) and indicative of the fragmentation of politics. There was an added level of complexity for the electorate who had to vote for the seven-member Consejo de Participación Ciudadana y Control Social (Cpccs), the country's fourth branch of government, created by the constituent assembly in 2008 under Correa, which is responsible for appointing senior officials to all state and judicial institutions.

The national electoral council (CNE) is yet to release final results but various trends can be discerned. The PSC excelled. Cynthia Viteri won Ecuador's most populous city Guayaquil for the PSC, having been backed by Jaime Nebot, the long-serving incumbent mayor. "I have been saying for years now that the only ideology that Ecuador's people care about is the ideology of prosperity. And the only party they ought to belong to is the party of Ecuador," Nebot said. The PSC looked to have secured 15 mayoralties in Guayas, the province of which Guayaquil is capital, and some 50 nationwide, including Portoviejo, the capital of the coastal province of Manabí.

The PSC also looks like returning more than one-third (nine) of the 24 prefects (some in alliances) – Guayas (where Carlos Luis Morales cruised to victory over Pierina Correa, Correa's sister), Pastaza, Imbabura, Bolívar, Cañar, Esmeraldas, Los Ríos, Santa Elena, and Chimborazo – having won just three in 2014. This is significant because these are much more an indication of national rather than local support and suggest that the PSC could challenge for the presidency in 2021. The AP, which won 10 governorships in 2014, won just two, El Oro and Orellana, this time around, and those only through alliances.

President Moreno celebrated a peaceful election, saying that his government "did not intervene in any way whatsoever, no advertising, or public works, to benefit any candidate", and would work closely with whoever was elected but AP's performance has to be seen as a setback. All the more so because allies of Correa fared well despite his political movement, Revolución Ciudadana, failing to register before the CNE in time.

Democracia Sí, a political party run by Gustavo Larrea, a former cabinet minister under Correa, won four governorships on its own or in alliances. Correa, who ran a social media campaign from Belgium, also encouraged supporters to back Fuerza Compromiso Social (FCS) and it registered some notable victories, none more so than the governorship of Pichincha, of which

Corruption

“The scourge [of corruption] has allowed for there to be partially completed hospitals, roads, and bridges that have been washed away by rivers, and for the lack of basic services... If we want a big and prosperous country, we need to eradicate this evil,” President Vizcarra said, addressing congress as much as the general public.

Quito is capital. This was won by Paola Pabón, head of political administration under Correa. The FCS also won the governorship of Manabí through Leonardo Orlando Arteaga. In 2014 correísmo lost control of the mayorality of Quito, but on this occasion, it was won by Jorge Yunda (with just 21.3% of the vote), a surgeon by profession, who was a radio broadcaster and AP legislator under Correa. Luisa Maldonado, of FCS, came a close second.

On 21 March, two days before the elections, Moreno denounced that Correa was plotting to “destabilise democracy” with Venezuelan funds and warned about a nefarious intervention in the elections. Moreno did not detail how but he claimed that Venezuela’s economic and social development bank (Bandes), which was sanctioned this week by the US, provided the Instituto de Pensamiento Político y Económico Eloy Alfaro, founded by Correa shortly before leaving office, with US\$281,000 in August 2018. Days after the elections, the anticorruption secretary, Iván Granda, appealed to the attorney general’s office to investigate Correa. The attorney general’s office was unimpressed, however, responding on 27 March, by saying that it would not “open investigations in an irresponsible manner” and that it was up to the judiciary if it wanted to launch a probe into the matter.

There is some speculation that Moreno is looking to strike another blow against Correa’s legacy by moving to dissolve the Cpcacs. A total of 43 candidates competed for the seven permanent positions on the Cpcacs, but if they receive fewer votes than blank ballots cast, it could provide Moreno with an excuse to disband the body via a constitutional reform. This would be consistent with Moreno’s policy of state austerity. It would also be likely to receive legislative backing. The president of the national assembly, Elizabeth Cabezaz, of the ruling AP, is already advocating a constitutional reform to restore the powers of the assembly at the expense of the Cpcacs.

PERU | POLITICS

Vizcarra completes a year but has little to show for it

It has been 12 months since Martín Vizcarra assumed Peru’s presidency on 23 March 2018 following the resignation of elected president Pedro Pablo Kuczynski over corruption allegations. While Vizcarra has succeeded in providing a degree of stability to the national executive by setting a clear agenda to overcome the crisis produced by the corruption scandals that continue to affect Peru’s political class, his administration has been unable to make much headway on its main objective – to advance far-reaching political and judicial reforms aimed at tackling the deep-rooted official corruption. These initiatives remain stuck in the opposition-controlled congress, which continues to be more interested in settling political scores and obstructing any moves that could undermine the privileges enjoyed by deputies.

President Vizcarra marked his first anniversary in office by releasing a video message in which he insisted that tackling corruption remains his administration’s top priority and that eradicating it is the best way to ensure Peru’s long-term development. He went on to add that in order to achieve this the establishment of a strong judicial system “which treats everyone the same and is not married to anyone” is fundamental. Vizcarra, who continues to enjoy record high levels of approval for a Peruvian head of state, expressed gratitude for the public support and urged people to continue supporting his administration.

In this way, Vizcarra sought to put public pressure on congress to expedite the approval of the judicial reform package that his administration presented in August 2018, and which has only been partly approved so far, and to move on to debate his government’s proposed political reforms. Although congress

Zeballos

Justice Minister Zeballos was summoned to appear before congress by FP deputies who complained that the plea-bargain deal signed with Odebrecht is an attempt to cover up the full extent of the corruption that took place and that the main aim of prosecutors is to convict FP leader Keiko Fujimori [WR-19-11]. This produced concerns that the FP majority bench could vote to censure Zeballos, which would force his resignation. But after Zeballos staunchly defended the plea-bargain deal, arguing that similar deals signed in other countries had helped to shed light on the Odebrecht corruption scheme, the FP bench announced that it would not table a motion of censure against Zeballos for the sake of “maintaining stability”.

has agreed to the creation of a new national judicial body (JNJ) that will replace the discredited council of magistrates (CNM), which was in charge of appointing and firing judges, there are still six other initiatives pending approval by congress including the creation of a specialised anti-corruption prosecutor’s office and the creation of a new independent body that will have oversight over the actions of the judiciary and the public ministry (the *Autoridad de Integridad y Control del Ministerio Público y Poder Judicial*).

