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Colombia and Peru strike accords to end social conflicts

The governments of Colombia and Peru sealed accords this week tentatively resolving long-running social conflicts that have caused serious economic repercussions. Detractors accused them of capitulating to protesters, setting a negative precedent. And yet it still might not be enough. Neither accord is set in stone. Indigenous protesters in Colombia's south-western department of Cauca, who have blocked the Pan-American highway for four weeks, and local community groups in Peru's southern-central region of Apurímac, who have blocked the access route to the massive Las Bambas open-pit copper mine for nearly two months, are pushing for more than the promise of greater social investment outlined in the respective accords.

Colombia's high commissioner for peace, Miguel Ceballos, and Interior Minister Nancy Patricia Gutiérrez negotiated an accord on 5 April with the Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca (Cric) to lift its blockade of the Pan-American highway in place since 11 March. Under the deal, the government committed to provide 17.5% of the Col\$4.6tn (US\$1.49bn) demanded by the Cric for investment in education, health, housing, and improving productivity. Gutiérrez said the promised investment (some US\$260m) was already envisaged in the government's national development plan (PND) and would solve "problems that have been unresolved historically", given that previous accords exceeded "Colombia's fiscal reality".

The Cric began to dismantle the roadblocks on the Pan-American highway on 6 April upon which President Iván Duque visited Popayán, the capital of Cauca, where he met local authorities, businessmen, and trade unions, and announced a package of measures to take immediate effect to try and boost the local economy affected by the protest action. With the chamber of commerce of Popayán putting economic losses in Cauca, and neighbouring Valle del Cauca and Nariño at over Col\$150bn, Duque announced seven measures, including Col\$275bn of credit and subsidies for agricultural producers, support for tourism ahead of Holy Week, and for transport companies that had to cancel hundreds of journeys due to the roadblocks, and the alleviation of food and fuel shortages as a result of the indigenous minga, the Quechua word for the protests.

Duque's mentor, former president Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), a senator and leader of the ruling right-wing Centro Democrático (CD), excoriated the Duque administration's decision on *Twitter* on 6 April, saying it would have been better for the Pan-American highway to remain closed for two years and alternative routes to have been improved than to sign accords with the "minga supported by terrorism". In a video released the following day, Uribe conceded that Duque had faced "a very difficult situation" but stressed that "when solutions are the product of pressure they do not generate affection for governments".

Political reform

The main challenge for Prime Minister Del Solar will be overcoming obstacles thrown in the way of the government's judicial and political reform proposals by FP. The next showdown with FP is looming as Del Solar sent 12 political reform initiatives to congress on 10 April, including modifications to a series of organic laws, such as the electoral law, and an attempt to increase citizen participation in the selection of candidates.

This is the most forthright criticism Uribe has levelled at Duque since he took office in August last year. It was not shared by all of the CD, with the party's president of the senate, Ernesto Macías, for instance, praising Duque's "prudence, integrity, and patience" for not sending in the armed forces to "put out the fires of leftist pyromaniacs who want to alter the democratic order..." But Duque might have taken the criticism to heart. When Duque visited the Cauca municipality of Caldono on 9 April to meet Cric leaders he insisted on meeting inside a school rather than in the open air in the main square as the indigenous had wanted. Duque waited with Gutiérrez and Ceballos, and the governors of Valle del Cauca, Dilian Francisca Toro, Huila, Carlos Julio González, and Cauca, Oscar Rodrigo Campo, among others, but Cric leaders, who had long demanded his presence during the month-long protests, did not show up.

Duque expressed profound regret. With Uribe's words ringing in his ears, he responded to the snub by saying his government would respect the accord but would not "allow people to hijack dialogue" issuing "inappropriate ultimatums", and made "a clear call for reflection" by the Cric. The day before the scheduled meeting, the attorney general, Néstor Humberto Martínez, claimed to have received "trustworthy information" that the minga had been infiltrated by "organised armed groups" and that Duque's life was in danger. The Cric accused Duque of "leaving the people waiting" in the main square, maintaining that he had "clearly concocted a plan with the attorney general's office to avoid this direct dialogue with the communities".

Despite the tensions, the accord is still in place for now. But the promised investments will need to be approved by a mixed commission comprising representatives of the government and indigenous. And the Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia (Onic) remains distrustful of the Duque administration. Onic's secretary general, Luis Fernando Arias Airas, has called a national strike for 25 April to keep up the pressure and ensure the accord is honoured. He insisted that "the nationwide minga does not end because of the signing of accords, but continues fortified".

Las Bambas conflict

On 7 April, two days after the Colombian government struck its accord with the indigenous protesters in Cauca, Peru's newly confirmed prime minister Salvador del Solar brandished an accord designed to put an end to protests by the Fuerabamba community blocking the access road to the Las Bambas mine [\[WR-19-13\]](#). The accord was reached after a meeting of more than eight hours in the headquarters of the Conferencia Episcopal Peruana (CEP) in Lima between Del Solar, the president of the Fuerabamba community, Gregorio Rojas, and a representative of the Chinese company Minerals and Metals Group (MMG) which owns Las Bambas.

The government promised to undertake public works and development programmes in the local area, while MMG's executive general manager of operations, Suresh Vadnagra, said "a mutually satisfactory" economic accord had been reached with Rojas on behalf of the community of Fuerabamba to end a dispute over a 2011 resettlement deal. Protesters agreed to lift the road-blocks on the access route to the mine until 11 April when Del Solar will lead a ministerial commission to the district of Challhuahuacho in the province of Cotabambas, Apurímac, to discuss details of proposed works in an effort to end the social conflict definitively. In response, the government lifted a state of emergency in the area.

The Fuerabamba community wants to go well beyond discussing future local development programmes with Del Solar. It has drawn up a nine-point agenda, including some thorny issues, such as the release of two of the community's legal advisers, brothers Frank and Jorge Chávez Sotelo, who

Poverty and corruption

During his appearance before congress, Prime Minister Del Solar said that the government would reduce poverty to 18% and indigence to 2.5% by the end of President Vizcarra's term in July 2021, as well as reducing infant anaemia and malnutrition. Del Solar also said that concrete action had been taken to combat corruption, with the creation of 25 regional anti-corruption commissions, and an additional S/25m (US\$7.5m) assigned to the attorney general's office to strengthen the prosecution of official corruption in emblematic cases such as the Odebrecht bribery scheme.

are in preventive detention and face prison sentences for allegedly extorting money from passing drivers trying to access Las Bambas; revision of the environmental impact assessment; a commitment by the government never to call a state of emergency in Cotabambas again; and a change of officials and administrators at Las Bambas. Others have promised to abide by the accord only if President Martín Vizcarra visits the area.

