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## CONTENTS

<b>LEADER</b>	<b>1</b>
Argentina's Fernández attempts to spin crushing electoral defeat	
<b>ANDEAN COUNTRIES</b>	
<b>Peru</b>	<b>3</b>
Ayala resigns over alleged military interference	
<b>Ecuador</b>	<b>4</b>
Lasso clashes with constitutional court after latest prison massacre	
<b>Colombia</b>	<b>5</b>
Army surge in Norte de Santander	
<b>BRAZIL &amp; SOUTHERN CONE</b>	
<b>Chile</b>	<b>6</b>
Boric and Kast neck-and-neck ahead of first round	
<b>Brazil</b>	<b>8</b>
Beating Covid?	
<b>Brazil</b>	<b>9</b>
Deforestation data dashes attempt at green image	
<b>MEXICO &amp; USMCA</b>	
<b>Mexico</b>	<b>10</b>
Army captures narco-queen	
<b>Mexico</b>	<b>11</b>
Zaldívar extension ruled unconstitutional	
<b>CENTRAL AMERICA &amp; CARIBBEAN</b>	
<b>Cuba</b>	<b>13</b>
Cracking down ahead of planned protest	
<b>El Salvador</b>	<b>14</b>
A leaf out of Ortega's book?	
<b>Nicaragua</b>	<b>15</b>
Making good a threat	
<b>POSTSCRIPT</b>	<b>16</b>
Playing the apathy card in Venezuela?	
Quotes of the week	

## Argentina's Fernández attempts to spin crushing electoral defeat

Argentina's President Alberto Fernández found himself in a strange position this week: facing one of his party's worst electoral defeats in decades, he called a rally in Plaza de Mayo in central Buenos Aires to celebrate what he described as an electoral "triumph".

President Fernández has been trying to 'spin' perceptions of what happened in the mid-term congressional elections held on 14 November, where 24 seats in the 72-member senate and 127 seats in the 257-member chamber of deputies were up for grabs. Undisputedly, the ruling centre-left Frente de Todos (FdT) coalition, whose driving force is the Partido Justicialista (PJ, Peronists), lost the elections and the opposition centre-right Juntos por el Cambio (JxC) won them. A key defeat was in the senate where the Peronists lost its majority for the first time in almost four decades, with the FdT's presence looking to drop from 41 seats to 35, two votes shy of the 37 needed to form a majority.

However, President Fernández's narrative was that the defeat could have been much worse. In his rather unusual logic, avoiding that terrible outcome was, therefore, a "triumph" in itself. To back up this claim he highlighted the fact that the pro-government vote in the key electoral district of Buenos Aires province was better than had been suggested by September congressional primaries (Paso) which had also delivered a major electoral defeat to the FdT [WR-21-37]. In the end the FdT still lost in the province, but by just over one percentage point - 39.81% for the JxC versus 38.53% for the FdT. The FdT narrowed the gap from 4.3 percentage points in September. This partial recovery of floating voters in the province was one crumb of comfort for the government, as was the fact that it managed to remain the largest bloc in the chamber of deputies, although it did so narrowly and still lacks a majority there.

Despite Fernández's narrative, the reality is that the opposition won an undeniable victory. In the nationwide vote for the chamber of deputies, JxC took 41.89% of the vote, to 33.03% for the FdT. This was broadly in line with the Paso results. The opposition won in 12 provinces against nine for the FdT, and it won in all the major electoral districts, including Buenos Aires province, Buenos Aires city, Córdoba, and Santa Fé. Electoral maps show the FdT retreating to a belt of poorer and less densely populated provinces in the northwest of the country. In the senate race the opposition won by an even bigger margin (46.85% against 27.54%). Without a majority in either house of congress, President Fernández now has no option other than striking cross-party deals, if he wants to avoid legislative deadlock in the second two years of his four-year term in office.