Throwing down the gauntlet

Vizcarra believes that the full implementation of his judicial reform package is key and is determined to see it implemented before he leaves office in 2021. He was clear about this in an interview with the national daily *La República* published on 24 March. In the interview Vizcarra said that he would now formally ask congress president Daniel Salaverry to advance the passage of the judicial reform package and did not rule out the possibility of making this an issue of confidence in his administration. “First we will try the formal channel... ask congress is there [political] will to do this?... if there is no will, then we’ll look for constitutional mechanisms to achieve it... [the issue of confidence] is part of that but we would analyse it in due course,” Vizcarra stated.

The threat by Vizcarra to resort to a vote of confidence in his administration (which could result in the dissolution of congress and the staging of early elections) is what prompted congress to agree to debate his reform proposals in the first place. Vizcarra is hoping that resorting to the same strategy will once again pay off. But this is a risky strategy that could end up once again plunging Peru into a political crisis. The calls by Vizcarra prompted Salaverry to say that discussion of the pending judicial reform initiatives were in the congressional agenda and that they would be debated but only once they had been approved at committee level and forwarded to the congressional plenary.

Salaverry went on to call on Vizcarra to avoid making the issue a matter of confidence as this would only increase tensions with congress. “Every time that the executive falls in the polls, it clashes with congress. I think that the time has come to stop this. What we need to do is to work together to push the reforms,” Salaverry said. In an attempt to show that he is amenable to advancing the discussion of the reform, Salaverry held his first meeting with Vizcarra’s newly appointed prime minister, Salvador del Solar, on 26 March. Afterwards the two said that they discussed the legislative agenda and expressed a commitment to work together to advance the judicial and political reform debate. Del Solar said that as part of this he would be meeting with representatives from the different congressional benches in the coming days to discuss the reforms.

Del Solar also revealed that he had announced to Salaverry that once he concludes his meetings with the leaders of all the congressional benches, he will submit himself and the new cabinet to the necessary vote of confidence in congress on 4 April. This could be the source of further tensions between the Vizcarra executive and the legislature.

These tensions were already heightened when, on 21 March, Justice Minister Vicente Zeballos was grilled by congress (*see sidebar*) over the plea-bargain and collaboration accord that the Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht has signed with Peruvian prosecutors in relation to the corrupt practices implicating Peruvian government officials and politicians. In addition, the main right-wing opposition *Fuerza Popular* (FP, Fujimoristas) has already questioned some of the new ministerial appointments. Del Solar and his cabinet must secure a confidence vote from congress or else Vizcarra will be forced to appoint a new cabinet.

Prosur comes to life but to what end?**Guaidó gets invitation**

The Prosur founding members made a point not only of not inviting Nicolás Maduro to attend the inaugural summit but also of inviting Venezuela's opposition leader and self-proclaimed interim president Juan Guaidó to represent Venezuela. Ultimately Guaidó decided not to attend the summit. Although Guaidó hailed the creation of Prosur, which he described as the "future of integration in South America", he said that he had decided to remain in Venezuela to continue leading efforts to restore the democratic order in the country. The snub by Guaidó points to what is one of Prosur's main challenges: to show that it can be relevant amid the more pressing political and economic issues facing the region.

A new regional integration promotion forum was launched last week in Chile. The *Foro para el Progreso de América del Sur* (Prosur) has been billed as the new vehicle to advance economic and political integration in South America to replace the moribund Union of South American Nations (Unasur). The main driving force behind the new integration initiative, Chile's President Sebastián Piñera, insists that, unlike Unasur, Prosur will not become an ideological enterprise designed to promote a specific political model. Instead the new group will exclusively seek the integration of all the countries in the region in order to contribute to its "growth, progress, and development". Detractors argue that Prosur is nothing more than another political vanity project that will not fulfil its lofty objectives.

The idea of creating a new regional integration promotion body was first floated by Colombia's President Iván Duque in January. But it has been President Piñera who has most enthusiastically advanced the initiative and wasted little time in organising a heads of state summit, which he hosted in Santiago on 22 March. The summit was attended by Duque as well as the presidents of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Peru, and Ecuador (all of which have formally withdrawn from Unasur). All of these leaders, plus Guyana's ambassador to Chile, then signed the Santiago declaration creating the new body, with Chile becoming its first pro-tempore president for a 12-month period. The deputy foreign ministers of Bolivia and Uruguay, and a Surinamese envoy also attended the summit as observers.

The latter three countries, along with Venezuela, are the only remaining active members of Unasur but as Prosur observers they have been invited to attend all future Prosur meetings and to join the group later on. The Prosur declaration states that the conditions for becoming a member state are to have a full democracy, to maintain each country's respective constitutional order, respect the separation of powers, and the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental liberties (although it does not specify who would be the judge of this). At any rate, the only South American country currently barred from joining Prosur is Venezuela given that the de facto government led by Nicolás Maduro is currently not recognised as legitimate by any of the Prosur founding members. Pointedly, Maduro was the only South American head of state that was not invited to attend the Prosur summit (*see sidebar*).