If the government cedes further ground, it could incubate discontent elsewhere, with other local communities motivated to stage their own social protests. The president of congress, Daniel Salaverry, was particularly scathing of the accord, denouncing "the total absence of the principle of authority" and arguing that negotiating with the Fuerabamba community when the access route to Las Bambas was still blocked set "a very bad precedent".

Del Solar's challenge

While it has yet to bring a definitive end to the conflict, the Las Bambas accord provided a fillip for Del Solar, diverting attention from the weak level of support he received on 5 April when congress granted the requisite vote of confidence in him and his ministerial cabinet after a debate lasting more than 16 hours. The main opposition Fuerza Popular (FP, Fujimoristas) pounded away at the Vizcarra administration during the debate and although some of the right-wing party's deputies voted in favour of Del Solar he received the backing of just 46 deputies in the 130-seat congress as both the left-wing Nuevo Perú and Frente Amplio voted against him and his cabinet.

Del Solar said that the government's five main priorities would be equitable, competitive, and sustainable economic growth; promoting socio-economic development and wellbeing; effective decentralisation; integrity and combating corruption; and strengthening state institutions for improved governability. He said this would all "set the foundations for a new destination". But not everyone believes this is the real destination: the Las Bambas conflict serves as a powerful reminder that not all Peruvians feel they are benefiting from avowed improvements to socio-economic development and wellbeing. Others do not want to reach the destination: FP continues to provide obstacles to efforts to combat corruption.

There were some tense moments during the congressional debate over the vote of confidence as Del Solar lamented the decision by the congressional subcommittee on constitutional accusations to archive a request to investigate the former FP-backed attorney general Pedro Chávarry for wrongdoing. Del Solar said it was "the job [of deputies] to change history not to repeat it". Outlining the 2018-2021 national plan of integrity and the combat of corruption, he added that "Integrity must be the new watchword of public life...we can no longer tolerate a lack of transparency and integrity in our judicial and political authorities".

Kuczynski arrested

Prime Minister Del Solar expressed concern at the sudden decision on 10 April to place former president Pedro Pablo Kuczynski (2016-2018) in detention for 10 days. "Separation of powers must be respected. As must due process," Del Solar tweeted, adding that Kuczynski had "fully complied with all of the judiciary's requirements". The special prosecutor José Domingo Pérez requested Kuczynski's detention for corruption and asset laundering in relation to the bribery scheme involving the Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht.

Kuczynski tweeted that he had "never fled from justice" but rather "completely cooperated with all the investigations and punctually attended all summons by the judicial authorities". Even FP, which conspired to bring Kuczynski down, criticised the decision, saying that "everything that happened to Keiko Fujimori [the FP leader placed in preventive detention for 36 months for her own links to the Odebrecht scandal] has been a drama which [he] will unfortunately have to endure too".

Moreno, Correa, Assange, plots and stratagems**Electoral results**

On 6 April the national electoral council (CNE) released the final results of the municipal elections held on 24 March. The AP lost eight of the 10 governorships it won in 2014. And it failed to win in any of the country's three main cities: Jorge Yunda, a former Correísta deputy, won Quito; the PSC's Cynthia Viteri, Guayaquil; and Pedro Palacios, an independent, Cuenca.

Some 197 newly elected mayors entered Ecuador's Carondelet presidential palace on 4 April on a red carpet customarily reserved for heads of state and other foreign dignitaries for a special ceremony organised by President Lenín Moreno. Such an event would have been unthinkable under Moreno's predecessor Rafael Correa (2007-2017), who stigmatised politicians from opposition parties. But Moreno's overtures come amid a sharp decline in his approval ratings brought about by his government's economic austerity measures (which he argues are necessary because of Correa's profligacy), and a change of political course that, if the results of municipal elections on 24 March are anything to go by, has perplexed the public. Meanwhile, the government is accusing Correa, and Julian Assange, the Wikileaks founder who had been residing in Ecuador's London embassy for almost seven years before his sudden arrest on 11 April, of conspiring to bring down Moreno.

"The partisan contest is over, now is the stage of reconciliation," President Moreno said during a speech welcoming the mayors elect, calling for constant national dialogue to "improve governance and governability". They were each handed a telephone directory with contact details of cabinet ministers in the interest of enhancing cooperation between local and central government. Moreno appealed for continuity in implementing his 'cradle to the grave' social welfare programme, 'Toda una vida', as well as improving healthcare, drinking water supplies, and sewerage systems. He also called for a coordinated approach to public security. He said that while the central government might control the police force, mayors were responsible for providing safe parks, illuminated streets, surveillance cameras, and controlling micro-trafficking outside schools and colleges.

Moreno claimed that US\$4.35bn had been assigned to Ecuador's municipal governments since he took office in May 2017 and he urged the new mayors to manage the resources carefully. "Public funds must be invested in public well-being and not maintaining bureaucracy, there are no sinecures anymore," Moreno said in a tacit criticism of the Correa government's public sector largesse. Protests outside Carondelet by some of the 2,500 medical workers dismissed on 1 March in the coastal province of Guayas suggested that at least some of the government's austerity drive has gone beyond ending waste and cronyism under Correa.

Moreno's stated commitment to work with politicians of all stripes might provide a refreshing contrast to Correa, and several of the mayors elect praised his efforts at open and sincere dialogue, but it has left many voters wondering what he stands for politically. An opinion poll conducted in the three largest cities of Quito, Guayaquil, and Cuenca, by Perfiles de Opinión on 29 March showed his popularity had dwindled to just 17% from 50% over the course of the last year, and the rump of the ruling left-wing Alianza País (AP) still supporting him lost ground in the municipal elections (see sidebar). A total of 24 mayors did not attend his meeting in Carondelet. Conspicuous by her absence was Cynthia Viteri, the incoming mayor of the country's largest city Guayaquil and a member of the traditional right-of-centre opposition Partido Social Cristiano (PSC), which emerged strengthened from the elections.

The PSC has cooperated with Moreno when it is in the party's interests, especially taking an axe to Correa's legacy (see box below). Correístas, meanwhile, are intent on landing a blow against Moreno. Amapola Naranjo, a deputy for the Correísta Revolución Ciudadana (RC), is gunning for Elizabeth Cabezas, the president of the national assembly and a member of

New attorney general

Diana Salazar was appointed attorney general on 8 April after winning the open competition set by the Cppccs-t.

Salazar had played a key role as head of the state institution Unidad de Análisis Financiero (UAFE) since February 2018 in exposing irregularities at

Ecuador's football federation (FEF), and the network of bribes surrounding the Brazilian construction company Odebrecht.

In her inaugural speech, Salazar promised improved transparency, with objectives and results made public;

effectiveness, prioritising cases and creating working groups; innovation; and a restructuring of the organisation.