One way of understanding the president's electoral triumphalism is to consider it from the perspective of the internal divisions within the FdT, which remains split between his broadly moderate centre-left policies and the more radical line taken by Vice President Cristina Fernández (who was president in 2007-2015 and remains a powerful figure). The Kirchneristas,

## Looking forward

President Fernández now has a limited window of opportunity to negotiate a three-way deal: first with the vice-president and her supporters within the government; second with the centre right opposition; and third with the IMF itself. Negotiating such a deal will take weeks and possibly months and success is not guaranteed. The process will need to be completed by March next year when major IMF loan repayments fall due, likely triggering a default if a rescheduling is not agreed.

who are loyal to the VP, bitterly blamed the Albertistas, the president's supporters, for the FdT's defeat in September, saying that International Monetary Fund (IMF)-influenced attempts at austerity accounted for the government's loss in popularity. Vice President Fernández forced through a cabinet reshuffle in which her boss had to accept a number of her appointees. This team then pushed through increased social spending (known as the *plan platita*) to try and regain some of the lost voters. Now, Kirchneristas believe the small improvement achieved since September vindicates them. The partial recovery in Buenos Aires province is being claimed as a victory by Axel Kiciloff, the governor, who is a leading Kirchnerista.

In short, President Fernández is caught between the rebellious Kirchneristas on the one hand, and the demands of the centre-right opposition on the other. His actions since the first election results began to come in can be seen as an attempt to zigzag and balance these competing requirements. In his first speech after the results, he acknowledged that errors had been committed and there were "lessons to be learnt". But this stopped well short of any formal admission of defeat, of the kind the opposition parties wanted to hear. Not to be outflanked by the Kirchneristas, the president also spoke of the FdT's alleged "triumph" and called a rally to celebrate it on 17 November. He also made it clear that any cross party talks with the opposition would be on his terms. He said the time had come to reach "national agreements" and he would submit a multi-year economic plan to congress in December, which was interpreted as the basis of an agreement with the IMF. Amid continuing silence from his vice-president, Fernández endorsed key members of his economic team (led by economy minister Martín Guzmán) who have often been the target of her criticism.

Opposition leaders were unimpressed. They wanted President Fernández to publicly concede defeat in the elections. They also say they need to know whether the economic plan that he is proposing will be supported by his vice-president. (He has said it has the support of all main internal factions in the governing coalition, but doubts persist). Alfredo Cornejo, a member of the Unión Cívica Radical (UCR) within the JxC coalition, described the call to talks as "pretty ambiguous" saying it was not clear what type of agreement the government was seeking and how it related to negotiations with the IMF. He added "they are calling on the opposition, but first they need an agreement between Cristina and Alberto".

One positive for the government, at least for the moment, is that the financial markets have been broadly stable. There were some price drops on the Buenos Aires stock exchange, and the big gap between official and free market dollar exchange rates – a sign of concern over the country's financial health – has continued. But by and large the markets and foreign investors seem to have taken the view that, while it may take time, the election results will force through some kind of consensus over the need to renegotiate Argentina's US\$44bn debt to the IMF and apply a multi-year economic stabilisation programme. Typical of that view was a comment from Shila Vilker, of consultancy Trespuntozero, who said the political cost of defeat had in some ways already been paid, back in September, when the ministerial team was reshuffled. Now, she added: "I'd say it's a dignified defeat for the government, and a dignified and non-catastrophic defeat gives it some oxygen to continue."

A harsher assessment came from Mariel Fornoni of pollsters Management & Fit. "The government has serious problems" she said. "It is a president who is totally drained of power. The coalition is broken." For Alberto Ramos, an analyst at investment bank Goldman Sachs, internal dissent might grow, overshadowing more moderate voices like those of Guzmán. "Losing control of congress implies that the government would have to negotiate with a stronger and re-energised opposition that could lead to a noisy and volatile policy-making process", he warned.

**Ayala resigns over alleged military interference**

Peru's defence minister, Walter Ayala, stood down on 14 November after being accused of interfering in military promotions. Ayala had been summoned to testify before congress's defence committee in relation to allegations from the recently dismissed general commander of the army, José Vizcarra Álvarez, who claims that he was fired for refusing to promote two colonels whose ascension was sought by President Pedro Castillo's administration. On 17 November, former interior minister Juan Carrasco Millones was named as Ayala's replacement (*see sidebar*).

The scandal that enveloped Ayala stems from a 4 November overhaul of the military high command, which saw Vizcarra and the general commander of the air force, Jorge Chaparro, replaced by Walter Horacio Córdova Alemán and Alfonso Javier Artadi Saletti, respectively. The commanders' replacement came as a surprise – having been appointed by Castillo in August shortly after he took office, they had held their posts for just three months.