While the presence of Piñera's fellow centre-right presidents was to be expected, that of Ecuador's President Lenín Moreno was perhaps the most significant. Being a leftist political leader, Moreno's participation in the Prosur summit gave it greater legitimacy by reinforcing the notion that the new group is inclusive and not ideologically driven despite the decision to ostracise the Maduro administration. The fact that Moreno's decision to attend the inaugural Prosur summit came after he announced that his government will repossess the Unasur headquarters located in Quito following the winding down of Unasur's operations was also highly symbolic [WR-19-11]. Piñera's justification for creating Prosur is that Unasur had become not only ideologically biased but too bureaucratic and burdensome for its members, saddling member states with heavy costs.

Notably, in a clear departure from Unasur, the Prosur declaration states that the organisation is to have a "flexible structure, not costly, with clear rules of operation and an agile decision-making mechanism that will help to advance concrete integration programmes in South America". The declaration does

Prosur declaration

The Prosur declaration identifies infrastructure; energy; healthcare; public security, defence, and the fight against criminality; and the prevention and management of natural disasters as the immediate priority areas on which it will seek to advance regional integration in order to “insert the region into the fourth industrial revolution and the society of knowledge and information”.

not envision the creation of a Prosur bureaucratic structure but rather states that its affairs will be run by the foreign ministries of member countries.

Following the signing of the declaration, Piñera said that “Prosur will be a forum open to all the countries in South America, a forum without any ideology in which diversity and differences between the governments elected by the people will be respected, a forum without excessive bureaucracy and pragmatic, which will seek to deliver results”. He noted that the aim is for it to have clear objectives so that it can be more effective in delivering concrete results. Yet many commentators across the region have been critical of Prosur and of Piñera’s efforts to advance it. In Chile, the most pointed criticism has come from the Foro Permanente de Política Exterior grouping of 26 leftist political thinkers, including three of Chile’s former foreign ministers among whom is José Miguel Insulza (1994-1999), who also served as secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS) for a decade (2005-2015).

A statement issued by the Foro Permanente de Política Exterior argues that Prosur is but an improvised initiative that will not contribute anything new to the region than any of the other countless integration promotion organisations over the years have. After extolling Unasur’s achievements over its 11 years of existence and arguing that it may still have a role to play, the statement added that “Prosur is an improvised proposal, with no previous preparation work done and made from one day to another. ... Its effects will be negative, not just due to its improvisation but because it represents another example of a bad Latin American practice: creating organisations only to suppress them with the pretext that they have not worked.” The onus is now on the Piñera administration and the other Prosur members to prove otherwise.

Piñera and Bolsonaro meet

Presidents Piñera and Bolsonaro held a bilateral meeting on 23 March, after taking part in the Prosur summit the previous day. Piñera is the second head of state (the first Latin American) to whom Bolsonaro has paid an official visit, breaking with Brazil’s diplomatic tradition of visiting Argentina first.

Piñera and Bolsonaro signed cooperation agreements for the construction of a transport corridor between Chile’s northern ports and Brazil’s mid-west and for closer economic integration between the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) and Pacific Alliance trade blocs, including the establishment of a free trade area. They also agreed to cooperate on working to restore democracy in Venezuela, and Chile committed to supporting Brazil’s bid to join the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Bolsonaro also congratulated Chile on its efforts to organise the 25th Conference of Parties climate talks (COP25) next November, after Brazil withdrew its offer to host the event, reportedly under pressure from Bolsonaro who was at the time president-elect. Bolsonaro said that Brazil would attend the COP25, but emphasised his concern with the so-called ‘internationalisation’ of the Amazon region, and said that Brazil does not owe the world anything where environmental conservation is concerned.

To mark Bolsonaro’s visit to Chile, the national daily *El Mercurio* published a written interview with the Brazilian president on 22 March, in which Bolsonaro highlighted the two countries’ close, friendly ties and many points of convergence. Both presidents re-affirmed this during their meeting. “Brazil is Chile’s principal trade partner in Latin America... we have ties that not only come from history, but also from the present,” Piñera said, speaking of “a friendship without limits or borders” between the two countries.

Not all Chileans seemed to share the sentiment. As well as leftist opposition lawmakers, who had announced that they would boycott a banquet attended by Bolsonaro [WR-19-11], civil society, including LGBTQ+ and women’s organisations, took to the streets to protest against Bolsonaro’s visit. Piñera himself told journalists on 24 March that, despite some points of convergence, he did not share Bolsonaro’s views on the region’s past dictatorships.

Clash of 'old' and 'new' politics imperils reforms

Military pension reform disappoints

President Bolsonaro's government delivered a proposal for the reform of military pensions to congress on 20 March. Congress was awaiting this proposal to begin discussions on the general pension reform. The military pension reform is deemed timid as it would give the government net savings of R\$10.45bn (US\$2.6bn) over 10 years, a fraction of the R\$1tn savings expected from the general pension reform. The armed forces approve of the changes, which include an increase in pensions contributions to 10.5% (from 7.5%), but legislators are disappointed, and markets reacted negatively.

President Jair Bolsonaro came to power promising a new way of doing politics, by putting an end to the pork-barrelling of the past and choosing appointments based on technical criteria rather than political affiliation or, indeed, experience. Less than three months in, his government faces serious difficulties. Infighting divides cabinet ministers. Dismissals and resignations amongst the lower levels of government are frequent. And communication between the executive and the legislature has broken down, meaning that flagship reforms are stuck in congress. In the face of this, support for Bolsonaro and confidence in the government are waning.

The government's inability to build support for its agenda in congress is, ostensibly, a failure of President Bolsonaro's 'new' way of doing politics. His government has not only steered clear of favour-trading practices which can easily lead to corruption, but has also seemed reluctant to engage in any form of negotiation whatsoever. Mistakes which can be put down to inexperience have, however, been compounded by unnecessary distractions, tensions and controversies, many of which have been instigated by Bolsonaro himself and his inner circle, and are the result of inflammatory behaviour on social media.