AP loyal to Moreno. Naranjo has accused Cabezas of seeking to obstruct a legislative probe into Moreno and his family for allegedly benefiting from an offshore company in Belize known as INA Investment Corporation [WR-19-08]. Naranjo provided an audio recording, leaked on social networks, of a private conversation Cabezas held with the interior minister, María Paula Romo, minutes before a vote in the national assembly on investigating Moreno. Cabezas, caught on an open microphone, expressed concern that the PSC would vote with RC.

Deputies voted overwhelmingly on 4 April to set up a three-person multi-party commission to investigate Cabezas. It has 10 days to draw up a report for the national assembly to vote on. AP coordinator Ximena Peña has said the party is four square behind Cabezas, and two members of the commission, Mercedes Cuesta (AP) and Fausto Terán of Fuerza Ecuador (FE), have already rejected the validity of the illegally obtained recording, while the third, Marcela Aguiñaga (RC), insists it should be permissible.

Plot to topple Moreno?

The Moreno administration, meanwhile, has gone on the attack. The communications minister, Andrés Michelena, accused Correa, Julian Assange, and Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro of concocting the so-called INAPapers as part of an elaborate plot to bring down Moreno. And, on 8 April, the foreign minister, José Valencia, said "Ecuador reserves the right to conduct investigations" and could "revise [Assange's] diplomatic asylum", saying he was behind the leaking of information about Moreno's personal life on social media. The Moreno administration submitted a formal complaint on 1 April to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Privacy accusing Wikileaks of disseminating hacked photos and personal information from Moreno's personal computers.

Wikileaks accused Moreno of being "desperate to divert public attention away from the scandal". It also claimed on *Twitter* on 26 March that Moreno was negotiating giving up Assange in exchange for US debt relief, vehemently denied by Valencia who said Assange was "biting the hand that feeds him". No longer. On 11 April Moreno said Assange's asylum was "unsustainable and no longer viable" and he was arrested by British police in Ecuador's London embassy.

Move to shatter Correa's legacy

One of the reasons Correístas are targeting Elizabeth Cabezas is that she advocates a constitutional reform to restore the powers of the national assembly at the expense of the Consejo de Participación Ciudadana y Control Social (Cpccs), the country's fourth branch of government, created by the constituent assembly in 2008 under Correa. The Cpccs is the principal surviving institutional structure created by Correa, which deputies loyal to him are fighting to preserve.

The outgoing president of the transitional Cpccs (Cpccs-t), Julio César Trujillo, however, wants to see the disbandment of the institution he has led since a referendum in February 2018 to restructure it. Trujillo said that the elections to appoint the seven-member Cpccs, held alongside the municipal contests on 24 March, demonstrated the illegitimacy of the institution. The new members of the Cpccs will assume their positions on 14 May when the national electoral council (CNE) formally proclaims the final results.

Trujillo said that the Cpccs elections produced a null vote in excess of 23%, while five of the seven candidates who received the most votes barely managed 13%. He argued that the Cpccs had been used to concentrate power in the hands of the executive and not for the purpose of conferring greater power on citizens, as defined in the 2008 constitution. Trujillo announced on 5 April that he would form an eight-strong 'committee for the re-institutionalisation of Ecuador', comprising among others two former presidents (Rosalía Arteaga [for five days in 1997] and Gustavo Noboa Bejarano [2000-2003]) to collect signatures for another referendum on whether to abolish the Cpccs. He urged academia, social organisations, and the media to drive the debate around his proposal.

US action

The US government sought to conflate further two of its foreign policy priorities in the Western Hemisphere on 5 April by imposing financial sanctions on two companies that ship crude from Venezuela to Cuba, in addition to 34 ships belonging to the state oil company Pdvsa. It explained that the decision would help Juan Guaidó achieve his oft-stated objective that Venezuela should stop gifting oil to Cuba. US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in a statement: “Cuba continues to profit from, and prop up, the illegitimate Maduro regime through oil-for-repression schemes...” Cuba’s President Miguel Díaz-Canel criticised the sanctions as “an act of extraterritoriality, interference, and imperial arrogance” on *Twitter*. Cuba is not a great example of forcing regime change through economic sanctions.

Guaidó buoyed by forward momentum

Juan Guaidó has the bit between his teeth again after a series of large protests against the government led by Nicolás Maduro at the weekend were followed by the decision by the Organization of American States (OAS) to recognise his choice of ambassador to the hemispheric body. This might be enough to quell signs of unrest within the broad opposition movement at the pace of progress, which Maduro sought to exploit this week by dangling the prospect of dialogue. Guaidó categorically ruled out “false dialogue”.

Guaidó launched ‘Operation Freedom’, designed to stir up support in cities across the country for an eventual march on the presidential palace Miraflores, on 6 April. He held a rally in El Marqués, a middle-class neighbourhood in eastern Caracas where the headquarters of the state electricity firm Corpoelec are based. The government’s 30-day electricity rationing plan began the following day – amid a power outage. Rationing will affect 20 of the country’s 23 states for four hours a day, excluding (as in 2010 and 2011) Caracas. Guaidó accused the government of “sacrificing the rest of the country to keep the lights on in Caracas”.

Guaidó portrayed ‘Operation Freedom’ as “the definitive phase” of his plan to remove Maduro from power. Two national legislators were briefly detained in Maracaibo, the capital of the western state of Zulia (hit especially hard by power outages), during 358 rallies nationwide, at several of which the national guard fired tear gas to disperse protesters.

There is a danger of fatigue setting in unless protesters can detect progress. More radical factions of the opposition, such as Vente Venezuela, led by María Corina Machado, are pushing to invoke article 187.11, which establishes that the national assembly can authorise foreign military missions in Venezuela, although the US special envoy for Venezuela, Elliott Abrams, poured cold water on this idea this week, saying it was “premature”.

With a government march on 6 April attracting far less support, and small cracks appearing in the opposition, Maduro sought to break its unity of purpose by appealing to more moderate factions. “Stop the terrorist attacks and...Venezuela can install sooner rather than later a great dialogue for peace and understanding,” Maduro said, urging Mexico and Uruguay to revive the so-called ‘Montevideo mechanism’ (first proposed in January) containing four phases: immediate dialogue, negotiation, compromise, and implementation. Guaidó, aware of internal rumblings of discontent, urged opposition leaders to show “unity, more unity, and mobilisation” as this would be “the key to success”. He did not rule out talks but stressed that the opposition would never again engage in “false dialogue” and that a precondition for talks would be Maduro’s departure (“the end of the usurpation”), a transitional government, and free and fair elections.

