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## López Obrador guns for predecessors in bid to revive fortunes

Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador is intent on stoking past resentments in a bid to divert attention from the grim present reality and spark future electoral success. López Obrador's approval rating remains high but it is well down on the stratospheric heights he achieved soon after coming to power in December 2018 in large part due to the perceived failings of his government's response to the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic and its economic fallout. With no present developments offering much prospect of boosting his support, he is advancing with an idea to stage a referendum to gauge popular backing for prosecuting his five predecessors, alongside elections in June 2021. This is becoming a major political and judicial issue, with the supreme court (SCJN) debating the referendum's legality as we go to press. Whatever the outcome of its deliberations, it looks like being a win-win scenario for López Obrador.

With more than 77,000 Covid-19 deaths, and 10 times as many confirmed cases of the virus in Mexico; with the economy set to suffer a double-digit contraction in 2020; and with violent homicides running at a level as high if not higher than before he took office, President López Obrador needs a distraction. His approval rating has taken a knock. In excess of 80% some 18 months ago, it has been steadily eroded and, according to a poll of polls by Oraculus, now stands at 57% on a downwards trajectory. This is disputed by López Obrador, who insists that his popularity is in excess of 60%, but while his support base remains loyal, if somewhat disillusioned, his opponents are growing more outspoken.

The conservative protest group Frente Nacional AntiAMLO (Frena) has occupied the main Zócalo square outside the national palace in Mexico City since last week calling for López Obrador to resign. He himself addressed the matter in his morning press conference on 29 November, insisting that he would leave power without demur and return to his ranch in Palenque, in the southernmost state of Chiapas, if opponents could muster a demonstration of more than 100,000 people and he sees that he no longer enjoys popular support in the polls, without waiting for a possible recall referendum on his mandate in 2022. There is very little prospect of that happening. López Obrador's combative response smacks more of an attempt to face down his opponents and galvanise his own support base in keeping with the confrontational politics he practices.

This strategy is also in evidence in López Obrador's decision to organise his own referendum, this one on whether the five presidents who served immediately before him should be investigated and prosecuted. In mid September he sent the proposed question to the senate for approval: "Do you agree or not that the competent authorities, in accordance with applicable laws and procedures, should investigate and, as the case may

## Opposition response

The political opposition accused President López Obrador of being intent on staging a political lynching, arguing that if he was in possession of evidence of wrongdoing by his predecessors then he should present it to the attorney general's office to investigate. Former president Calderón accused López Obrador, with whom he has clashed frequently in recent months, of "mistaking the Republic for a Roman circus" by turning to spectators to "convict or pardon innocents with a show of thumbs up or down".

be, prosecute possible crimes committed by former presidents Carlos Salinas de Gortari [1988-1994], Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León [1994-2000], Vicente Fox Quesada [2000-2006], Felipe Calderón Hinojosa [2006-2012], and Enrique Peña Nieto [2012-2018] before, during, and after their respective administrations?"

López Obrador maintains that he would vote 'no' because he does not believe in "vengeance", but this image of tolerance is belied by his frequent diatribes against his predecessors, his predilection for heaping opprobrium on past administrations, and the terms in which this latest initiative sent to the senate is couched. It claims that during the 30 years of their respective administrations, "neoliberalism left millions of victims" and that there was "uncontrolled growth in violence, public insecurity, massive human rights violations, normalised impunity, and the breakdown of the rule of law in vast areas of the national territory."

The referendum initiative goes on to allege that Salinas de Gortari was "imposed by fraud" and that "inequality grew the most" under his administration; that "the policies of privatisation [were taken] to their ultimate consequences" under Zedillo; that Fox was guilty of "unwarranted and illegal intervention" in the 2006 presidential elections, which López Obrador lost to Calderón, who, in turn, was accused of "handing territory over to criminal gangs"; and that Peña Nieto received "large quantities of money of unknown provenance in his presidential campaign".

SCJN magistrate Luis María Aguilar responded by presenting a proposal to the full court declaring that such a referendum "would condition the exercise and protection of human rights to the will of the majority, which runs counter to the constitution". Aguilar added that it contained "a series of unconstitutionality which could negatively impact access to justice, criminal prosecution, and the rule of law itself". The SCJN started deliberating on Aguilar's proposal on 1 October.

López Obrador fired off a salvo in response. He ramped up the pressure on the SCJN by saying that it was "an important day...because the court will resolve whether it is acceptable to apply participative democracy" and that it should "assume responsibility" as the "people want to be heard". He said there would be "no summary, extrajudicial, judgement, but public prosecution...should the people approve the referendum". López Obrador added that he would present a bill to congress to modify article 35 of the constitution if the SCJN rejected the referendum in order to make the requirements for public consultations more flexible and the results binding.

López Obrador stands to benefit from whatever the SCJN decides. If it rules that the referendum is unconstitutional, he could argue that he did his best to deliver it but was thwarted by the judiciary. This would leave the SCJN open to popular indignation stirred up by López Obrador as if the magistrates were absolving the former presidents of guilt rather than merely ruling that this would be an inappropriate means of proceeding against them. If the SCJN rules that the referendum is acceptable then López Obrador gets to bolster his anti-corruption credentials, diverting attention from his government's mishandling of the pandemic and the parlous state of the economy.

Despite López Obrador's protestations to the contrary, the referendum is eminently political, right down to the choice of date in the senate initiative: 6 June 2021. By calling for the referendum to be held together with federal congressional, gubernatorial, and municipal elections on this date, it would not just further politicise a legal issue, but deepen the political polarisation on which López Obrador thrives, while increasing turnout among those who might otherwise stay at home.

## Street protests coming back?

For most of this year an unrelenting combination of heavy-handed political and popular repression, a catastrophic economy, and fear of the coronavirus (Covid-19) infection has damped down street protests in Venezuela. This may be changing: the last week has seen over 100 angry protests, including clashes with the security forces in 19 of the country's 23 states.

Most of the protests have taken place away from the capital Caracas, which is more tightly controlled and better supplied than other Venezuelan towns and cities. Street protests have focused on the lack of basic services, including shortages of petrol, water, medicine, and cooking gas. Protesters have blocked roads and burnt tyres, and in one case in San Carlos, the capital of the centre-west state of Cojedes, looted a CLAP subsidised food store. At various points security forces have dispersed crowds with tear gas and gunshot fire.

Some of the first wave of protests took place in the contiguous state of Yaracuy and were unusually sparked by dissident left-wing political parties that have recently departed the pro-government coalition led by the ruling Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV). These include members of the Alternativa Popular Revolucionaria (APR), an alliance closely linked to the Partido Comunista de Venezuela (PCV).