Simmering tensions between the government and congress boiled over last week, when federal deputy Rodrigo Maia, who represents the Democratas (DEM) and is the president of the chamber of deputies, sparred with Justice Minister Sérgio Moro over the latter's anti-crime package proposal. The situation was exacerbated by provocations from Bolsonaro's son Carlos on social media, following which there were reports that Maia was close to abandoning all efforts to support the government's pension reform in congress. The reform, deemed vital for Brazil's economic future [[WR-19-09](#)], underpins the government's economic agenda but has remained stuck in the chamber of deputies since late February, amid expectations for the military pension reform proposal (*see sidebar*) and delays to set up necessary congressional committees and appoint rapporteurs.

Maia and Bolsonaro then traded reproaches through declarations to the press over the weekend. They mutually accused each other of shirking their responsibilities, with both considering that the other should be working harder to garner congressional support for the pension reform. "[Bolsonaro] should spend more time taking care of the pension reform and less time taking care of Twitter," Maia told *TV Globo* on 22 March. He echoed this in a cutting interview with *O Estado de São Paulo* published the following day, in which he questioned whether the government has any direction or concrete plans, describing it as "a desert of ideas". Speaking during an event in Chile on 23 March, Bolsonaro hit back with implied criticism of Maia when he said that "some people...won't let go of the old politics". Maia had separately said that he supports the 'new politics', but that Bolsonaro needs to put his 'new politics' discourse into action.

Both then sought to minimise the conflict. Maia maintained that he remains committed to the pension reform and Bolsonaro defended building a harmonious relationship with congress, after holding a meeting with a small number of close cabinet ministers. These included Economy Minister Paulo Guedes, the minister of the institutional security cabinet (GSI), Augusto Heleno Ribeiro, and secretary of government Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz. The latter two, retired high-ranking generals, form part of the military faction in government, which is deemed to be a pragmatic voice of reason with influence over Bolsonaro.

The PSL in congress

President Bolsonaro's Partido Social Liberal (PSL) in congress is composed of disparate first-time representatives who rode the wave of Bolsonaro's popularity to get elected last year. It has gone from being a fringe party to being the largest one in the chamber of deputies with 55 members, although it remains a minority in the 513-strong chamber. Its lack of cohesion and political experience has frequently hindered the government, as its members have criticised and contradicted each other and the government both privately and publicly, increasing the sense that Bolsonaro has little control over his political allies.

Congress bites back

Subsequent developments have dashed hopes of positive progress for the pension reform, however. Many representatives in congress have taken the attack on Maia as an affront to the entire legislature, and party benches have expressed their support for the president of the chamber of deputies. Even members of Bolsonaro's Partido Social Liberal (PSL) have defended Maia. The PSL's own lack of cohesion has certainly contributed to the government's rocky relationship with congress (*see sidebar*).

Guedes cancelled his much-awaited appearance at a hearing in the chamber of deputies' constitutional and justice committee (CCJ) on 26 March, during which he had been due to answer questions on the pension reform, arguing that his presence would be more productive after a rapporteur had been appointed. Critics argued that he was simply shying away from being cross-examined by hostile legislators. The chamber of deputies' CCJ is the reform's first stop on its long route through congress.

That same day six opposition parties in congress, including the left-wing Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), which holds 54 seats in the 513-strong chamber of deputies, rejected the pension reform outright. A group of 13 centre-right parties announced that they would support a version of the reform that excludes the current proposed changes to rural workers' pensions and the distribution of a social benefit known as the BPC. Maia was quick to express his support for their position. These 13 parties include Maia's DEM, the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), and the Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (MDB). Together they hold a combined 294 seats in the chamber of deputies. The constitutional amendment for the pension reform would require a 308-majority vote in the chamber.

In a further blow to the government, on 26 March the chamber of deputies voted on a separate constitutional amendment (PEC) dating back to 2015 which would diminish the government's control over the federal budget and hand more power to congress. The chamber overwhelmingly approved this PEC in two rounds of voting, although its implementation is in no way guaranteed as it must now receive a three-fifths majority in the senate. The vote, which was belatedly added to the congressional agenda on the day it took place, was symbolic in its timing and content, as legislators seemed to be re-affirming the power they hold.

The end of the honeymoon

Bolsonaro arguably never benefitted from a 'honeymoon period' where his relationship with congress is concerned, despite supposedly having allies leading the senate and the chamber of deputies. However, he has enjoyed widespread support from the population and from the financial markets. Both are now waning. An Ibope poll released on 20 March shows that only 34% of Brazilians have a positive opinion of the Bolsonaro government, down from 49% in January. Those with a negative opinion have increased, from 11% of Brazilians in January to 24% in March. Meanwhile, market optimism has cooled in line with the pension reform's prospects.

Temer's arrest

The temporary arrest of former president Michel Temer (2016-2019), who was detained on 21 March on charges related to the 'Lava Jato' corruption probe, added to the past week's turmoil. Temer was detained with a former minister, Wellington Moreira Franco, who happens to be Maia's father-in-law. A significant number of sitting members of congress are under investigation as part of the 'Lava Jato' operation, and Temer's arrest will have caused disquiet for some. It also came as the judiciary has been accused of political activism by parts of the legislature, as tensions have arisen between all three branches of government. Temer and Moreira Franco have since been released, on the basis that the evidence for their detention was dated and insufficient.

Spying network

Federal judge Alejo Ramos Padilla is investigating a case brought against a lawyer, Marcelo D'Alessio, accused by a businessman, Pedro Echebest, of soliciting bribes in the name of prosecutor Carlos Stornelli to be left out of the 'notebook case' [WR-19-11]. Stornelli has repeatedly refused to appear before Ramos Padilla, arguing that D'Alessio's allegation is a ploy to stymie his investigations into corruption under former president Cristina Fernández (2007-2015). Stornelli is calling for his summons to be nullified, while the Macri administration has accused Ramos Padilla of being biased and called for his removal by the council of magistrates. The political opposition, meanwhile, has accused the government of trying to silence Ramos Padilla for trying to shed light on a "political and judicial spying network" and contravening judicial independence.