Guaidó’s strategy received a boost on 9 April when the permanent council of the OAS recognised Gustavo Tarre as Venezuela’s permanent representative designated by the national assembly “pending new elections and the appointment of a democratically elected government”. The resolution passed with the support of 18 of the 34 OAS member states. Venezuela’s foreign ministry branded the decision a “criminal and rampant violation of international law and the OAS charter”, and reaffirmed its “irrevocable decision” to leave the OAS on 27 April. The resolution was opposed by eight states, including Uruguay and Mexico, whose ambassador, Jorge Lomonaco, questioned whether judicial and legislative branches elsewhere in the region might seek representation on the OAS if it was no longer a requirement for the executive to appoint a state’s representative. The US ambassador, Carlos Trujillo, argued that the national assembly was the only democratic body in Venezuela.

Bolsonaro reaches 100-day mark**Violent rhetoric**

On 7 April, members of the armed forces shot 80 bullets at a car in Rio de Janeiro, believing they were exchanging fire with criminals. The car was actually transporting a family. One person died and two were injured as a result of the military officers' mistake. The tragic accident has shaken Brazil and renewed concerns that President Bolsonaro's tough-on-crime stance and encouragement of violent policing tactics is translating into increased police violence. Ten officers have been taken into custody over this incident in Rio, but there have been several other cases of violent police lethality in recent weeks.

President Jair Bolsonaro's government reached the symbolic 100-day mark on 10 April. As we went to press, Bolsonaro was holding a ceremony with cabinet ministers to mark the occasion and present the balance of his administration's achievements thus far. While no government can be expected to solve pre-existing problems and implement challenging policies in just over three months, by most accounts Bolsonaro's chaotic administration has achieved remarkably little during this time.

In late January, Chief-of-staff Onyx Lorenzoni had outlined 35 goals that the government aimed to achieve by 10 April. Some of these goals, including the presentation of the anti-crime legal package to the federal congress and the suppression of 21,000 government jobs deemed superfluous, have been met. Others have been addressed but not attained. This is the case of the somewhat vague aim of increasing international economic integration, and of some social programmes. Arguably, only a minority of the 35 measures have been completely bypassed.

The government might therefore point out that it has been working towards completing the majority of these goals. It might argue that it has achieved one of its principal aims, that of implementing measures to streamline state bureaucracy, increase its efficiency, and cut government costs. It will most likely highlight the successful outcome of several public tenders for maritime port and airport concessions, a key policy for the infrastructure ministry.

However, few of these goals address either the core challenges that Bolsonaro and his government face, or many of their stated priorities (although to omit the pension reform from the 100-day goals was realistic). Justice Minister Sérgio Moro's anti-crime package may have been presented to congress, but it has so far seen little progress and remains stuck in the chamber of deputies, testament to the executive's difficult relationship with the legislature. Plans to de-politicise appointments at all levels of government align with Bolsonaro's vision of 'new politics', but have contributed to the deadlock with congress [[WR-19-12](#)] and therefore to the government's lack of concrete achievements.

Drama and confusion

Bolsonaro's first 100 days have been "very low in politics and very high in drama", as Thiago de Aragão, partner at Arko Advice, a political consultancy firm, put it. A round-up of the more memorable episodes of Bolsonaro's first 100 days in power would take in the allegations of corruption tainting the president's party, the Partido Social Liberal (PSL), as well as his son Flávio, now a federal senator [[WR-19-03](#)]; the emergence of links between the Bolsonaro family and illegal militia in Rio de Janeiro; the short-lived but frequent scandals caused by Bolsonaro and his sons' impulsive comments, usually on *Twitter*; and public spats exposing the government's lack of cohesion.

Controversy and social media helped Bolsonaro gather enough visibility and support to win last year's presidential election. Since taking over the presidency, he has maintained confrontational and unorthodox tactics better suited to campaigning than governing. While this may please some of his more hard-line supporters who enjoy his slapdash politics and identify with his provocative opinions, it has frittered away much of his political capital.

In January, Bolsonaro could boast a good relationship with important political allies (on whom he depends to govern successfully), strong support from

Datafolha exposes divisions

In its poll conducted on 2-3 April, Datafolha asked respondents questions relating to the image of President Bolsonaro, such as whether he is hardworking or not, pleasant or unpleasant, modern or old-fashioned, sincere or insincere, humble or proud. The responses show how deeply Bolsonaro divides opinion, with an even split on most questions. For example, 49% consider him to be pleasant and 47% unpleasant. The questions that garnered the most consensus were on him being authoritarian (58% believe this, versus 37% saying he is democratic) and respecting the wealthy the most (57%, versus 24% saying he respects the poor the most, and 19% with no opinion).

the Brazilian population (which helps give him some authority), and widespread optimism in his government's capacity to spur economic revival (instrumental in bringing the financial and business sectors outside). These assets have now begun to fade away (if not disappear entirely), just as Bolsonaro needs them more than ever.

(Un)popular support

A Datafolha poll released on 7 April illustrates both Bolsonaro's waning popularity, and how deeply he divides the Brazilian population (*see sidebar*). Compared with the first term of Brazil's last four elected presidents (Fernando Collor in 1990, Fernando Henrique Cardoso in 1995, Lula da Silva in 2003, and Dilma Rousseff in 2011), Bolsonaro has the lowest approval rating.

Just 32% of the poll's respondents have a positive opinion of Bolsonaro's first three months in office, with 33% deeming him to be average, and 30% considering his performance to be 'bad' or 'very bad'. Even amongst those who voted for him, only just over half (54%) have a positive opinion. Surveys by other pollsters conducted over the past three months show that Bolsonaro's previously high levels of support have been falling since the beginning of his term.

A parallel Datafolha survey, also released on 7 April, questioned Brazilians on the prospects for the economy. Its results show that optimism for the future has dampened compared with last December, after Bolsonaro was elected but before he took office. A higher proportion now believe that inflation will rise, purchasing power will fall, and unemployment will increase. Only 22% of respondents think that the country's economic situation has improved over the past few months (31% think it has worsened and 46% think it has stayed the same), whereas 65% had expected improvement in December.

Overall, Brazilians do remain more positive about the current economy and its prospects than they have in years. But the fact that Bolsonaro and his government have so far failed to deliver any tangible results on the economic front has taken its toll on the population's satisfaction and economic optimism, and by extension the president's support.

The pension reform's slow progress

For the financial markets (and many in government), the biggest disappointment on the economic front has been the lack of progress on the approval of a pension reform. It would have been unrealistic to suggest that a structural reform of Brazil's pension system, which requires a constitutional amendment and must therefore pass with a three-fifths majority in both chambers of congress, would have been approved by now. But there had been high hopes for more progress than has been the case, as personal disputes between members of government, including Bolsonaro, and the president of the chamber of deputies, Rodrigo Maia from the Democratas (DEM) party, have dominated the news and rocked the congressional agenda.