Vizcarra presented his version of events on 8 November, claiming that he was replaced after refusing to buckle to pressure from Ayala and Castillo's presidential secretary, Bruno Pacheco, to promote two colonels to the rank of general. According to reports in the local media, those colonels – Ciro Bocanegra and Carlos Sánchez Cahuancama – are both from Castillo's homeland of Chota province (Cajamarca region), and both work in the presidential palace, fuelling speculation that Castillo was seeking to favour his allies in the armed forces.

Vizcarra claimed that he rejected repeated requests from Ayala and Pacheco to promote the colonels, who he said did not meet the standard to be elevated to generals. Vizcarra alleged that these instructions were coming "from the top", and said he met with Castillo on 15 October to express his concerns, before being replaced three weeks later.

Following these allegations, the pressure quickly piled up on Ayala. He offered his resignation to Castillo on 8 November, but he was still in his position until 14 November when, with no sign of the storm blowing over, Castillo accepted it. This came after congress's defence committee had opened an inquiry into Ayala and Pacheco, with Vizcarra offering to present the committee with WhatsApp messages allegedly proving Ayala's interference in the military. Further adding to the pressure, a petition started by opposition deputy Jorge Montoya of the far-right Renovación Popular had gathered enough signatures to trigger a questioning of Ayala in a plenary session of congress, potentially paving the way to an impeachment vote against him.

These escalations made it unviable for Castillo to not accept Ayala's resignation. However, the defence minister's departure from government may not have been enough to draw the curtain on the scandal. On 16 November, the defence committee voted to share its classified findings with the attorney general's office, which raises the spectre of possible criminal charges against Ayala and marks a further blow to Castillo, whose 4 October cabinet reshuffle has failed to put an end to the series of scandals that plagued his first team of ministers [[WR-21-40](#)].

Castillo can expect further questions over why he so doggedly sought the colonels' promotion. Any controversy involving perceived interference in the military risks being particularly damaging for his administration, given the fears whipped up by the Peruvian right in the election campaign that he seeks to impose an authoritarian, hard-left government [[WR-21-22](#)].

**Juan Carrasco Millones**

Ayala's replacement, Juan Carrasco Millones, served as interior minister in President Castillo's first cabinet from July-October, before being fired in a cabinet overhaul on 6 October. Carrasco was briefly investigated by the attorney general's office in his first week as interior minister for maintaining a salaried role as public prosecutor – the investigation was dropped when he resigned from the prosecutor position. Carrasco has no obvious background in defence, although in his time at the attorney general's office he worked on several high-profile organised crime cases. After being fired as interior minister he has spent the last six weeks working as an advisor to the justice ministry.



## Lasso clashes with constitutional court after latest prison massacre

Yet another prison massacre rocked the Penitenciaría del Litoral, the main prison in Guayaquil (Guayas province) on 12 November, leaving 68 inmates dead and triggering a public spat between President Guillermo Lasso and the constitutional court (CC). The violence was the latest in a string of massacres in Ecuador's penal system, of which the Guayaquil prison has borne the brunt. Lasso accused the CC of watering down a state of exception that he had declared on 18 October in response to mounting violence; the CC retorted that Ecuador's prison crisis requires structural reform rather than repeated states of exception.

According to Guayas governor Pablo Arosemena, the latest massacre was triggered by the release of an imprisoned gang leader, leaving a power vacuum inside the prison that a rival gang attempted to exploit via a "total massacre" of its rivals. Whilst the authorities have not named the gangs involved, previous massacres at the prison have been the result of tensions between Los Lobos and Los Choneros – Ecuador's two most powerful criminal organisations, which act as subcontractors for rival Mexican drug trafficking organisations and battle for control of Guayaquil's port.

The killings add to the grim toll in a year of record violence in Ecuador's prison system. According to the local media, over 300 prisoners have been murdered this year, compared to 51 violent deaths in 2020. The Penitenciaría del Litoral has seen the worst of this upswing, being the site of the country's worst ever prison massacre on 28 September, which left 116 inmates dead, and one of the four sites that suffered the coordinated 23 February massacres, which killed 79.

With Lasso having made prison security a key theme of his security agenda on the campaign trail, he is under pressure to restore order to Ecuador's penitentiaries. Following the September massacre, he decreed a state of exception that saw the police deployed to assist in prison management and the military mobilised to secure prison perimeters. Lasso declared a further state of exception on 18 October, mobilising the armed forces to participate in domestic policing operations for a period of 60 days in response to a broader rise in criminal activity.