Judicial rulings put Macri on back foot

Strained relations between the government led by President Mauricio Macri and the supreme court took a turn for the worse on 26 March when magistrates on Argentina's top court voted to exempt pensioners from paying the *impuesto a las ganancias*, payroll tax. The resultant economic repercussions could have a political cost for Macri with just seven months to go before presidential elections. The ruling also deepens a rift within the supreme court (CSJN) whose president, Carlos Rosenkrantz, opened the new judicial year on 19 March with a stark warning: the judiciary faces a crisis of legitimacy due to a lack of public confidence in the nation's judges.

The CSJN ruled by 4-1 that it was unconstitutional to require pensioners to pay the *impuesto a las ganancias* as "age and infirmity are determining causes of vulnerability obliging [them] to amass greater resources to avoid compromising their quality of life". The ruling will benefit some 400,000 pensioners who receive a pension in excess of the threshold for the *impuesto a las ganancias* to kick in: Ar\$62,462 (US\$1,470), the equivalent of six minimum pensions. The ruling will compound the government's difficulties in wiping out the fiscal deficit in 2019. The CSJN had dealt an earlier blow to the Macri administration last December with an adverse ruling on state pension pay outs requiring it to find more funds to pay some 100,000-150,000 pensioners who took legal action [WR-18-50].

The dissenting voice in both rulings came from Rosenkrantz, widely considered to be an ally of the Macri administration outnumbered on the five-member CSJN by what the justice minister, Germán Garavano, has decried as a "a Peronist majority", a three-strong bloc he claims is serving the interests of the main opposition Partido Justicialista (PJ, Peronists).

Elisa Carrió, a federal deputy for the ruling centre-right Cambiemos coalition and Macri's maverick attack dog, lashed out at one CSJN magistrate, Ricardo Lorenzetti (who served as court president before Rosenkrantz assumed the post last September) this week for "staging a coup against the [supreme] court president, having failed in his bid to stage a coup against the president of the Republic". Carrió was referring to a vote by the three-strong bloc to appoint Pablo Méndez, an ally of Lorenzetti's to head the Centro de Información Judicial (CIJ), the judicial news website where nationwide legal rulings are reported. Carrió urged Rosenkrantz to stay on as president of the CSJN because "democracy depends upon it".

Rosenkrantz delivered a scathing critique of the judicial system during the opening of the judicial year in the CSJN building in Buenos Aires on 19 March. "There are doubts that we behave as true judges of a republican democracy," Rosenkrantz told an audience of state officials. He said that there was "a suspicion judges are motivated by personal, ideological, or political interests [rather than the law]", and that they had to demonstrate that this was not the case. "It is impossible to recover public confidence with isolated achievements, and constancy is something that Argentines find hard," Rosenkrantz argued, alluding to the overriding public perception of a high level of impunity, especially with regard to violent crime.

Rosenkrantz's comments were not well-received by his fellow CSJN magistrates. They also irked some judges who accused him of hypocrisy for denouncing the politicisation of the judiciary while neglecting to mention the recent allegations of the existence of "a vast political and judicial spying network" in Argentina (*see sidebar*).

López Obrador wrestling with violent past and present

When Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador took office on 1 December 2018 he promised that the style and substance of his government would differ completely from that of his predecessor Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018). This was to be not just a change of government but a change of regime, ushering in Mexico's fourth transformation. López Obrador celebrated the anniversary of the birth of his icon, former president Benito Juárez (1858-1872), last week by calling for unity and reconciliation, the latter also motivating his contentious decision to send the Spanish monarchy a diplomatic letter (and reveal its contents) requesting an apology for abuses committed during the conquest. But for all López Obrador's focus on writing a new chapter in Mexico's history, just like Peña Nieto he has been unable as yet to escape an old story: mounting homicides and insecurity.

President López Obrador visited the birthplace of Juárez in San Pablo Guelatao in the south-eastern state of Oaxaca to mark the 213th anniversary of his birth on 21 March. "It is the moment for unity, to put the people's interests first and foremost, the national interest, altogether, unity," López Obrador said. He described Juárez as "an ideal that should always inspire a good government". He also emphasised Juárez's commitment to national reconciliation.

At much the same time, López Obrador made public a diplomatic challenge sent to the Spanish monarchy and the Vatican in the form of a letter, dated 1 March, seeking "historical reconciliation with our past". He called upon King Felipe VI and Pope Francis to apologise for the sins committed against Mexico's indigenous peoples during the Spanish conquest, "violations of what are now known as human rights...massacres and oppression".

López Obrador revealed the contents of the letter in a video published on social media while visiting the Mayan site of Comalcalco in the state of Tabasco on 25 March. He referred to the letter again later in the day while commemorating a battle won by the conquistador Hernán Cortés in the nearby municipality of Centla shortly after landing in Mexico 500 years ago. "Let's make a historical revision, recognising the abuses endured by indigenous peoples; let the Spanish Crown and Catholic Church recognise this because this was not a meeting of two cultures, it was an invasion...thousands of people were killed [as] one civilization imposed itself on another," López Obrador said.

López Obrador's letter was "emphatically reject[ed]" in a statement by the Spanish government, which appeared to be taken by surprise by it (or at least by its contents being made public), especially given that Spain's prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, only visited Mexico in January to strengthen bilateral ties (see sidebar). Spain's foreign minister Josep Borrell categorically ruled out an apology "in the same way that we are not going to ask France to apologise for what Napoleon's soldiers did when they invaded Spain, nor are the French going to ask the Italians to apologise for Julius Caesar's conquest of Gaul". Borrell said he had spoken to his Mexican peer Marcelo Ebrard and would try and ensure that relations were not affected by "this unfortunate initiative".