Only this week, after a month and a half of tensions, does the stalemate over the pension reform appear to have been broken. On 9 April, after a four-hour session, the proposal's rapporteur in the chamber of deputies' constitutionality and justice committee (CCJ), PSL deputy Marcelo Freitas, recommended that the CCJ approve the reform. The CCJ is now due to debate its constitutionality on 15 April, after which the reform's specifics will be analysed by a special committee. Only after this can it be put to a plenary vote in the chamber.

Bolsonaro, meanwhile, seems to have accepted that he must actively engage in negotiations with the legislature. Over the past two weeks, he has been reaching out to leaders of party benches in an attempt to drum up support. According to estimates by the national daily *O Estado de São Paulo*, 193 federal deputies declare themselves in favour of the pension reform, of

100 days of environmental setbacks

On 9 April, Greenpeace Brasil warned against the environmental setbacks that President Bolsonaro's government is causing in the country. The NGO notes that during his first 100 days in government, Bolsonaro has weakened the environment ministry's regulatory power, attacked indigenous rights, allowed increased use of dangerous agrochemicals, and tacitly encouraged the illegal exploitation of protected territories with his discourse promoting development at all costs.

which 123 make this support conditional on certain changes in the proposal. This is still far from the 308 votes needed, but more support could still be found amongst the 213 who have not or will not pronounce themselves (107 deputies are openly against it).

Tensions in the education ministry

Despite these indications of progress on the pension reform, this week brought further evidence of the government's internal instability, when Bolsonaro dismissed Ricardo Vélez Rodríguez as education minister on 8 April. This is the second minister that Bolsonaro has sacked following Gustavo Bebianno's departure in February [[WR-19-07](#)].

The scandals and confusion that dogged the education ministry (MEC) during Vélez's short tenure reflect the wider tensions and divisions in government as a whole. Vélez's appointment had been recommended to Bolsonaro by Olavo de Carvalho, an ultra-conservative maverick philosopher who entertains conspiracy theories and is known for his foul-mouthed tirades against globalism. Described as Bolsonaro's intellectual guru, De Carvalho is also behind the appointment of Foreign Minister Ernesto Araújo and has a loyal following known as 'olavistas' (or 'olavetes') with a strong presence in government. The olavistas are frequently at odds with officials linked to the military, another powerful group in government.

Paralysis in the MEC due to tensions between the ministry's olavistas and military appointees, as well as controversies generated by Vélez himself, led to his much-expected dismissal. However, there are concerns that his replacement, Abraham Weintraub, is not better suited for the post. An ideologue like Vélez, Weintraub also has links to De Carvalho, as well as the government's economic team, and with no experience in the education sector, he could find himself caught in the crossfire of competing interests as Vélez did.

ARGENTINA | POLITICS

Río Negro election gives Macri food for thought

The 7 April gubernatorial elections in Argentina's Río Negro province produced another victory for a local political party and a resounding defeat for the nationally ruling centre-right Cambiemos coalition. With the parlous state of the domestic economy continuing to hurt the Argentine people, support for President Mauricio Macri and the economic adjustment plan implemented by his administration is waning. To have a chance of re-election in October, Macri and Cambiemos need to convince the electorate that better times lie ahead.

The Río Negro election was the second provincial poll to be held in this general election year following that in Neuquén [[WR-19-10](#)]. As in Neuquén, it was contested by Cambiemos as well as the main opposition Partido Justicialista (PJ, Peronists), with both outfits seeking to score an electoral victory to build political momentum in the run up to October. However, once again the two main national political forces were left frustrated as a local provincial party retained the governorship. Arabela Carreras of the Juntos Somos Río Negro coalition won the gubernatorial race with 52.49% of the vote followed by the PJ's Martín Soria with 35%, and Lorena Matzen, a Cambiemos national deputy, with just 5.6%.

In another parallel with the Neuquén election, Carreras is close to the popular outgoing provincial governor. Notably Carreras, who served as tourism, culture & sports minister in the provincial government, only became a gubernatorial candidate after the outgoing governor Alberto Weretilneck – who became governor in 2012 following the death of the elected governor and won election outright in 2015 – was ultimately banned

Stagflation

Some local economists maintain that, after falling into recession with GDP contracting by 2.6% and with an inflation rate of 47.6%, Argentina has entered a period of stagflation. With inflation still high and domestic economic activity showing little signs of picking up, it is feared that this will continue this year as the terms of the economic adjustment plan agreed with the IMF limits the government's ability to use fiscal policy to stimulate the economy. More problematically, some argue that this is fuelling market concerns about Argentina's ability to pay off its debts as the economy continues to contract before a powerless government, likening Argentina's predicament to Greece's.

from standing for re-election by the electoral authorities after the supreme court ruled on 22 March that this ran counter to Río Negro's constitution.

Notably, although Weretilneck started his political career in the PJ, he drifted away from the party to form Juntos Somos Río Negro with which he won election in 2015. Since then Weretilneck developed a good working relationship with the Macri administration and backed its national economic adjustment plan. However, in recent months Weretilneck has become increasingly critical of the high inflation rate, falling levels of economic activity, and rising poverty levels. This distancing from the national government is believed to have helped maintain Weretilneck's popularity, which appears to have transferred directly to Carreras (in fact, the proportion of the vote obtained by Carreras was almost identical to that obtained by Weretilneck in 2015).

Conversely, the poor performance by Cambiemos's Matzen has been attributed to the economic crisis afflicting the country which, in the eyes of many, is being exacerbated and not alleviated by the adjustment plan devised by the Macri administration and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Critics maintain that the plan, which is based on allowing the floating of the Argentine peso and eliminating the fiscal deficit through significant spending cuts, has led to a sharp depreciation of the peso, economic recession, and mass job losses. Local economists argue that Argentina is now suffering from 'stagflation' (see sidebar). Civil society organisations complain that the plan has failed to bring down inflation (which is already running at 6.8% and the central bank forecasts will end the year at 36%) and has increased the cost of living. None of this helps to boost electoral support with Argentines feeling that despite his promises their standard of life under Macri has deteriorated rather than improved.

TRACKING TRENDS

ARGENTINA | Drop in industrial and construction activity. Argentina's national statistics and census institute (Indec) released two reports on 4 April, indicating an 8.5% fall in industrial activity and a 5.3% decrease in construction activity in February 2019 with respect to the same month of 2018. However, both industrial and construction activity showed monthly gains in January and February 2019. The industrial sector had a 4.8% monthly increase in January and a 2.4% monthly increase in February. The construction sector showed monthly expansions of 4.6% and 8.3% in January and February respectively. According to Argentina's finance ministry, this provides evidence that the country's domestic economy is recovering.