However, on 4 November the CC reduced the length of this state of exception to 30 days, limited troop deployments to nine provinces instead of the whole country, and restricted military operations to those that "complement" the work done by the national police. Feeling the heat over the latest eruption of prison violence, Lasso turned on the CC the day after the massacre, demanding "better constitutional tools to protect the population [and] restore order in prisons" and warning that "the security forces are unable to act". The CC issued a frosty response, accusing Lasso of "seeking to evade his own responsibilities" and insisting that prison violence "requires concrete and structural actions, different to those adopted under a state of exception".

Following a meeting on 15 November with the heads of Ecuador's high courts, attorney general's office, police, military, and the national assembly, Lasso announced a 'national agreement on the prison crisis'. This will see the indefinite deployment of the police and military to Ecuador's prisons; the promotion of dialogue between rival gangs; a new 'citizens defence bill' that aims to make gang leaders responsible for crimes committed by their subordinates; early release from prison for well behaved inmates; and measures to reduce pre-trial detention, among other things.

### Resignations

The head of the Ecuadorean military's joint command, Jorge Cabrera, and the director of Ecuador's prisons authority (SNAI), Bolívar Fernando Garzón, both resigned the day after the massacre. Cabrera was replaced by General Orlando Fabián Fuel Revelo, and Garzón temporarily replaced by Fausto Cobo, who headed the SNAI until September before becoming director of Ecuador's national intelligence agency (CIES). Cobo will maintain his current position at CIES whilst also overseeing the SNAI.

## Army surge in Norte de Santander

On 17 November two local leaders of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) guerrilla group were captured in a joint army and police operation in Teorama, Norte de Santander department. The news comes as the government has ordered a military 'surge' in the conflictive department on the border with Venezuela. The results so far are mixed.

The authorities said they had captured Eider Fernando Pino (alias 'Perico') and Diego Fabián Carrascal (alias 'Dago') who now face a long list of charges including kidnapping, extortion, and criminal conspiracy. The two were reportedly part of an ELN operation to raise funds by extorting local businesses in the Catatumbo region.

The police also highlight the recent capture of Ramiro Antonio Pallares (alias 'Pichón') who they believe was responsible for shooting down a helicopter in 2019. Norte de Santander remains one of the most conflictive departments in the country, with a range of non-state armed groups in operation, including the ELN, dissident units of the disbanded Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc) guerrilla group, and drug trafficking organisations (DTOs).

In two notorious attacks in June a military base was bombed in Cúcuta, and snipers fired on a helicopter carrying President Iván Duque. Responsibility for both attacks was claimed by a Farc dissident commander. The department has also seen activity by the Clan del Golfo DTO, whose leader Dairo Antonio Úsuga (alias 'Otoniel') was captured last month [[WR-21-43](#)].

The government appears to be going on the offensive, creating a new 14,000 strong military force to fight against the insurgent groups. As part of a reorganisation, a new 'specific command' for Norte de Santander (CENOR) has been created, bringing together four separate units to allow more rapid deployment and intelligence sharing.

Armed forces commander General Luis Fernando Navarro told *Reuters* news agency that a "confluence of factors" was causing violence in the department. A porous border and weak law enforcement in Venezuela allowed ELN and Farc guerrillas to strike in Colombia and then flee across the border back into Venezuela. He estimated that half the ELN forces and 30% of the Farc dissidents active in Norte de Santander operate out of Venezuela, where they are protected from Colombian army bombing raids. Some analysts believe that these groups attack high-profile targets as part of a strategy to draw the authorities away from drug production areas and clandestine air strips.

While violence remains high it is not yet clear if the army surge will deliver results. Homicides in the department totalled 576 last year, up by 7% on 2019. According to the defence ministry 16 soldiers have died so far this year in 30 attacks in Norte de Santander, and 19 members of illegal armed groups have also been killed.

Civil society groups say 22 human rights activists have been murdered since 2020 and some 6,500 people have been displaced by fighting. But drug production does not seem to have been seriously disrupted. United Nations data shows that Catatumbo's cocaine production capacity has risen to 312 tonnes per annum, a quarter of Colombia's total output. Eradication of illegal coca crops has fallen to 30km<sup>2</sup> this year, down from 95km<sup>2</sup> in 2020. Seizures of cocaine have increased to 24.8 tonnes this year, but this may simply reflect greater production rather than improved detection.