López Obrador sought to downplay any diplomatic rift with Spain, a major source of foreign direct investment in Mexico, which he has been pushing to increase to drive the country's development. López Obrador said that he would also apologise to Mexico's indigenous peoples on behalf of the Mexican state for what happened post-independence. But he insisted on the

Spain takes umbrage

The Spanish government released a statement saying that "the arrival of Spaniards 500 years ago to present-day Mexican territory cannot be judged in light of contemporary considerations". It added, pointedly, "Our brother nations have always known how to read our common past without anger and with a constructive perspective".

New supreme court judge

Yasmín Esquivel Mossa assumed her position as a supreme court (SCJN) judge on 21 March after being selected from a shortlist of three sent to the senate by President López Obrador. Esquivel Mossa becomes just the twelfth female judge on the SCJN in its 200 years of existence and she paid tribute to the women of “talent, tenacity, and courage” who had held the position before her. Esquivel’s appointment was criticised as she is married to the businessman José María Riobóo, who was contracted by López Obrador when he was mayor of Mexico City (2000-2005) and with whom he retains close links. López Obrador denied any conflicts of interest and said that Riobóo held no formal position and was merely an “adviser”.

need for truth and reconciliation (also his answer to end the violent domestic struggle with organised criminal groups) ahead of 2021, which will mark the 500th anniversary of the fall of Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec empire, and the bicentenary of Mexico’s independence.

Senator Noemí Reynosa, of the right-wing opposition Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), said López Obrador’s remarks came “straight out of the script of [Venezuela’s former president] Hugo Chávez in 2008...he hasn’t changed anything at all”. She also argued that by insisting that reconciliation was necessary López Obrador was implying that Mexico was in a state of confrontation with Spain, which could affect bilateral relations. Even Senator Ifigenia Martínez, of the ruling left-wing Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena), branded López Obrador’s comments “untimely”. “Where was the president 500 years ago?” she asked rhetorically, adding “From the historical point of view, the scar is open but nothing can be done about it”.

Homicide rate keeps climbing

López Obrador’s presence in Tabasco coincided with the publication of disturbing data on modern day rather than historic “murders and massacres”. There were 5,649 violent homicides in January and February in Mexico, up by 13.5% on the first two months of 2018, according to official figures released by the national public security system (SENSP), part of the interior ministry (Segob), on 21 March. This contradicted claims by López Obrador in his speech marking 100 days in office on 11 March that the homicide rate had declined since he took office in December last year.

Tabasco was one of the states to have seen a sharp increase in homicides. There were a total of 62 homicides in Tabasco in February, up 68% on the same month in 2018. There have already been 44 homicides in the state in the first half of March. Governor Adán López, of Morena, said that five national guard bases would be established in Tabasco but that could be many months yet. López Obrador had hoped that his native state would be grabbing headlines for his administration’s flagship infrastructure projects which will be based (or pass through) there: a US\$6bn-US\$8bn oil refinery in Dos Bocas and the US\$5.9bn-US\$7.4bn 1,525km Tren Maya railway line across Tabasco, Chiapas, Campeche, Quintana Roo, and Yucatán.

MEXICO | POLITICS

López Obrador ally disbanded

One of the three parties within President Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s ruling coalition Juntos Haremos Historia (JHH) will cease to exist after an adverse ruling by the electoral tribunal (TEPJF). The conservative evangelical Partido Encuentro Social (PES) lost its battle for survival after the TEPJF ruled last week that it had not met the requirements of electoral law. But the PES is intent on exploiting a legal loophole to recover its registration within a year, prompting calls for urgent reform to prevent political parties from abusing the system.

The PES argued that its candidates had performed strongly in the elections, with the party returning 56 federal deputies (11 more than Mexico’s traditional political powerhouse, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional [PRI]), eight senators, 86 state deputies, the governorship of the south-central state of Morelos, 115 mayoralties, and nearly 5,000 councillors. But it was not enough to save the party.

The TEPJF stripped the PES of its registration under a strict interpretation of electoral law, failing to pass the threshold of 3% of the vote in any of last July’s federal elections – either the presidential or congressional elections (to

'New' political party

The PES has 12 months to present evidence of 233,000 members, and to hold 200 district assemblies, each attended by at least 300 people, and 20 state assemblies, attended by 3,000 supporters. After that, the national electoral institute (INE) conceded, under electoral law, the PES could apply to be registered as a new political party with a slightly altered name but identical acronym.

the lower chamber or senate). It also contended that many of the seats obtained by the PES in the federal lower chamber of congress had been won through proportional representation by virtue of the party's alliance with President López Obrador's left-wing Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena) and the Partido del Trabajo (PT) under the JHH banner.

A draft document filtered to the press in the days before the TEPJF ruling had suggested that the PES would survive. Other political parties had threatened to seek the impeachment of magistrates on the TEPJF if they preserved the PES, accusing them of planning to favour a party allied to the López Obrador administration.

López Obrador responded by saying he respected the TEPJF ruling as final, while calling on the PES to register as a new party. The PES party president, Hugo Erik Flores, has already announced plans to register the party with a different name (Partido Encuentro Solidario) but the same acronym (PES). The president of the national electoral institute (INE), Lorenzo Córdova, criticised this move as "clearly cheating" but acknowledged that at present the law permitted it (see sidebar). Córdova called for a reform to the electoral law to prevent the practice.

Ending presidential immunity

The federal senate voted overwhelmingly by 111-1 on 27 March to end presidential immunity (fuero presidencial), as well as the immunity from prosecution enjoyed by federal deputies and senators. President López Obrador sent the senate a constitutional reform initiative on 4 December to replace the 'fuero' which prevented the prosecution of the president for anything other than treason.