There have also been reports of protest action by Tupamaros, a long-standing armed group at one time linked to the motorcycle riding pro-regime street enforcers known as *colectivos*. Relations between some of these groups and the PSUV-led government of Nicolás Maduro have turned sour, with Maduro trying to seize legal control of some of their parties in the same way he has attempted to capture mainstream opposition groups.

The political complexion of the demonstrations remained fluid. Eduardo Torres, a human rights activist in Yaracuy, said demonstrators had faced brutal repression at the hands of police and *colectivos*. While acknowledging the early involvement of left-wing dissidents, Torres said the protests were cross-party affairs coordinated on social media.

Alfredo Díaz, the opposition-aligned governor of the north-eastern island state of Nueva Esparta said the protests were a response to the government's "incapacity" to deliver basic services.

Opposition leader Juan Guaidó called on Venezuelans to join the protests. Guaidó has struggled for months to rally opponents of the regime and may now believe he is at last facing a real opportunity to capitalise on some protests, although he has experienced many false dawns. He called for opponents of the government to join a strike and protest action in support of the country's teachers on 5 October.

Guaidó also spoke of creating opposition "commandos for freedom and free elections" to keep up the pressure on Maduro. What these commandos will do was not immediately clear, but Guaidó indicated that their main role would be to campaign against the proposed congressional elections on 6 December which the main opposition alliance is boycotting, on the grounds that they will be fraudulent.

### Petrol shortages

Lobby group Observatorio Venezolano de Conflictividad Social (OVCS) said it had logged 748 protests across the country during August, and that the number for September would be higher. OVCS said that on one day, Friday 25 September, there had been around 100 protests. Last month, some 40% of the protests were sparked by petrol shortages. There were reports of new petrol deliveries by two Iranian tankers at the end of the month, which were expected to ease the shortages.

## Side-stepping a fishing dispute with China

Reports of a Chinese-flagged mega fishing fleet operating close to Peru's territorial waters have caused concern in Lima, but the government is also wary that it is being egged on by the US, eager to drag it into a maritime dispute with a superpower rival.

It all started with a tweet. On 22 September US President Donald Trump delivered a speech to the United Nations General Assembly in which he accused China of dumping “millions and millions of tonnes of plastic and trash into the oceans” as well as “overfishing in other countries’ waters” and destroying coral reefs.

Hours later the US embassy in Peru issued a tweet “alert” saying that a “mega fleet” of around 300 Chinese trawlers had arrived off the Peruvian coast. These ships, the US said, had a history of de-activating their satellite trackers and changing boat names. “Over-fishing can cause enormous ecological and economic damage. Peru cannot afford such a loss,” the tweet said. A new Peruvian law passed in August requires foreign ships to use GPS and SISESAT trackers to allow their movements to be monitored.

The Peruvian authorities sent out air force spotter planes and a navy patrol boat to investigate, reporting back that the Chinese trawlers, although present in large numbers scattered over a relatively large area, had not entered Peruvian territorial waters, situated up to 200 nautical miles off the country's coastline. The Peruvian foreign ministry expressed “unease” at the “inconvenient inaccuracy” of the US embassy tweet, noting that it had failed to acknowledge that the Chinese ships were “demonstrably” outside Peru's territorial waters.

The foreign ministry went on to suggest that the US and China should resolve their differences through dialogue, but it noted at the same time that Peru would “defend its sovereignty and natural resources, and equally firmly prevent, discourage, and eradicate illegal fishing”. The Chinese embassy in Lima also entered the fray, accusing the US of peddling “false information” and insisting that its ships observed international law and operated only on the high seas.

While Peru was careful not to be pulled into a dispute that was “made in Washington” it is also true that it, and many of its neighbours, remain seriously concerned over Chinese fishing. Typically, large Chinese fishing fleets follow the Humboldt Current, tracking migrating shoals of giant squid and anchovies in the Pacific.

In August the ‘mega fleet’ was detected operating close to Ecuador's Galápagos archipelago and to the protected Galápagos Marine Reserve [\[WR-20-33\]](#). Marine environmental lobby group Oceana used satellite tracking to conclude that Chinese trawlers put in 73,000 hours of fishing time around the Galápagos in the month to 13 August, accounting for 99% of all fishing in that area.

Peruvian coast guard commander Rear Admiral Jorge Portocarrero said Chinese trawlers typically move in a triangular area in the Pacific stretching from the north of Chile to the Peruvian coast and to the Galápagos. Chinese mega-fleets also operate in the Atlantic off Argentina and off the northern coast of Brazil. Peru's trade group Sociedad Nacional de Pesquería (SNP) says indiscriminate fishing of giant squid hurts the domestic industry. Squid accounts for around 43% of the country's fish exports. In 2018 Peru and Ecuador together are reported to have captured 4.5m tonnes of fish, similar to the US catch, but only about a quarter of China's catch, according to World Bank data. China accounts for around one-third of the world's fish consumption.

### US-China dispute

This is not the first time the US government's wider diplomatic tensions with China have spilled over into regional fishing concerns. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo put out a statement criticising the “predatory fishing practices” of China after its ‘mega fleet’ was detected operating close to Ecuador's Galápagos archipelago in August. Pompeo condemned the “illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing” of Chinese vessels.



## Uncertainty prevails as election draws close

### Arturo Murillo

The perception that Arturo Murillo has benefitted from a shift in power within the government was furthered by the news on 29 September that he had travelled to the US, for meetings with the secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro, and with US State Department officials. A foreign ministry statement reported that Murillo had gone instead of the foreign minister, Karen Longaric “due to the importance of these meetings for the country”; Murillo offered few details on the content of these meetings, saying only that he had discussed electoral preparations with Almagro, and “co-ordinated state security issues with the White House”.

One thing that Bolivia’s protracted election campaign has unequivocally demonstrated is that a shared opposition to the previous Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) government is not as powerful a force for unity as some in the country had hoped. Demonstrated first by the repeated failure of the array of anti-MAS presidential candidates to consolidate an alliance, interim president Jeanine Áñez’s recent withdrawal from the contest [\[WR-20-38\]](#) has exposed similar fragilities within her own governing coalition. With a divisive election on the horizon, and a deadly pandemic still in full flow, a crumbling government is the last thing Bolivia needs.