### Criticism

One of the main criticisms of the government's troop surge is that it is a militarised response which is being given a higher priority than social and economic initiatives that could reduce dependence on the illicit drugs economy. Activists such as Wilfredo Cañizares of Fundación Progresar argue that there should be greater emphasis on anti-poverty measures and the substitution of legal crops for coca. He says that "it has been proven that it's a failure to insist on militarising territory as the only answer".

**Boric and Kast neck-and-neck ahead of first round**

Chileans go to the polls on 21 November to elect their next president and congressional representatives. Coming two years after mass protests over socio-economic grievances shook the country, eventually leading to the current re-drafting of the constitution by a popularly elected constituent assembly, this election has been described as the country's most critical since the return to democracy. Polls suggest that the far-right candidate, José Antonio Kast from the Partido Republicano (PLR), and left-winger Gabriel Boric, running for the Apruebo Dignidad coalition, will win the first round and face each other in a run-off vote on 19 December. But electoral rules in Chile impose an opinion poll 'blackout' in the two weeks prior to the vote, and developments over the last fortnight, as well as voter behaviour on the day, could unexpectedly shift the outcome.

The last authorised opinion surveys released at the beginning of the month present different findings: Boric leads with over 30% of voting intentions in some, such as the polls by Tú Influyes and Criterias, while Kast – who has seen his support surge over the last couple of months [[WR-21-43](#)] – sits several points ahead of Boric in others, such as Cadem's. However, all polls confirm that candidates from the traditional political forces that have dominated Chilean politics over the past three decades have fallen out of favour.

Yasna Provoste, a Christian Democrat running for Nuevo Pacto Social, a coalition of traditional centre-left parties broadly considered to have succeeded the Concertación coalition, languishes in third place with just over 10% of voting intentions. Sebastián Sichel from Chile Podemos Más, the right-wing ruling coalition previously known as Chile Vamos, has single-digit support and jostles for fourth and fifth place with Franco Parisi, a wildcard candidate who is running his campaign remotely as he is not even in the country (*see sidebar*).

In the days since the poll blackout began, both Boric's and Kast's campaigns have hit potential snags. Boric tested positive for the coronavirus (Covid-19) at the beginning of November, forcing him to suspend in-person campaigning while he self-isolated (the other candidates, with whom he had been in close contact, also withdrew from in-person campaigning for a few days).

The re-emergence of sexual harassment allegations, dating back to Boric's time as a student leader, has cast a shadow over the left-winger's campaign (he denies any impropriety and says he will collaborate with any potential investigation). He has also had to distance himself from a position adopted by a sector of the Partido Comunista (PC), the more radical partner in the Apruebo Dignidad coalition, after it expressed support for the contentious re-election of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua (Boric himself described the widely-slammed elections [[WR-21-45](#)] as a "farce").

Kast, meanwhile, came under fire last week for defending the authoritarian and repressive regime of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990) and suggesting that the elections held in 1989, during Pinochet's dictatorship, were free. He became the main target of attacks during the final presidential debate, which took place six days before the election.

**The final debate**

Six of the seven presidential candidates (Parisi being absent) took part in the last presidential debate ahead of the first-round vote, which was organised by the national television association (Anatel) on 15 November. The debate was considered the last opportunity for Provoste and Sichel to try and attract

**Parisi**

A US-based economist who has been described as both controversial and disruptive, Franco Parisi, is making his second bid for the presidency. He came fourth in the 2013 election with just over 10% of the valid vote. Running for the militant Partido de la Gente (PDG) with a populist slogan – "Parisi. The people in power" – Parisi has conducted his entire campaign online from Alabama. He will not be in Chile for the election in which he is competing after he tested positive for Covid-19 on the day he was due to travel. Some polls put Parisi ahead of Sichel, on 8%-10%.

## Legislative elections

Chileans are also electing regional councillors, national deputies, and some senators on 21 November. According to the electoral authorities (Servel), there are 1,256 candidates registered to compete for the 155 seats in the chamber of deputies, and 173 candidates disputing the 27 seats that are up for election in the senate. While deputies serve four-year terms, senators are elected for eight years. The next senate will be made up of 50 representatives, up from 43 currently.

undecided voters, while Kast and Boric were expected to go into it with the aim of not committing any errors which might put off voters and affect their lead.

It is hard to gauge how much of an impact the debate – which attracted some 3m viewers – will have had on voting intentions, but Kast is widely considered to have suffered from it. He came in for heavy criticism from his opponents, drawing fire for his aggressive stance against issues such as same-sex marriage and abortion, as well as his Pinochet comments. In contrast with his usually smiling and relaxed appearance, Kast was tight-lipped and visibly uncomfortable, on the defensive about human rights and caught short over the contents of his own government plan.