Senator Cristóbal Arias, of the ruling left-wing Morena said that the reform was another step by the government "to combat, eradicate, and punish corruption and impunity". Senators Damián Zepeda and Julen Rementería, of the right-wing PAN, said it was important to note that the 'fuero' had not been eliminated but the list of crimes for which a president, and members of congress, could be charged had been expanded to include corruption and electoral crimes. Senator Samuel García Sepúlveda, of the left-wing opposition Movimiento Ciudadano (MC), said he had reluctantly voted in favour of the reform to the 'fuero' despite its being "a farce" as the president could only be formally charged with committing a crime by means of an absolute majority in the senate, where Morena has a majority.

TRACKING TRENDS

MEXICO | Improving ties with the banks. President López Obrador sought to mend fences with the banking sector on 22 March while closing the annual two-day banking convention in the Pacific resort of Acapulco, in the state of Guerrero. López Obrador said that banks should be entitled to carry out self-regulation, just like the press, and not be subject to congressional regulation.

López Obrador received resounding applause from the near-1,000 attendees at the convention as he decisively eschewed a legislative initiative advanced by his ruling left-wing Morena last November to curtail commissions charged by banks, eliminating a dozen bank charges on customers, such as cash withdrawals, balance enquiries, and inter-bank transfers.

In exchange for this commitment, López Obrador, who also stressed that he would always respect the autonomy of the Banco de México (Banxico), appealed to the banking sector to cooperate with his plans to double GDP growth to 4% by sinking private investment into major infrastructure projects, notably the Tren Maya, to propel Mexico's economic development. He also 'suggested' that as part of its self-regulation banks should reduce the high fees presently charged on remittances.

Sliding down the rankings

In its 22 March report, Funides highlights the most recent Democracy Index (2018), compiled annually by the UK-based Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) which, released in January, now classifies Nicaragua under President Ortega (in office since 2007) as an ‘authoritarian regime’, having described it in the previous year as a ‘hybrid regime’. Funides also points to the latest Freedom in the World review by US-based NGO Freedom House, released last month, which showed Nicaragua’s status declined from Partly Free to Not Free due to “authorities’ brutal repression of an antigovernment protest movement, which has included the arrest and imprisonment of opposition figures, intimidation and attacks against religious leaders, and violence by state forces and allied armed groups that resulted in hundreds of deaths”.

Mounting pressure on Ortega over human rights

“A crucial next step in addressing the human rights crisis that is rapidly tearing the country apart”. This was the response by the NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) to the first-ever resolution passed last week by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on Nicaragua. Along with other recent moves by the international community in response to human rights concerns, the UN resolution is serving as the latest source of pressure on President Daniel Ortega which would seem to be having an impact of sorts.

On 22 March the OHCHR adopted a resolution on the promotion and protection of human rights in Nicaragua which calls on the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) government “to release all those arbitrarily or illegally detained and to guarantee due process rights”, and requests a comprehensive written report on the human rights situation in the country to be presented at a future session. The previous day, for the first time in 25 years, in its annual report the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) added Nicaragua to a blacklist of countries that failed in the fulfilment of human rights, along with Cuba and Venezuela.

With a report released on 22 March by a local think-tank Funides highlighting the country’s deterioration in other rankings in the area of human rights and democracy (*see sidebar*), the continued pressure on Ortega from human rights institutions comes amid the stop-start talks with the opposition Alianza Cívica por la Justicia y la Democracia (ACJD) which began last month. These most recently resumed on 21 March [\[WR-19-11\]](#) after the Ortega government agreed to release all political prisoners, albeit within a 90-day deadline – a major ACJD demand along with early elections (to which Ortega has yet to respond).

In one boost for the credibility of the process, on 22 March, the two sides agreed various points which include the participation of Luis Ángel Rosadilla, the special envoy of the Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary General Luis Almagro, as observer and guarantor of the talks. Another point agreed could well result in difficulties: the start of the process of releasing prisoners. This involves harmonising and updating the lists of prisoners held by the government, the IACHR and the ACJD, which diverge. The ACJD has a list of 647 prisoners, a figure which the IACHR also cites; the human rights group Comité Pro Liberación de Presos Políticos has a list of 802 people; while, in December, the interior ministry reported that 347 people had been detained in the protests.

Protests

On 23 March dozens of anti-Ortega protesters took to the streets across the country calling for the release of political prisoners. According to the opposition Unidad Nacional Azul y Blanco (UNAB), there were protests in the capital, Managua, as well as the cities of Matagalpa, León, Chinandega, Granada, Rivas (all capitals of eponymous departments) and Bluefields, the capital of the impoverished South Atlantic autonomous region (RAAS).

This relatively peaceful show of protest was in marked contrast to the attempted demonstrations scheduled for 16 March which resulted in reports of repression and violence by the police (PNN). This was the first attempted demonstration since the PNN had announced in September 2018 that demonstrations that “alter the public order” were “illegal” and criminalised the act of calling them.

Cosying up to the US

While previous US governments had backed the anti-corruption efforts of Cicig, which began operating in the country in 2007, since taking office in 2016 President Morales had made clear efforts to endear himself to the US administration led by President Donald Trump. Examples include his decision to follow Trump's lead in moving the country's embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Accordingly, when Morales announced in August 2018 that he would not extend Cicig's mandate when it expires in September 2019, local human rights groups had slammed the lukewarm response from the US State Department which said merely that it was "aware of" Morales' decision not to extend its mandate and would "continue to support Guatemala's fight against corruption and impunity".