Áñez renouncing her presidential candidacy ought to have put the interim government in a stronger position to oversee what is likely to be a highly contentious electoral process. Instead, many of those close to Áñez have quickly drifted away, while others have rushed to push through their own policy priorities before a new administration takes office at the end of the year. This schism was brought into full view on 28 September, as the economy minister, Óscar Ortiz, reported that he had been sacked for disagreeing with a presidential decree he felt to be “unconstitutional”, returning ownership of the electricity company Empresa de Luz y Fuerza Eléctrica de Cochabamba (Elfec) – privatised by the MAS in 2010 – to its former shareholders.

A long-time colleague of Áñez as senators for the right-wing party Demócratas, Ortiz is by no means ideologically opposed to such a privatisation. He attributed his opposition on this occasion to his “respect for the laws and interests of the country”, but it perhaps owed more to tensions with the interior minister, Arturo Murillo, who Ortiz claims is “concentrating power in his own hands”, with Áñez left as a lame duck (*see sidebar*). The implication is that Murillo, formerly a senator for Cochabamba, where Elfec is based, has a vested interest in this privatisation. Murillo retaliated with a thinly-veiled allegation of hypocrisy, alluding to Ortiz and Demócratas’ economic interests in Santa Cruz department when he said that “unfortunately there are people who defend their own regions tooth and nail, but when others defend their regions, they are opposed”.

There has never been a shortage of strong personalities in Áñez’s cabinet, appointed in November 2019 to appease the broad coalition that had forced out the MAS to put her in power [\[WR-19-45\]](#). As well as Murillo, the defence minister, Fernando López (aligned with far-right presidential candidate Luis Fernando Camacho), has shown himself to be something of a strongman, and raised concerns last week by referring to the armed forces as “part of the democratic logic” of Bolivia. It comes as a surprise, however, that Áñez’s Demócratas colleagues have been the first to jump ship; the labour minister, Óscar Mercado, and the productive development minister, José Abel Martínez, resigned shortly after Ortiz’s statement, and the party’s national executive committee had distanced itself from her administration by the end of the day.

Áñez sought to recover the situation by insisting that her decree had merely created a technical commission to analyse the return of Elfec shares, and by quickly appointing three new ministers. But the damage was already done. MAS-aligned senate president Eva Copa claimed that the government is “falling apart”, attributing this “crisis” to “misrule, infighting, private economic interests, and corruption”. If there is to be any possibility of a peaceful transition of power following October’s vote, Bolivia needs the interim government to keep its head down until then, rather than continuing to push a political agenda; the key question may be whether Áñez retains enough authority within her own cabinet to enforce such behaviour.

## Vote of censure

Jorge Robledo's request was originally filed over Carlos Holmes Trujillo's failure to consult congress before inviting a US Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB) to help tackle drug trafficking in Colombia [\[WR-20-23\]](#), but its outcome will undoubtedly be shaped by everything that has happened since. Called on by the CSJ to apologise for violence against protesters, Trujillo claimed that his earlier criticisms of those responsible for such "excesses" fulfilled the terms of this judicial order.

## Electoral tensions

The MAS could soon be facing a crisis of its own, if Bolivia's electoral tribunal (TSE) rules on 5 September to disqualify the party from participating in the election, following an appeal by Demócratas senator Carmen Eva Gonzales, after MAS presidential nominee Luis Arce allegedly discussed internal polling results during a televised interview in July. A ruling against the MAS - leading in the polls, and hopeful of a first-round victory - is highly unlikely, but all eyes will be on this hearing nonetheless, given the scale of discontent that such an exclusion would incite among the party's supporters.

The first poll since Áñez's withdrawal from the contest, published by pollsters Ciesmori on 30 September, suggested the field remains highly fragmented. Arce and the MAS retain their lead, with 42.2% of valid voting intentions, but without the 10% lead needed to secure a first-round victory, as Carlos Mesa of Comunidad Ciudadana (CC) sits on 34.1%. Much of Áñez's support seems to have gone to her erstwhile ally Camacho, on 17.5%; if a second round of voting is required, much will depend on whether his supporters turn out to vote for Mesa.

## COLOMBIA | POLITICS & SECURITY

### Trujillo stirs the pot on social media

Facing growing pressure, Colombia's defence minister Carlos Holmes Trujillo unleashed a late-night *Twitter* tirade on 27 September, in which he defended the "legitimate authority" of state security forces "to confront vandals, violent terrorists, instigators, and accomplices", and repeatedly called for the "slanderers" who criticised him to be "thrown in prison". With a congressional motion of censure scheduled to be debated on 13 October, and public anger over violence by state security forces showing no signs of dissipating [\[WR-20-37\]](#), it is difficult to see how Trujillo can stay in his post.

The principal target of Trujillo's rage was opposition senator Jorge Robledo, who sponsored the motion of censure (see sidebar). Robledo said that "a person with such serious legal and ethical weaknesses cannot be a minister in Colombia, let alone a defence minister", and he accused Trujillo of "hurting the country's institutions", most recently by rejecting last week's supreme court (CSJ) ruling calling for the government to take action in defence of the right to protest [\[WR-20-38\]](#). In response, Trujillo condemned as "slandrous" not just this critique, but also those condemning other elements of the government's security policy, such as its increasingly militarised approach to coca eradication.

Trujillo took to *Twitter* once again two nights later, this time setting his sights on Bogotá's mayor Claudia López, after she called into question his claim that the protests had been orchestrated by guerrilla groups such as the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and dissident remobilised factions of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc). This came after the 'Segunda Marquetalia' - the most prominent remobilised Farc group, run by some of its former leadership, currently in hiding in Venezuela - issued a statement condemning the government for "setting the country on fire", and calling on President Iván Duque to resign.

Trujillo claimed that this intervention makes it "more necessary and urgent" that state security forces are entrusted to use "legitimate force...to combat the ELN, the Farc, and other narco-terrorists in the country". However, the Farc statement staked no claim to having orchestrated the protests, simply voicing its support for their objectives; similarly, ELN commander Ómar Gómez ('Uriel') last week confirmed that members of the guerrilla group had taken part in demonstrations in Bogotá, but had not played any role in organising them.

### Tradition

The tradition of broadcasting ads across all TV channels during popular consultations dates back to the 1988 plebiscite in which Chileans were asked if they agreed with Pinochet remaining head of state or if they preferred for presidential elections to be held. Back then, the leftist opposition groups joined forces to launch a highly successful 'positive thinking' ad campaign considered instrumental in securing an improbable victory for the 'no' vote in rejection of Pinochet. While the circumstances are very different, many are drawing parallels between the 1988 plebiscite and next month's vote, although this time it is a victory for the 'reject' camp that looks less likely with public opinion polls showing overwhelming support for a new constitution.