With little to lose, both Provoste and Sichel performed relatively well, while Boric's performance was considered unexceptional as he tried to play it safe – although he did appear stronger on the economy than previously. The two other candidates, who achieve about 6% of voting intentions between them – Marco Enríquez-Ominami on the centre-right and Eduardo Artés on the far-left – also joined the chorus of criticism directed at Kast and, to a lesser extent, Boric.

## Uncertainties

Although it appears difficult for Sichel or Provoste to catch up Boric's and Kast's 20-point or so lead in the polls, a level of unpredictability surrounds the outcome of this week's presidential first round. The uncertainty lies around the behaviour on the day of the more than 20% of voters who declared themselves unsure or undecided two weeks ago, as well as the level of abstention.

Since voting stopped being compulsory in 2012, Chile has suffered from systematically low electoral participation. Turnout was just 46.7% in the first round of the 2017 presidential election (which Sebastián Piñera went on to win in the second round), while the 50.96% turnout achieved at the referendum on a new constitution last October was hailed by some as a success. Pollster Criteria presented two possible first-round results in its last poll, one based on calculations of 'low turnout' (41%), and the other on 'high turnout' (51%).

Political observers in Chile broadly expect turnout to be similar to that of other recent elections, although two factors could lead to higher voter numbers. The first is the level of polarisation in this election, with the two frontrunners hailing from political extremes and proposing fundamentally different agendas. The second is the possibly higher participation of older voters – amongst whom abstention was higher than among younger voters in the elections held over the past year – due to both the polarisation factor, and fewer worries over Covid-19.

### Piñera survives impeachment

On 16 November, the Chilean senate threw out a motion to impeach President Sebastián Piñera after it failed to garner the necessary 29 votes to pass. The impeachment motion was presented by the left-wing opposition in October, which accused Piñera of lack of probity and compromising the honour of the nation (two constitutional violations) in relation to the sale of his family's shareholding in the Minera Dominga mine carried out during his first term in 2010, unveiled in the 'Pandora Papers' leaked last month [\[WR-21-40\]](#).

The chamber of deputies voted in favour of impeaching Piñera on 9 November – the motion only required a simple majority in the lower house – but as expected, the opposition was unable to muster the required two-thirds majority needed for the motion to pass the senate. The move to impeach Piñera was understood to be an entirely political move by the opposition to taint the already unpopular government ahead of the elections.

Piñera's government has rejected the impeachment motion as having no legal basis. In a statement after the senate's decision, the executive said it could now get back to focusing on important issues such as pension reform, tackling crime, and economic recovery.



## Beating Covid?

Brazil has been racking up encouraging news on the coronavirus (Covid-19). On 8 November, the state of São Paulo did not record a single death from the disease. A week later, on 15 November, Rio de Janeiro's main Covid-19 hospital discharged its last Covid patient. That same day, Brazil overtook the US in terms of vaccination coverage: according to 'Our World in Data', 60% of the Brazilian population is now fully vaccinated against the coronavirus, compared with 58% in the US.

As a country which saw its healthcare system collapse earlier this year [[WR-21-14](#)], which regularly made headlines as the pandemic's epicentre over the past 18 months, and which still has the second-highest official Covid-19 death toll in the world with over 610,000 victims, these developments are positive for Brazil. Testimony to the effects of what has become a successful vaccine rollout, new cases and deaths have both been on a steady downwards trend for months. Restrictions imposed at a local level have largely been lifted, and a number of cities, including São Paulo and Rio, are enthusiastically preparing for the 2022 Carnival season.

Scientists and public health experts are sounding cautionary notes, however. In its 12 November epidemiological bulletin, the Fundação Oswaldo Cruz (Fiocruz) public health institute said that the World Health Organization (WHO)'s warning to Europe and Central Asia, where cases are soaring again even in countries with high vaccination rates such as Germany, should serve as an example to Brazil. Stressing the importance of making the coronavirus vaccine available and encouraging its uptake, the Fiocruz highlighted that the jab is not the only tool to fight the disease and said that measures such as the use of facemasks, controls on travellers arriving into the country, and effective testing and tracing must be maintained.