PARAGUAY | Tax reform. On 4 April, the business associations that make up Paraguay's technical tax commission (CTET) asked the finance ministry to delay until the end of this month the presentation before congress of a tax reform bill. According to the deputy finance minister for taxation, Fabián Domínguez, increases in the excise tax rate and the value-added tax (VAT) rate for agricultural products are some of the main points still under discussion in the CTET. However, the CTET has reached a consensus on the corporate income tax (IRE) rate and the personal income (IRP) tax rate (figures that have not been made public). Domínguez explained that the ministry could either present to congress a project agreed with the CTET or let the legislature approve tax rates unilaterally, which would most likely lead to higher tax rates.

Manuel Ferreira, Paraguay's former finance minister (2012-2013), noted that the consensus reached on the IRE and IRP rates was significant enough that the government should reconsider its intentions to increase the excise tax rate due to the current economic slowdown and low public spending. The Unión Industrial del Paraguay (UIP), a sector lobby, has been insisting that tax increases will not be enough to reduce the fiscal deficit if government spending is not reduced. On 10 April, Paraguay's finance ministry reported that in the first quarter of 2019, 76% of tax revenue went towards the payment of public salaries.

New ally and old foe give López Obrador headache

When Andrés Manuel López Obrador assumed the Mexican presidency in December last year he must have thought that education reform would be the most straightforward of all the challenges facing him. It is not playing out that way. López Obrador won the electoral backing of the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (CNTE) after promising to annul the education reform introduced in 2013 which the country's second-largest teachers' union has fought tooth and nail. With the CNTE in tow and the country's main teachers' union, the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (SNTE), toothless, what could go wrong? Four months later the CNTE is up in arms against López Obrador's proposed education reform and the SNTE could soon get some fangs back with veteran powerbroker Elba Esther Gordillo bidding for the presidency of the union.

The CNTE is proving to be President López Obrador's most awkward ally by some distance. Over the course of the last few weeks, the CNTE has blocked access to the federal congress, subjected deputies to escraches (personally directed protests), and staged disruptive marches in Mexico City against the López Obrador administration's proposed education reform.

López Obrador moved swiftly last December to announce the repeal of the education reform approved by his predecessor Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018), which had been bitterly opposed by the CNTE, above all for its focus on teacher evaluation to improve the quality of education. But the CNTE suspects that López Obrador is singing the same song to a different tune. The fact that Deputy Cynthia López Castro of the opposition Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) tweeted on 2 April her support for López Obrador's education reform in the lower chamber of congress as it retained "80%" of the Peña Nieto administration's reform seemed to confirm the CNTE's suspicions.

The education reform has split López Obrador's ruling Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena). Some 40 Morena deputies close to the CNTE are refusing to back the reform on the grounds that it bears too many similarities to Peña Nieto's. After an extraordinary congress in Mexico City from 5 to 7 April, the CNTE released a political declaration demanding "the absolute annulment of [Peña Nieto's] education reform" and rejecting "any simulation whatsoever in the new education initiative".

La Maestra returns

It was at this juncture that Gordillo announced her intention to seek the presidency of the SNTE which she bestrode like a colossus for 25 years, in addition to serving as a secretary general of the PRI and later playing an instrumental role in the party's downfall, before her arrest in 2013 accused of embezzling M\$2.6bn (US\$137m) of union funds and links to organised crime. Sans Gordillo the SNTE turned supine, allowing Peña Nieto to push through his education reform. But Gordillo was released in December 2017 and was formally absolved of the corruption charges levelled against her in August last year. Now she is set on recovering her power at the helm of the SNTE.

While announcing her bid for the presidency of the SNTE in a 47-minute message on 7 April, Gordillo criticised the López Obrador administration's proposed education reform as "old wine in a new bottle" and "not the reform we were hoping for". Gordillo added, tongue in cheek, that "we don't want any disputes with any government, fourth, fifth or tenth transformation" (López Obrador has set great store by his promise to deliver Mexico's fourth transformation).

Education reform

The political opposition has been looking on while the CNTE protests rage and Morena wars among itself. The 2012-2013 education reform had cross-party backing and the opposition has been clear that it will not back any new reform designed to cater exclusively to the CNTE.

Military commander

During his morning press briefing, President López Obrador was asked if he still intended to appoint a retired or active military officer to head the national guard. López Obrador said that he indeed wanted to appoint an individual with military experience to the post because in his opinion they would be able to imprint “discipline, rectitude, honesty, and professionalism” to the new force. López Obrador went on to say that he had already identified a candidate, but they would only be revealed after the full command structure is thrashed out. However, asked if his proposed commander is a retired or active member of the military, López Obrador was clear that the individual in question is an active military officer.

Some commentators interpreted Gordillo’s criticism of the reform as an attempt to reach out to the CNTE. But in its declaration on 7 April, the CNTE said it would do everything within its power to oppose “the murderer” Gordillo’s attempt to resume control of the SNTE.

With the CNTE pressuring for a better deal and the SNTE poised to enter the fray, after standing on the side lines, López Obrador lashed out at both on 8 April, threatening to maintain Peña Nieto’s education reform and ditch his own proposal if the CNTE was not happy, and accusing Gordillo of “trying to make hay” by arguing falsely that his government was “more of the same”.

Speaking on 6 April in the municipality of Uruapan in the western state of Michoacán, López Obrador issued a veiled threat to the CNTE by promising to overhaul the official lists of teachers so there are none receiving money for not working, while ensuring that those who are diligently working are being paid on time. Michoacán is one of the states where the CNTE’s influence is greatest.

MEXICO | POLITICS & SECURITY

Opposition demands UN oversight for national guard

Members of the political opposition in Mexico’s federal senate took advantage of a meeting with the visiting head of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Michelle Bachelet, this week to ask for the UN to monitor the process of the creation of a national guard (GN) closely. The opposition has consistently expressed concerns that the new federal security force proposed by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador could lead to the militarisation of public security in Mexico, which could further undermine the already poor human rights situation in the country. UN oversight would place considerable pressure on López Obrador to abandon his efforts to turn the GN into some form of paramilitary force.

Bachelet was on an official visit to Mexico to gauge the current human rights situation, meeting government officials, members of the political opposition, as well as civil society groups. As part of this, Bachelet attended a special session of Mexico’s senate in which she heard the concerns of senators about human rights. It was at this meeting that senators from the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) asked Bachelet for her office to keep a close eye on the creation of the GN and ensure that it maintains a civilian command structure and not a military one as President López Obrador has proposed.

The concern that a military-controlled GN would result in the new security body committing human rights abuses was such that legislators agreed to change the original bill tabled by López Obrador for creating the GN to stipulate that it would have a civilian command structure [WR-19-08]. But López Obrador, who was unhappy with the change, said on 5 April that he plans to appoint an active military officer as the GN commander (see sidebar). This fanned fears that despite the approved legislation the GN would in effect operate as a military force, much like the army and the navy, which have faced growing accusations of human rights violations committed against civilians since their deployment to combat organised crime.