### Plebiscite campaign stokes polarisation

The campaigning for Chile's national plebiscite on 25 October on whether the country needs a new constitution is now in full swing, with those that want a new constitution and those opposed to it allowed to conduct public and media campaigns to try to sway voters. There are concerns that this democratic exercise is stoking the country's historic political divisions and that it could reignite the social unrest that erupted last year following widespread protests in rejection of social and economic inequality. Managing these tensions and policing the campaigns while continuing to fight the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic could become a major challenge for the government led by President Sebastián Piñera.

The Piñera government reluctantly agreed to hold the constitutional plebiscite to appease those protesting against inequality and bring an end to the social unrest that paralysed the country at the tail end of last year. The drafting of a new constitution that incorporates more individual rights and guarantees, and replaces the magna carta penned during the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship, was one of the leading protest demands. But the need for a new constitution divides the country. While many civil society groups and the leftist political opposition are broadly in favour of drafting a new constitution, conservative groups and most in the centre-right ruling Chile Vamos coalition are generally opposed.

Conservatives have long fretted that rewriting the constitution would shake Chile's foundations and undermine a political and economic model that they argue has been largely successful, providing political stability and continued economic growth for decades. They fear that a new constitutional process would be dominated by efforts to satisfy the political left's demands for the new constitution to include the kind of socialist principles that run counter to a free market economic model that they are not prepared to accept and are similar to those that prompted the military coup d'état against Salvador Allende (1970-1973) in the first place. The possibility of voting in the plebiscite on how the constituent assembly tasked with drafting a new constitution should be formed has not completely dispelled these concerns.

The coup and the atrocities committed by the Pinochet dictatorship remain an open wound that still divides Chileans today and many see the battle over a new constitution as a continuation of the political struggle between Chile's right and left. This helps explain why the issue incites passions on both sides of the plebiscite campaign: the 'approve' camp (those that want a new constitution) and the 'reject' camp (those that reject the need for a new constitution). These passions were on clear display over the 25-28 September weekend, after the plebiscite process reached a critical point: the start of the TV advertising campaign period. In line with what has become tradition for national consultations in Chile (*see sidebar*), starting from 25 September and until 22 October both camps have been given daily national TV slots to broadcast advertisements in support of their cause.

The start of the so-called 'Franja Televisiva' was marked by the staging of public demonstrations by both camps. Sympathisers from both camps organised street demonstrations around the capital Santiago throughout the weekend. But the largest of these took place on 25 September in the Plaza Italia square, the epicentre of the social protests that started last year. Like every Friday, various groups demonstrated in the Plaza Italia pressing various social demands. However, the calls for an 'approve' vote in the plebiscite were a common theme.

## Violence

The violence and the mass gathering of people was criticised by government officials. Interior Minister Víctor Pérez said that the large demonstrations and the violence with which some demonstrators reacted when Carabineros sought to disperse them were “irresponsible”. Recalling that the restrictions on mass gatherings are part of the sanitary protocols to contain the spread of Covid-19, Pérez warned that such irresponsible acts could lead to an increase in infections in Santiago Region where the number of cases only began to come down at the start of September.

As the Plaza Italia demonstration rapidly grew (some 300 people were present on police estimates), the Carabineros militarised police used tear gas and water cannon to disperse the crowds for being in breach of the restrictions on mass gatherings in place to contain the spread of Covid-19. This led to some violent clashes between Carabineros and demonstrators (see sidebar). With both the ‘approve’ and ‘reject’ camps announcing the staging of public events throughout the campaign period, the risk that tensions and Covid-19 infections could rise will be a major concern for the Piñera administration.

## Employment programme

On 27 September, President Sebastián Piñera announced the launch of a plan to subsidise employment, aimed at supporting a national economic recovery and restoring jobs lost due to the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as creating new jobs.

The initiative, which the government hopes will help recover some of the 1.8m jobs lost during the pandemic and create up to 1m new jobs, involves an investment of US\$2bn over six months. The scheme will provide subsidies to employers who contract new employees or re-employ suspended workers. The government will subsidise 50% of each new employee’s gross monthly salary, to a maximum of Cl\$250,000 (US\$317). If the new employee is a woman, aged 18 to 24, or a person with disabilities, the government will give the employer a subsidy equivalent to 60% of the gross monthly salary, capped at Cl\$270,000. In the case of the re-employment of workers who were suspended under the employment protection law (a furlough scheme implemented during the pandemic), the subsidy to employers will be Cl\$160,000.

Since the onset of the pandemic, the Piñera administration has implemented various programmes designed to offset its negative economic impact equivalent to 12% of the GDP. Nevertheless, Chile’s GDP fell by a record high 14.1% year-on-year in the second quarter, and the central bank now forecasts that the economy will contract by 7.5% this year.

## ARGENTINA | POLITICS & JUSTICE

### Top court defies government with ‘per saltum’ ruling

Argentina’s supreme court (CSJN) ruled on 29 September that it would consider ‘per saltum’ appeals against the transfer of three federal judges involved in corruption investigations. The issue could escalate into a major conflict between the judiciary and the government led by President Alberto Fernández.

The three federal judges are Leopoldo Bruglia, Germán Castelli, and Pablo Bertuzzi. All have been involved in hearing corruption cases against Vice-President Cristina Fernández (who served as president from 2007 to 2015). Castelli, for example, has been hearing the ‘Causa de los Cuadernos’ (‘notebooks case’), a bribes-for-public contracts scheme alleged to have operated during Cristina’s time in office.

The vice-president, who faces a total of nine corruption cases, has not concealed her animosity towards the three. She says she is the victim of persecution at their hands and has accused the opposition of trying to “illegally” keep the three judges in federal court circuits “to guarantee the impunity of Mauricio Macri” – her longstanding opponent and successor (2015-2019).

The three were in fact transferred into their current positions during the Macri presidency, transfers that were approved at the time by the federal senate and enabled by presidential decree. President Alberto Fernández has tried to use exactly the same procedure to send them back to their courts



## Sanitary measures

The TSE has issued basic guidelines on sanitary measures to adopt during the elections due to the coronavirus pandemic: asking candidates to avoid attracting crowds and recommending social distancing and the use of facemasks at all time. Stricter restrictions on campaigning will depend on local rules, as coronavirus restrictions have been implemented at state or municipal level since the start of the pandemic. Most restrictions have now been lifted (although some states and cities have begun tightening them again) – despite the country's 4.8m cases and almost 144,000 deaths, the public discussion in Brazil has largely moved away from Covid-19. However, the polarising debate over the pandemic and authorities' response to it could be a feature of the campaign in some cities.

of origin. On 16 September their "return" transfer was approved with the votes of 41 out of 72 senators. Opposition senators boycotted the session, which they said was a politically motivated attack on the independence of the judiciary. The following day President Fernández issued three decrees moving the judges. However, all three filed 'per saltum' appeals against their transfer – a procedure which allowed them to jump over lower appeal courts and make their case directly to the CSJN.