Despite President Jair Bolsonaro's anti-vax stance – he says he will not get the vaccine and has associated the jab with a range of ills, including turning into an alligator and getting AIDS [[WR-21-43](#)] – vaccine scepticism is not an issue in Brazil. Nevertheless, there are concerns about second jab uptake (*see sidebar*) and the Fiocruz warned last week that the distribution of first jabs is slowing, with the percentage of the population having received at least one jab growing from 71.03% in mid-October to just 73.27% in mid-November. The Fiocruz estimates that 86% of the total population is currently eligible to get the jab.

The use of vaccine passports in dozens of municipalities might help address these concerns. Proof of vaccination is also now required to enter a number of public buildings, such as congress. But the issue of vaccine passports has opened a new battlefield between the federal government, which has always opposed any kind of restrictive measures to combat Covid-19, and the local authorities which are implementing vaccine mandates.

On 1 November, Bolsonaro issued a decree making it illegal to fire employees who refuse to get the Covid-19 vaccine – a move which directly challenged São Paulo state governor João Doria, a potential presidential rival of Bolsonaro next year. A week later, the government's special secretariat for culture issued an executive order banning cultural activities which have been financed under the 'Lei Rouanet', a cultural incentive law, from demanding vaccine passports. Both these measures have been condemned as a further sign of the Bolsonaro government's denialist stance on Covid-19. Supreme court (STF) justice Roberto Luis Barroso partially suspended the first decree on 12 November, while public prosecutors and the political opposition have challenged the second one.

### 'Vaccination mega-campaign'

On 16 November Brazil's federal health ministry announced the launch of a 'mega vaccination' campaign, which aims to encourage uptake amongst the 21m Brazilians who are due their second Covid-19 jab but are yet to get it. Health Minister Marcelo Queiroga also said that all Brazilians over the age of 18 will now be offered a third booster jab – previously reserved for the elderly and those with underlying health conditions – five months after their second dose.



## Deforestation data dashes attempt at green image

### Selling the green image in the Middle East

President Bolsonaro has been using the ‘Brazil is a green power’ line while on a trip to the Middle East drum up investment. However, the president’s discourse remains peppered with untruths about the scale of environmental destruction in Brazil: while speaking to investors in Dubai on 15 November, Bolsonaro said that Brazil is unfairly attacked over the Amazon, which he said remains “almost exactly the same as when it was discovered in 1500”. The president also said that the Amazon does not catch fire as it is a “humid forest”. Forest fires, linked to deforestation, have surged during his presidency.

Although President Jair Bolsonaro did not attend the COP26 climate talks earlier this month in Scotland (“everyone would have thrown stones at him”, Vice President Hamilton Mourão said to explain the head of state’s absence), a large delegation was present at the conference in Glasgow to push the image of Brazil as a green power. Pledges to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2030 and end deforestation by 2028 were welcomed but viewed with scepticism by many [\[WR-21-44\]](#) – scepticism which appeared justified when Brazil’s latest deforestation figures were published on 12 November.

The Bolsonaro government had been touting year-on-year drops in monthly deforestation figures for July and August (while ignoring the fact that deforestation remained at extremely high levels) as proof of its environmental commitments and of the success of its policies aimed at tackling forest clearing, which notably involved deploying the army to the Amazon [\[WR-21-24\]](#). But forest loss edged up again in September, and data released by the government’s Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais (Inpe) last week show that deforestation in October was at the highest level for that month in the last six years. According to the Inpe’s deforestation alert system (Deter), 877km<sup>2</sup> of forest were cleared in the Amazon in October, a 5% increase on last year.

Environment Minister Joaquim Leite skirted the issue during a press conference in Glasgow on the last day of the COP26. “I haven’t looked at the numbers,” Leite told reporters on 12 November, arguing that the COP tackles the issue of climate change globally, not on a country-by-country basis. In those same comments he repeated Brazil’s demand for climate funding from rich countries.

Marcio Astrini, the executive secretary of the Observatório do Clima network of environmental organisations, voiced the widely held opinion that these figures, and Leite’s response to them, prove that the Bolsonaro government’s discourse at the COP26 was nothing more than greenwashing. “Emissions happen on the forest floor, not in Glasgow’s plenaries. And the forest floor is telling us that the government does not have the slightest intention of observing the commitments it signed at the COP26,” Astrini said.