Bachelet sought to offer senators reassurances that her office would monitor the establishment of the GN to make sure that it is a civilian-led police force. “My office will accompany the process...not only the legislative process [a reference to the pending drafting of secondary legislation required for the GN to start operating] but also the education and training process,” Bachelet said. She added that “what is key in any institution – regardless of

Mobile coverage
Figures from the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSMA) for 2017 show that 51% of Mexicans are connected to mobile internet, 44% are covered but not connected, and 5% do not have coverage.

how it is formed and who is leading it – is how it tackles the security situation while guaranteeing human rights”. Notably, following her meeting with senators, Bachelet met López Obrador on 9 April and signed a formal agreement under which the OHCHR will provide technical assistance and human rights training for the GN.

Local security analysts like Alejandro Hope, however, have insisted that putting the GN under the command of a military officer would only reinforce its paramilitary nature and weaken its policing traits. In an opinion column in the national daily *El Universal* on 8 April, Hope argued that, under the government’s proposal, the GN would initially be composed of 43,000 re-trained military officers and only 18,000 federal police officers, meaning that the institution will already have a predominantly military ethos and that appointing a military officer as its commander will only reinforce rather than counterbalance this.

Hope also contended that, by definition, any active military officer is subordinate to the defence (Sedena) or navy (Semar) ministries and that this could produce an institutional conflict as the GN is supposed to fall under the control of the federal public security ministry (SSPC). “Normally such arrangements end in weak civilian control of the police force and in conflicting responsibilities,” Hope said.

TRACKING TRENDS

MEXICO | Fiscal discipline. The international credit ratings agency Fitch Ratings released a research report on 4 April noting that the ‘Pre-Criterios 2020’ preliminary budget spending planning document sent by Mexico’s finance ministry (SHCP) to the federal congress confirms the government’s intention to maintain the focus on fiscal discipline despite the current domestic economic slowdown.

The delivery of the ‘Pre-Criterios 2020’ document forms part of the preparations for the 2020 national budget, the first to be submitted to congress by the government led by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, in line with the fiscal responsibility law. The Fitch report points out that the document reduces this year’s official GDP growth forecast to 1.6%-2%. As a result, the SHCP document proposes a 0.5% of GDP reduction in government spending this year to fulfil the target of a 1% primary fiscal surplus. It also proposes a 3% reduction in spending in 2020 to deliver a primary surplus of 1.1% and an overall fiscal deficit of 2.1%. However, according to Fitch, it is unclear exactly how the government will cut spending to reach its objective. Fitch adds that the López Obrador’s administration’s commitment to maintaining fiscal discipline “could be tested” once these cuts come up for debate in congress.

MEXICO | Mobile data costs. According to a global study carried out by British company Cable using source data from 2018, at US\$7.38 Mexico has the highest average cost for 1GB of mobile internet data in Central America and the second-highest for Latin America, surpassed only by Bolivia at US\$8.51. Cable’s findings seem to contradict a 2017 report from the international telecommunications union (ITU) which placed Mexico among the 10 cheapest countries in Latin America for a 500MB handset-based mobile broadband basket.

Comparing the findings, Mexico’s federal telecommunications institute (IFT), the sector regulator, posits the inclusion of texts and minutes in Cable’s survey as the cause of the varying statistics. Despite the introduction of the 2013-2014 telecommunications reform, which among other things was designed to increase competition in the telephony sector, Mexico’s mobile telecoms market is still dominated by América Móvil. According to data from the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSMA) international trade body, América Móvil had a 67% share of the market in 2016 just three percentage points lower than before the introduction of the reform.

Talks fail to produce outcome

The 3 April deadline for the latest round of talks between the government led by President Daniel Ortega and opposition Alianza Cívica por la Justicia y la Democracia (ACJD), which began at the end of February, has come and gone with little to show. The talks were aimed at finding a solution to the crisis which began just over a year ago, stemming from the government's crackdown on its opponents. As previously, the ACJD is denouncing a lack of will on the Ortega government's part to find a genuine solution. Yet the transfer of further political prisoners to house arrest since the deadline passed has sparked speculation that the government could be compelled to make more concessions.

The ACJD had cited as evidence of this lack of will, the government's apparent disregard for a deal inked by both sides on 29 March in which it had pledged to respect and guarantee citizens' rights, such as the right to protest and press freedom. Addressing another common opposition complaint, under the deal the government also pledged to take "necessary measures to ensure the disarmament of those who carry arms without authorisation and those who organise themselves into armed groups". A day later, however, the ACJD complained that the national police (PNN) had responded with "assault, repression and arrest" to a demonstration in Managua calling for the release of political prisoners, while three people were injured after a government supporter opened fire on protesters. While the PNN claimed it was reacting to "violent groups" who were "attacking and harassing the general public", the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) denounced repression and detention of protesters, urging the government to respect the right to protest.

Other stumbling blocks in the latest round of talks have been Ortega's refusal to agree to the key opposition demands of bringing forward the 2021 general election and releasing "all political prisoners". These had numbered 802 at the start of the talks according to the human rights group Comité Pro Liberación de Presos Políticos (CPLPP), although other figures vary. The government had said it would release all political prisoners (with the help of the International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC]) within a 90-day deadline. However, ACJD leaders complained of foot-dragging amid delays over the procedure of harmonising and updating lists of prisoners held by different institutions. On 5 April (two days after the 3 April deadline) the IACHR reported that 154 prisoners had been released, after which the Ortega government announced a further 50 political prisoners would be transferred to house arrest.

International pressure

On 5 April the Organization of American States (OAS) Permanent Council held a special session to discuss the situation in Nicaragua. The meeting took place four days after the US ambassador to the OAS, Carlos Trujillo, assumed the chair of the OAS permanent council for a three-month term. Trujillo has been calling for the process of applying Art. 20 of the Inter-American Democratic Charter (IADC) against Nicaragua (which allows the OAS to take action against any member state that breaches democratic order) which could pave the way for further sanctions. OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro had signalled at the end of last year his decision to begin the process.

The Ortega government had already faced various sanctions from the US administration – not least its promulgation in December 2018 of the Nicaraguan Investment Conditionality Act (Nica Act). The lack of progress in the latest talks is likely to be ill-received by other international actors, such as the European Union, which has already warned of sanctions.

Democratic Charter

The local investigative publication *Confidencial* cited Nicaragua's former foreign minister Francisco Aguirre Sacasa (2000-2002) as saying that he would not rule out the possibility of the Inter-American Democratic Charter being applied given a likely "change in the correlation of forces" within the OAS. He is referring to the fact that a representative of Venezuela's Juan Guaidó could be recognised. Meanwhile, El Salvador's president-elect Nayib Bukele, who takes up the presidency in June, has indicated that, unlike El Salvador's outgoing president Salvador Sánchez Cerén, he will not support President Ortega.