President Fernández criticised CSJN president Carlos Rosenkrantz for agreeing to hold an emergency meeting of the court to analyse the request. He was also angered by a demonstration supporting the three judges held outside the home of CSJN justice Ricardo Lorenzetti, which he said was reminiscent of actions taken by "Nazis and fascists". In the event all five justices present voted unanimously to hear the case, freezing the transfer decree until a definitive ruling is reached. For the government, the deputy justice minister, Juan Martin Mena, countered angrily that the SCJN was politicised and "losing academic and judicial prestige". The issue is set to feed an increase in tension between the executive and the judiciary.

### Tougher times for the president

An opinion poll by Giacobbe Consultores shows that President Alberto Fernández's approval rating has fallen to 37%, well below a disapproval rating of 49%. The pollster found that the opposition-aligned mayor of Buenos Aires, Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, is currently the country's most popular politician.

Other polls also show Fernández gradually losing popularity, with Synopsis saying the proportion of respondents blaming Fernández for the economic crisis has increased from 42% to 55%. Continuing lockdown restrictions and slow progress in reducing coronavirus infection rates is likely to continue to weigh down on his ratings.

## BRAZIL | POLITICS

### Elections with new rules, old problems

Brazilians will elect their mayor and municipal councillors for the next four years in the country's 5,568 municipalities on 15 November, with a second round planned for 29 November. This is the first electoral test for President Jair Bolsonaro, although he has kept his distance from electoral talk. Held in the context of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic and with a number of new electoral rules in place, these elections – for which campaigning began on 27 September – will be unlike previous municipal votes. But familiar problems, most notably the issue of corruption, have already cropped up.

Electoral reforms passed in 2017 will apply for the first time to municipal elections this year. One of the main changes is a ban on electoral coalitions in elections through proportional representation (that is to say, elections for the country's legislative bodies). Coalition lists for electoral purposes between parties with no shared agenda or ideology was a common practice in Brazil's fractured political landscape, with the idea behind ending this being to reduce the number of parties elected to the country's legislatures.

The end of electoral coalitions means that rules on gender quotas will have to be met within each party rather than within a coalition, something which the supreme electoral court (TSE) hopes will increase female participation. As well as being legally obliged to register a minimum of 30% female candidates, since 2018 parties must also allocate public campaign funds and free radio and TV advertising airtime proportionally between male and female candidates. Similar rules guaranteeing the proportional distribution of public funds and publicity airtime to candidates of colour

## Political nicknames

Candidates in Brazilian elections can register with the name of their choice – allowing them to use the name or nickname by which they are best known, rather than their legal name. The result is that many candidates adopt the names of better-known figures in the hopes of boosting their profile; this year, 84 candidates have registered under ‘Bolsonaro’ and 185 under ‘Lula’. There are also three candidates with the name ‘Trump’, 18 ‘Obamas’ and 99 ‘Tiriricas’ – a well-known federal deputy who is a clown by profession. Candidates also often include references to their profession or affiliation to, for example, the security forces or religious sector in their name. Almost 9,000 candidates have registered with a religious title such as ‘pastor’.

were passed by the TSE in August this year. Initially due to come into force for the 2022 general elections, the supreme court (STF) ordered that these rules be applied in this year’s municipal campaign.

At first glance, these attempts to diversify political candidates appear to have been successful. According to the candidacies registered with the TSE as of 26 September, this year has the highest proportion of female candidates and candidates of colour ever (as well as a record number overall of candidates for the mayoral and municipal council positions). Women make up 34% of the more than 540,000 registered candidates, while 51% of all candidates identify as black or mixed race (‘pardo’), meaning that candidates of colour outnumber white candidates (48%) for the first time. These numbers are to be read with caution, however; the proportion of women amongst just mayoral candidates falls to one in ten, while several thousand candidates reportedly changed the race to which they identify between 2016 and now.

Voting and campaigning will also be impacted by the context of the pandemic. With recommendations against public gatherings, campaigns are expected to play out online, a factor which some political scientists think could favour incumbents seeking re-election, as they are already known to the electorate (although this advantage could be reversed if their perceived management of the pandemic is negative). In a speech on 26 September TSE Justice Luís Roberto Barros called for campaigns to be run without “lies [or] hatred” and warned against fake news and misinformation – not a new problem in Brazilian elections, but one magnified by the pandemic.

Another familiar issue to have already reared its head is corruption, the shadow of which continues to hang over local politics. Last week, the federal police (PF) arrested four mayors for suspected crimes against public administration in the northern border state of Rondônia, the result of an investigation begun last year into bribes for public contracts. A more visible case has been that of the incumbent mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Marcelo Crivella.

In the most recent of a series of scandals, prosecutors have accused Crivella of leading a kickback scheme in the Rio municipality. Crivella has avoided impeachment proceedings, but on 24 September Rio’s electoral tribunal (TRE-RJ) voted unanimously to declare Crivella ineligible until 2026 for abuse of political power, relating to a misdemeanour committed in 2018. Crivella has said he will appeal the TRE-RJ’s decision, which does not currently prevent him from campaigning for re-election. Crivella’s main opponent is his predecessor as mayor, Eduardo Paes (2009-2017), who currently leads the polls with 26% of voting intentions according to an Exame/Ideia poll published on 30 September, but who might also face electoral impediments over corruption allegations. Crivella is in second place with 17% of voting intentions.

Although President Bolsonaro, who is not currently affiliated with a political party, previously said he would not get involved in the municipal elections, he has begun to give signs of where his support lies in some cities. Crivella, who represents the conservative Republicanos party and the Evangelical vote, is believed to be Bolsonaro’s candidate of choice in Rio. That is in any case the message Crivella has tried to project, using the president’s image in his campaign materials, in an attempt to take advantage of Bolsonaro’s popularity – a widespread electoral practice (*see sidebar*).

In São Paulo, Bolsonaro has indicated that he stands behind Celso Russomanno, a federal deputy also from Republicanos, who is on his third attempt to dispute the mayoralty of Brazil’s largest metropolis. A 24 September poll by Datafolha puts Russomanno in the lead, with 29% of voting intentions, ahead of the incumbent Bruno Covas (20%) from the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), who took over the post from João Doria in 2018 when the latter stepped down to run successfully for São Paulo state governor.