Aldana's candidacy under threat

A local judge has ordered the arrest of Thelma Aldana, a former attorney general (2014-2018) who is running for the new centre-left Movimiento Semilla in the June general election. As presidential candidate Aldana, who is currently polling second in opinion surveys [WR-19-10], theoretically enjoys immunity from prosecution. However, the interior minister, Enrique Degenhart, has said that the arrest warrant, which relates to charges of embezzlement, lying, and tax fraud (which she maintains are trumped up), remains active. This has sparked concerns that Aldana, who made her name as attorney general through her ground-breaking efforts (along with the International commission against impunity in Guatemala, Cicig) to tackle corruption, may be barred from the race.

Announced on 19 March, the charges against Aldana relate to allegations regarding the irregular hiring of personnel under her watch at the attorney general's office. She is also facing various other complaints, including one filed on 4 March before the attorney general's office by the current frontrunner, former First Lady (2008-2012) Sandra Torres (Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza, UNE). Torres's complaint accuses Aldana of using justice for electoral aims. This relates to an investigation into the UNE over alleged illegal campaign financing which prompted Juan Francisco Sandoval, a prosecutor from the special unit against corruption (Feci) at the attorney general's office, to request that Torres be stripped of her immunity from prosecution to be investigated. However, the supreme court (CSJ) threw out this request at the end of last month.

Movimiento Semilla was clear that the arrest warrant and related charges were linked to Aldana's previous efforts to tackle corruption – not least her requests for President Jimmy Morales to be investigated for illegal campaign financing. In a series of tweets, it recalled that as attorney general, she had presented requests for legal action against Morales and the so-called 'pacto de corruptos' – a reference to the pro-Morales coalition in the 158-seat legislative assembly which voted not to strip the president of immunity from prosecution, thus preventing his investigation. Yet Aldana's participation in the contest remains uncertain. The arrest warrant was issued while she was in El Salvador for a meeting and she has yet to return, her representatives telling reporters that she will remain out of the country until guarantees are in place for her safety and judicial security.

US moves on corruption concerns

On 14 March the US Department of Defense (DoD) revealed that it had suspended the transfer of some equipment and military training that it provides to Guatemala in protest at the misuse of vehicles it donated. The announcement made headlines as one of the first US responses to growing concerns regarding the direction of anti-corruption efforts in the country after President Morales announced last year that he would not extend Cicig's mandate (*see sidebar*).

The DoD's announcement, which some link to the Democrats' strengthened position in the US House of Representatives following the November 2018 mid-terms, came the day after the US State Department released its latest annual human rights report. That report noted that in Guatemala, on 31 August 2018, the interior ministry with the support of the defence ministry deployed "a convoy of armed jeeps at various points in the capital, including in front of an embassy, Cicig headquarters, and a prominent local human rights organisation". According to the US State Department report, the jeeps "were mobilised from Interagency Task Forces and were donated for the purpose of counternarcotics operations". The same report goes on to highlight that local NGOs had "pointed out the jeep deployment coincided with President Morales' announcement he would not extend the Cicig mandate and was intended as a show of force, intimidation, and an attempt to repress civil society".

Quotes of the week

“Urging Spain to apologise [for the Conquest 500 years ago] is a sham. What [the government] needs to do is return the land stolen from [indigenous] communities. All these projects [such as the Tren Maya] continue this dispossession.”

Mexican indigenous leader María de Jesús Patricio

Martínez ‘Marichuy’ on President Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s letter to the Spanish monarchy.

“Brazil needs to leave *Twitter* and enter real life. No one gets a job, a place in a school, in a crèche or a hospital through *Twitter*. We need the country to have a project again.”

Brazilian federal deputy Rodrigo Maia.

“Any abandonment of one’s principles will be seen as confirmation that judges cannot be trusted...we must be prepared to live with the lack of popularity that some of our decisions will engender.”

Argentina’s supreme court president Carlos Rosenkrantz.

Uruguayan opposition seizes on FA security woes

It is not often that a government presiding over the most violent year on record eagerly anticipates an impending election. It is no different in Uruguay. The executive and legislative hegemony of the ruling left-wing coalition Frente Amplio (FA) could come to an end in October’s elections. The main right-of-centre opposition Partido Nacional (PN, Blancos) and Partido Colorado (PC, Colorados) have been agitating for the removal of the interior minister, Eduardo Bonomi, for years in the face of an inexorable increase in homicides and violent theft, but he has retained his position from one FA administration to the next. The FA may now pay an electoral price for this political loyalty.

Homicides in 2018 increased by 46% on the previous year, totalling 414, according to the interior ministry’s Observatorio Nacional sobre Violencia y Criminalidad. More than half of the homicides occurred in Montevideo, up by 39% on 2017 to 223. Uruguay’s homicide rate of 11.8 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2018 was the fourth-highest in South America behind only Venezuela, Brazil, and Colombia. There were 29,904 recorded violent thefts, meanwhile, jumping by 54% in 2018 on the previous year, an average of 3.4 every hour.

“They had budget, human resources, a congressional majority, and popular support. They fixed a target. Not only did they fail to meet it but they also increased crime in our country noticeably. They either don’t know what they are doing or cannot deal with public security. They failed,” PN Senator and presidential pre-candidate Luis Lacalle Pou said. His main internal rival in the PN, Senator Jorge Larrañaga, accused Bonomi of “virtually no shame, announcing these figures and leaving,” after the interior minister was summoned to appear before a senate security commission to explain what had happened. Bonomi acknowledged that the electoral promise of reducing violent theft by 30% would not be met, but said his ministry was “working to bring these figures down”.

The opposition tried to exploit the FA’s parlous record on public security in both the 2009 and 2014 elections, but the coalition retained executive power, and a wafer-thin majority in congress, on both occasions. In large part that was because of the FA’s economic stewardship and fresh memories of the financial crisis of 2002 from which the PC’s popularity has never recovered. At this rate, however, public security could become for the FA what the economy is for the PC, with the PN the most likely beneficiary.

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