Concerns over new comptroller general

Civil-society groups like Pro Justicia and Acción Ciudadana (AC), the local branch of international NGO Transparency International (TI), have raised concerns about the legislature's recent election of Edwin Salazar as the country's new comptroller general for a four-year term. The election itself, which took place on 3 April, was already six months late. UNE bench leader Orlando Blanco complained that, ahead of the election, the ruling party and its allies had been offering Q100,000 (US\$13,000) per vote in favour of Salazar. In a statement dated 3 April AC complained that the election process "presented irregularities that do not guarantee that the elected person fulfils requirements of capability, suitability, and integrity". Among other concerns, the same statement warned that lobby groups invested "millions" in support of Salazar's candidacy while the process of evaluating the different candidates was "not transparent".

Twist to electoral race as TSE moves against Aldana

With just over two months to go until the general election, Guatemala's electoral authority (TSE) has revoked the candidacy of one of the main contenders, Thelma Aldana, a former attorney general (AG) (2014-2018), who was running for the new centre-left Movimiento Semilla. Aldana, who has said that she will appeal the move, maintains that there are efforts afoot by the political establishment to exclude her from the race. She links this to her ground-breaking attempts (along with the United Nations-backed International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, Cicig) to tackle corruption – not least her requests for President Jimmy Morales to be investigated for illegal campaign financing.

The TSE announced its decision on 1 April on the grounds that Aldana's registration documents were not valid. The former AG is currently in El Salvador, having failed to return to Guatemala after being issued with an arrest warrant relating to other charges last month [[WR-19-12](#)]. Her representatives have told reporters that she will remain there until guarantees are in place for her safety and judicial security. When the arrest warrant was released, Movimiento Semilla was clear to link it and the related charges to Aldana's previous efforts to tackle corruption. In a series of tweets, it recalled that as AG, she had presented requests for legal action against President Morales and the so-called 'pacto de corruptos'. This is a reference to the pro-Morales coalition in the 158-member unicameral legislature which voted on various occasions not to strip him of immunity from prosecution, thus preventing him from being investigated for alleged illegal campaigning financing involving the ruling Frente de Convergencia Nacional (FCN-Nación).

Aldana also faces various other complaints, including one filed by the current frontrunner former First Lady (2008-2012) Sandra Torres of the Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE). Torres herself continues to face legal uncertainty over her own candidacy. While the supreme court (CSJ) rejected a request to strip her of her immunity from prosecution at the end of February, to be investigated for allegations of illegal campaign finance [[WR-19-10](#)] Cicig has since filed an appeal before the constitutional court (CC) against the CSJ's decision.

Electoral violence concerns

On 29 March Mirador Electoral, a group of civil-society organisations, issued its first report on the election in which it warned that 75% of the country's 340 municipalities are facing either "extreme or high risk" of violent acts or conflict during the electoral process. It notes that the highest number of municipalities are located in departments such as Huehuetenango, San Marcos, Suchitepéquez, Jutiapa, and Chiquimula.

So far, four murders linked to the electoral process have been registered since the start of the year. Most recently, on 8 April, Hermil Leonel Nájera Trigueros, a member of the campaign team for the indigenous Movimiento para la Liberación de los Pueblos (MLP) for Libertad municipality, Petén department was killed after being shot six times. On 17 March, Willy René de Paz Bojorquez, a candidate for the indigenous party Comité de Desarrollo Campesino (Codeco) who was running for a local council position in Poptún mayoralty, Petén department, was shot dead. Meanwhile, Marvin Geovanni Peña, a mayoral candidate for Tiquisate municipality, Escuintla department, and Arturo Juc Caal, a mayoral precandidate for Tinta municipality, Alta Verapaz department, were shot dead on 11 February and 21 January respectively. Both were linked to the small opposition Fuerza party.

According to Mirador Electoral, a total of 20 murders linked to electoral violence were registered in the 2015 election campaign, fewer than the 37 cases registered in the previous electoral process in 2011.

Quotes of the week

“In the 21st century pure Christianity is called chavismo.”

Venezuela's de facto president Nicolás Maduro.

“We are building [momentum], sometimes not as fast as we would like, but we are confronting a sadist regime.”

Venezuela's interim president Juan Guaidó.

“I am not going to lecture the president but when I say that they have not acted intelligently it is because you don't sit down to negotiations amid threats, blackmail, and blocked roads.”

Peru's president of congress, Daniel Salaverry, on President Martín Vizcarra's Las Bambas accord.

POSTSCRIPT

Uruguay's government struggling to defuse army tensions

“Military subordination to political authority is not in question,” José Bayardi, said on 4 April, four days before being sworn-in as Uruguay's new defence minister. In the interim, the new commander of the army, General Claudio Feola, the third in as many weeks, caused consternation among victims of the disappeared by stating that he was not in a position to confirm whether the accusations of human rights abuses carried out during the military dictatorship (1973-1985) were “real”.

Bayardi, who has already presided over the defence ministry (2008-2009), replaces Jorge Menéndez, who left under a cloud after President Tabaré Vázquez unwittingly signed off on documents from a military tribunal which contained, among other things, a confession from retired Lieutenant Colonel José Gavazzo that he had disposed of the body of a Tupamaro guerrilla, Roberto Gomensoro, who had been arrested, tortured, and murdered days earlier, into a river in 1973 [WR-19-13]. Feola's predecessor as commander of the army, General José González, had sat on the military tribunal, bringing his short tenure to an abrupt end (his predecessor General Guido Manini Ríos had been dismissed for misconduct by Vázquez two weeks earlier).

Bayardi is keen to turn the page on the whole affair as swiftly as possible. But he was forced to haul in Feola for an explanation after the new commander of the army appeared intent on following Manini Ríos and González out of the exit door by casting doubt on human rights abuses committed during the dictatorship in a media interview. Feola's comments incensed some members of the ruling left-wing Frente Amplio (FA) coalition as well as the Madres y Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos de Uruguay. The NGO's spokesperson, Nilo Patiño, denounced “a broad layer of military officials” who behave as if Uruguay were still under a dictatorship, adding that Feola's remarks were all the more “horrifying” because of what they suggested about the values inculcated in new recruits. Patiño also criticised Bayardi for coming to Feola's defence by saying he was “inexperienced” in front of the media.

After a talking to from Bayardi, Feola rushed out a statement seeking to clarify his comments, rejecting “aberrant and repugnant acts...that compromised the name of the institution”, adding that the army would “continue to make the maximum effort to respond to the demands of relatives of disappeared prisoners”, as well as “teaching respect for human rights...and republican democratic ideals”, but Patiño questioned whether he had written the text. Feola's future comments and actions will be more closely scrutinised than ever.

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