## Sending mixed messages

### Another spat with congress

Economy Minister Paulo Guedes' notoriously fractious relationship with the legislature had led to him taking a backseat in discussions between the executive and congress. But this week saw another exchange of barbs between Guedes and the president of the chamber of deputies, Rodrigo Maia. After Maia publicly questioned why Guedes was blocking discussions on a tax reform on 29 September, Guedes accused congress of deliberately blocking the government's efforts to privatise state companies. "Paulo Guedes is unbalanced," was Maia's reaction to this.

President Jair Bolsonaro's government does not seem to have a clear economic agenda. Economy Minister Paulo Guedes, who preaches fiscal austerity and economic liberalism, appears to be an increasingly isolated voice as others in government have discovered the political benefits of loosening the purse strings and dishing out social benefits to the Brazilian population. The result is a contradictory and muddled discourse on economic and fiscal measures, as the government seeks, but fails, to reconcile assurances of fiscal responsibility with promises of social benefits – as observed this week when the announcement of plans to fund a new social programme, dubbed 'Renda Cidadã', spooked investors.

Renda Cidadã alone exposes the lack of consensus in Brazil's governing circles. It is ostensibly to substitute Renda Brasil, a mooted social programme born from a desire to replace both the Bolsa Família conditional cash transfer programme (CCT) [\[WR-20-23\]](#), which has close associations with previous leftist governments, and the emergency basic income that the government has been handing out to around a third of the population since the start of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, and which has played an important role in bolstering the economy and President Bolsonaro's support levels. But amid internal disagreements on how to finance Renda Brasil (Guedes favoured extinguishing existing benefits deemed inefficient), Bolsonaro shut down talk of Renda Brasil earlier in September.

A fortnight later, Renda Cidadã was announced in a press conference in which Bolsonaro appeared flanked by cabinet ministers, including Guedes, and lawmakers, including the government leader in the federal chamber of deputies, Ricardo Barros. Although details on this new version of a social programme remain scarce – it is understood that it will be more generous and wide-reaching than Bolsa Família, which it will replace – the government announced how it plans to finance it: by using funds from the 'precatórios' (court-issued government debt reparation payments), and reallocating resources from the basic public education fund (Fundeb), which congress voted to maintain in August.

This means that Renda Cidadã will involve extra expenditures which will not be balanced out by cuts elsewhere, or by the raising of new taxes (the government has still not reached an agreement with congress on the details of its much-talked about tax reform). The negative reaction in the markets was instant on 28 September, with the index for the São Paulo stock exchange falling 2.41% to its lowest point since late June, while the real sank 1.42% to its lowest point against the US dollar since May. Criticism also rained down from the legislature and experts in the legal and economic spheres. The measure has been slammed as populist and inviting creative accounting – using funds from the precatórios would essentially mean delaying the repayment of these debts, while dipping into the Fundeb could constitute an attempt to conceal a breach of the constitutional spending cap (which does not include the cost of the Fundeb).

The government is in a dither over this negative backlash. On 29 September, the national treasury secretary, Bruno Funchal, said the government would take investors' "clear signals" into account. Bolsonaro himself took to Twitter to reaffirm his commitment to fiscal responsibility and the spending cap, and say that the emergency handout, "unfortunately for demagogues and communists, cannot be forever". A day later, Guedes said that precatórios would not be used to finance Renda Cidadã. Such backpedalling and confusion merely reinforces the impression that the government is disorganised and divided over its economic policy – an issue which also makes the markets jittery.



## Blancos back up electoral triumph

### PN entrenches interior dominance

There are some departments which the PN has not lost in seven decades (Cerro Largo, Durazno, Flores, and San José), and it preserved its stranglehold on much of the Uruguayan interior even during the FA's heyday. In Cerro Largo the PN achieved a record victory, with 81.5% of the vote, 20 percentage points more than in 2015; in Treinta y Tres, it took 70% of the vote (up five points); and in Artigas 65% (up 15 points).

It is necessary to go back more than 30 years to see so many departmental intendants (governors) representing Uruguay's centre-right Partido Nacional (PN, Blancos) come to power. In 1989 the PN lost in only three of 19 departmental elections, including Montevideo, where Tabaré Vázquez launched his political career by becoming the first governor for the left-wing coalition Frente Amplio (FA). The PN is now the big winner again. On 27 September, in departmental and municipal elections postponed from May because of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, it lost out on just four governorships. It was another electoral setback for the FA after losing control of the presidency for the first time since 2005 in March to a five-party coalition led by the PN's Luis Alberto Lacalle Pou. But the FA did retain three departments, including Montevideo, which between them comprise nearly two-thirds of the national population of 3.5m inhabitants.

The PN expanded its presence at the FA's expense. Retaining the 12 departments it won in 2015, the PN added a further three that had been in the FA's hands: Paysandú, Río Negro, and Rocha. The victories owe in part to the positive evaluation of President Lacalle Pou in his first seven months in office, particularly his government's handling of the pandemic. But the PN also got a decisive boost from the support of other parties in Lacalle Pou's multi-colour coalition. The FA won more votes in the three departments it lost to the PN, for instance, than it managed in 2015. But the PN benefitted from the backing of its national coalition partners. In Paysandú the PN allied with the right-wing Cabildo Abierto (CA), the populist Partido de la Gente (PG), and a faction of the right-of-centre Partido Colorado (PC) to win by a margin of some 6,000 votes over the FA, and it took Rocha, which had been held by the FA since 2005, by just 1,000 votes thanks to the CA contributing 4,000-odd votes.

This borrowed support was a key factor in the PN winning nearly 60,000 more votes in the interior of the country than in 2015. It was noteworthy that where it was absent, the FA held on. In Salto, for instance, the PN and PC presented separate candidates, splitting the right-of-centre vote and allowing the FA to win.

CA, meanwhile, besides assisting the PN in reconquering Rocha, and elsewhere, fared poorly, failing in the local elections to replicate the success of its candidate, former army commander Guido Manini Ríos, in last October's presidential elections. CA won just six departmental councillors. It was also a new nadir for the PC, an electoral titan of yesteryear. The PC retained Rivera, its northern departmental fiefdom, but it fell from seven to just three of the country's 125 mayoralities. All of the parties lost ground at a municipal level except for the PN, which added 21 to its 2015 haul to finish with 91.

The FA gained four but lost nine mayoralities, including several strongholds, such as Chuy in Rocha. It also lost Montevideo's F municipality. Crucially, however, the FA won convincingly in the department of Montevideo, which it has held since 1990. The left-wing coalition won by 13 percentage points in Montevideo in 2015 and the margin of victory was similar this time over the multi-colour coalition candidate Laura Raffo. Carolina Cosse, representing the FA's Partido Comunista del Uruguay (PCU), was elected after receiving most votes of the three FA candidates on the ticket, seeing off previous incumbent Daniel Martínez (2015-2019) and Álvaro Villar. Cosse promised "dialogue, dialogue, and dialogue" with the Lacalle Pou administration. The FA also won the governorship of Canelones, confirming its control of the country's urban and metropolitan areas.



**Paraguay leaps to defence of Mercosur-EU deal****Bolsonaro response**

Following the threat issued by the Macron government, President Bolsonaro reiterated that Brazil is a role model when it comes to protecting its environment and that those that criticise his government over its failure to control wildfires do so for political and economic reasons. Insisting that wildfires are a natural phenomenon that can happen anywhere, Bolsonaro said that those that complain about Brazil's uncontrolled fires are "those that have already burned everything" in allusion to industrialised countries. "Our critics are interested in attacking us because they are our competitors," Bolsonaro added, noting that Brazil is one of the world's largest agricultural producers and that most countries cannot compete with its ever-growing agricultural sector.

The Paraguayan government is the only member of the Southern Common Market (Mercosur) to have come out in defence of the trade agreement that the bloc signed with the European Union (EU) in June 2019 following the threat by the French government not to ratify it unless Mercosur members show greater commitment to protecting the environment [\[WR-20-38\]](#). With Mercosur heavyweights Brazil and Argentina seemingly unwilling to champion an agreement that neither of their presidents particularly likes, it appears that it is up to the government led by President Mario Abdo Benítez to sing the praises of an accord that many consider crucial for Mercosur. This is a tall order that the Abdo Benítez government will struggle to deliver unless it can convince all Mercosur partners to present a common front.

France's President Emmanuel Macron had warned last year that his government could veto the ratification of the agreement in the European Parliament unless all Mercosur members, but in particular the Brazilian government led by President Jair Bolsonaro, showed that they are committed to protecting the Amazon and upholding the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Macron's warnings came after the Bolsonaro administration was widely criticised for not doing enough to stop the major forest fires that ravaged the Brazilian Amazon last year. With fires once again devastating the Amazon this year, as well as the Pantanal wetlands, the issue is back again in the spotlight.

But it was after the commission of independent experts convened by Macron to analyse the environmental impact that the agreement would have presented its report on 18 September that the Macron administration threatened to veto the ratification of the agreement. The French government issued a statement saying that the commission had found that the agreement does not contain sufficient provisions for ensuring that "our commercial partners assimilate the climate problem and the need to protect biodiversity through respect for the Paris Agreement". The statement added that France would only support the Mercosur-EU trade accord if it receives reassurances from Mercosur members that their policies will not result in increased deforestation; that they conform to the Paris Agreement; and that agricultural food imports from Mercosur respect all European environmental and sanitary norms.

Despite being the main target of France's criticism, there was a limited reaction from the Brazilian government, although President Bolsonaro did indirectly hit back (*see sidebar*). The Argentine government, which has previously said that it will not take part in Mercosur matters while it faces a national emergency over the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, did not respond either. The Uruguayan government, which currently holds the Mercosur pro-tempore presidency, and has long been interested in securing an agreement with the EU, and expressed its desire to see it ratified before its presidency ends in December, surprisingly kept its own counsel too. But the Abdo Benítez administration did respond via its deputy foreign minister for economic relations and integration, Didier Olmedo.

In a statement, Olmedo defended the agreement, arguing that it offers the best form of reassurance that Mercosur members will be committed to addressing concerns about environmental protection. "It is always better to have a valid agreement...this is the best way to force Mercosur to assume all commitments and address all European concerns". Olmedo also complained that there are still many "myths" about environmental protection practices in Mercosur and misinformation about "what the agreement will mean for Europe". Olmedo argued that the environmental impact that increased bilateral trade would have has been exaggerated; and that despite fears that increased competition from Mercosur would undermine European farming, free trade will deliver broad economic benefits to the European population including cheaper food.

**Rule of law concerns intensify****Military archives**

The refusal to allow the inspection of military archives drew international criticism from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee chairman Eliot Engel (D-NY). On 24 September President Bukele then released the documents the federal government had regarding the El Mozote massacre, although he said that most of these had been destroyed in the past 40 years. However, this led Universidad Centroamericana's human rights institute (Idhuca) to request on 28 September that the attorney general's office launch an investigation into the apparent disappearance of these documents.

"A slow but sure departure from the rule of law and norms of democracy". This was the assessment of the situation in El Salvador in a letter addressed to President Nayib Bukele on 23 September by six US Republican legislators. The letter came the day after Salvadorean judges penned a letter to the United Nations special rapporteur Diego García-Sayán, warning of threats to the independence of judges and lawyers, and requesting García-Sayán's intervention in the face of "grave violations to judicial independence". Both letters once again underline what remains the prevailing criticism of the Bukele government which took office in June 2019 - his seeming lack of respect for democratic process and institutions such as the legislature and judiciary with which he has clashed repeatedly over his response to the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic and other issues.

In their letter to García-Sayán, the judges cited as the most recent example of the executive's disregard for judicial rulings its refusal to heed an 18 September constitutional court (SC) decision which found that requiring a negative Covid-19 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test for Salvadorean nationals and residents to enter the country was unconstitutional. Regardless, the government has said that airlines are required to ask all passengers for the test following the resumption of commercial flights to El Salvador on 19 September. The letter also cited as other examples of this disobedience, the defence ministry's refusal to comply with a court-ordered inspection of military archives, due to take place on 21 September, as part of ongoing investigations into the 1981 El Mozote massacre, one of the worst atrocities of the 1980-1992 civil war (*see sidebar*).

Meanwhile the US legislators' letter referenced the 9 February military takeover of congress (which is controlled by the main opposition parties, Alianza Republicana Nacionalista [Arena] and Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional [FMLN]) [\[WR-20-06\]](#). It also noted recent allegations by the local online investigative publication *El Faro* that, since taking office, Bukele's government has been involved in private negotiations with one of the country's main street gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) [\[WR-20-36\]](#).

Bukele has downplayed both the judges' letter and the statement by the US legislators: *El Faro* cited him as saying that the signatories were only six of 435 US congress members and "it was common for members of Congress to sign letters without reading them".

**Local government protests**

With employees of both the judiciary and the legislature last week complaining of not receiving salaries (which they linked to the institutional clashes), the Bukele government has also been accused of breaking the law at another institutional level - local government. On 24 September hundreds of mayors and municipal employees staged protests outside the finance ministry, demanding funds which they claim they are owed from the economic and social development of municipalities fund (Fodes), which is used to pay for municipal projects and salaries in the country's 262 municipalities. Protesters claimed that these have not been received since June, in breach of the law.

Mayors such as San Salvador's Ernesto Muyschondt (Arena) accused Bukele of manoeuvring ahead of the March 2021 municipal elections, suggesting the failure to disburse funds is aimed at reducing support for opposition-run municipal governments. (Bukele's political party Nuevas Ideas was only set up after the last [2018] municipal election and so lacks mayoral representation).

## New CEP stokes controversy

### US pressure

The political establishment had been facing increasing pressure from the US to name the new CEP and set in motion the electoral process. In a US State Department press briefing on 16 September, an unnamed senior official warned of possible consequences for those who obstructed efforts to hold elections. The official said “I’m a little bit tired of every group, every opposition party in Haiti saying, ‘Well, I won’t appoint my person,’ or ‘We won’t have an election,’ or ‘We won’t run in this until you meet all of my political demands’. That’s not democracy. And so we are quite insistent on this, and it’s going to start to have consequences for those who stand in the way of it.”

Haiti’s President Jovenel Moïse has named a new nine-member provisional electoral council (CEP). The move was hailed by the US embassy as “an important step towards conducting legislative elections”. These are long overdue and widely deemed necessary given the current political crisis, with Moïse ruling by decree since January, when legislators’ terms lapsed after elections failed to take place in October 2019. Moïse’s appointment of the CEP, however, has proven contentious, both in terms of its members and one of its declared objectives - organising a referendum on a new constitution.

President Moïse named the new nine-member CEP on 18 September. Its members are Patrick Numa (representing the local trade unions); Josette Massillon (women’s sector); Marie Rosemène Joseph Pierre (voodoo/peasant farmers); Guylande Mésadiou (human rights); Antonio Détil (youth); Louis Arlext Noël (disabled people); Nadia Jules Amédée (peasants/cooperatives); Espérance César (diaspora); and Guy Romélus (protestant religious sector). The appointments sparked outrage, however, as key sectors, such as the Episcopal Conference, the association of journalists, and universities, which should be represented (as stipulated by the constitution) are not after they reportedly refused to participate.

Another bone of contention regarding the new CEP was the announcement that, along with organising local, municipal, legislative, and presidential elections, one of its objectives was to organise a referendum on a new constitution. This has been slammed by human rights groups such as La Fondasyon Je Klere (FJKL), which pointed out that the current constitution prohibits the use of a referendum to modify the constitution. Back in January, Moïse first announced plans to draft constitutional reforms to be put to the people in a referendum. The precise changes sought were not specified but some speculated that it could see a strengthening of the executive which was weakened in Haiti’s 1987 constitution following the Duvalier dynastic dictatorship (1957-1986).

Further compounding concerns regarding the credibility of the new CEP, on 22 September the supreme court opted not to swear in the new members who were then installed by Moïse regardless. The court had come under pressure from Haiti’s main bar association (FBH) and local human rights groups such as Réseau National de Défense des Droits Humains (RNDDH) and Centre d’Analyse et de Recherche Réseau International en Droits de l’Homme (CARDH) not to swear them in. Doubts regarding the new CEP’s credibility have even come from Moïse’s own party, Parti Haïtien Tèt Kale (PHTK), whose president Liné Balthazar told national daily *Le Nouvelliste*, in an interview published on 24 September, that the controversy surrounding elections with CEP members will hinder the ability to prevent an electoral crisis.

### Death threats denounced

The national network of magistrates (Renamah) and national magistrates’ association (Anamah) have both denounced that one of the supreme court magistrates, Wendelle Coq, had received death threats as a result of her refusal to endorse the new CEP members. The announcement has sparked particular concern given the recent killing of Monferrier Dorval, a prominent lawyer, professor, and the head of the Port-au-Prince bar association [\[WR-20-35\]](#), a crime which the Core Group (comprising the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General, the ambassadors of Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Spain, the European Union, the US, and the Special Representative of the Organization of American States) described as an “attack on the consolidation of democracy and state of law in Haiti”.

## Quotes of the week

“The referendum [on whether to prosecute former presidents] would not contravene any guarantees, quite the reverse, it is presenting the people with the freedom to exercise their sovereignty.”

*Mexico's President Andrés Manuel López Obrador.*

“If I were a dictator, I would've shot them [the constitutional court judges] all.”

*El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele.*

“I will always put principles first over personal interest. No role, no matter how important, justifies going against the principles and ethics that have always guided my actions.”

*Bolivia's departing economy minister Óscar Ortiz.*

## POSTSCRIPT

### Venezuela tables debt-renegotiation offer

Venezuela has launched a rescheduling offer for holders of sovereign Venezuelan bonds, as well as those issued by the state oil company Pdvsa and the power company Electricidad de Caracas (EDC). The government led by Nicolás Maduro said it would waive a three-year statute of limitations on the bonds in exchange for a commitment by creditors not to take legal action, or to halt legal action if it had already been commenced. This would then pave the way for wider restructuring talks.

The offer was conditional on 75% take-up by a deadline of 13 October. It was widely seen as a token political gesture, however, with little immediate chance of success. Venezuela, it should be noted, has defaulted on around US\$60bn worth of foreign debt over the course of the last three years and it does not possess sufficient foreign exchange to be able to resume debt servicing on a sustainable basis. One analyst, Jesús Cacique, says the debt-to-GDP ratio is a record-breaking 278%.

Existing 2027 bonds have been trading on the secondary market at about eight US cents on the dollar. US sanctions prevent bondholders from entering debt-rescheduling negotiations. The political message appears to be to enlist creditors to lobby the current or future US administration, should Joe Biden defeat President Donald Trump in November's elections, to ease sanctions in the hope that they might get some of their money back.

The parallel government of opposition leader Juan Guaidó said on 29 September that it would seek an “ordered and consensual” debt renegotiation “as soon as possible”. But Guaidó's future is uncertain. His claim to the interim presidency is contingent on his holding the presidency of the opposition-controlled national assembly, however denuded of power this body has become due to an alliance between the Maduro government and the supreme court (TSJ). If the political opposition persists in its determination to boycott the congressional elections on 6 December, then the national assembly will shortly be stacked with deputies representing Maduro's pro-government coalition led by the ruling Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) and Guaidó will be no more than a figurehead.

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