Annual deforestation figures, based on Prodes satellite figures and usually released by the Inpe around this time of year, will give a further indication of the situation in the Amazon after annual deforestation figures reached a more than 10-year high last year. It has now emerged that the government may have been deliberately withholding this data while the COP26 was taking place. On 17 November, a union representing Inpe civil servants, SindCT, published a note accusing the government of lying about the report on annual deforestation not being ready to share ahead of the COP26.

According to SindCT, the report of consolidated Prodes data had been finalised in mid-October, sent to the Inpe director, and passed on to the science & technology ministry (MCTI). Leite should therefore have had these figures to hand during the official speech he delivered in Glasgow on 10 November, in which he conspicuously avoided acknowledging that Amazon deforestation has soared during the Bolsonaro government and sought to present Brazil as “part of the solution” to tackle emissions globally. (The majority of Brazil’s emissions are related to land use changes, which includes forest clearing.) “[Leite] didn’t speak of the numbers because he didn’t want to; or maybe also to avoid getting a ‘beating’,” the SindCT declared.

#### Army captures narco-queen

In a joint operation between Mexico's army, federal prosecutors, and intelligence agency (CNI), Rosalinda González Valencia, the wife of Nemesio 'El Mencho' Oseguera Cervantes, the leader of the *Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación* (CJNG) drug trafficking organisation (DTO), was captured in Zapopan, Jalisco state, on 15 November.

The capture of 58-year-old González Valencia is significant on at least two counts. Imprisoning the wife of Oseguera Cervantes could be a significant blow against the leader of what is arguably Mexico's most powerful DTO. In second place she is a significant criminal leader in her own right, closely involved in handling CJNG money laundering and business interests.

González Valencia is the daughter of a large Michoacán-based family of avocado farmers which over the years diversified into growing marijuana, processing Colombian coca paste, and eventually dealing in synthetic drugs.

Her uncle set up the Milenio Cartel in the 1990s, and González Valencia played a key role in running Los Cuinis, a money laundering and financial operation which owns beauty salons, restaurants, and hotels. Although Los Cuinis were for some time aligned with the Sinaloa DTO, they ended up becoming the financial arm of CJNG. The US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) claims that CJNG/Cuinis is one of the world's richest criminal groups.

González Valencia has been imprisoned in Mexico various times on money laundering charges. A number of her brothers are also in prison. Two of her three children with El Mencho are currently in prison in the US: Jessica Johanna (who has dual US-Mexican citizenship) on money laundering charges, and Rubén (also known as 'El Menchito') who is awaiting trial on drug trafficking charges.

Her capture raises speculation over Mexico's current anti-crime strategy. By and large the federal government led by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has avoided targeting top DTO leaders, preferring a 'hugs not bullets' strategy of relying on long term poverty reduction and economic development to provide alternatives to crime.

It has been critical of the previous government's use of a US-inspired policy of targeting 'kingpins', arguing that it only leads to increased violence and that captured leaders are quickly replaced.

The government's attempt to seize one Sinaloa DTO kingpin (Ovidio Guzmán López, son of DTO leader 'El Chapo') in Culiacán in October 2019 backfired badly. It seems that in this latest case the López Obrador administration is seeking to attack the financial side of the CJNG operation. There is certainly a risk of reprisal: in the past El Mencho has ordered attacks on government officials (including an assassination attempt on Mexico City [CDMX] public security minister Omar García Harfuch in June 2020). CJNG also used a grenade launcher to shoot down a Mexican army helicopter in 2015.

A further interesting question is whether the capture of González Valencia involved intelligence cooperation between US and Mexican law enforcement agencies. Angered over the US arrest on corruption charges of Mexico's former

“The capture of 58-year-old González Valencia is significant on at least two counts. Imprisoning the wife of Oseguera Cervantes could be a significant blow against the leader of what is arguably Mexico's most powerful DTO. In second place she is a significant criminal leader in her own right, closely involved in handling CJNG money laundering and business interests.”

(2012-2018) defence minister (General Salvador Cienfuegos) in October 2020, Mexico's government had threatened to limit security cooperation and intelligence sharing. However, the US side monitors CJNG extremely closely. There have been speculative reports that González Valencia may be proposing to reach some kind of plea-bargaining deal in the US that would result in reduced prison time for her children.

## MEXICO | JUSTICE & POLITICS

### Zaldívar extension ruled unconstitutional

**Mexico's supreme court (SCJN) has ruled that a government-backed proposal to extend the term of its chief justice Arturo Zaldívar by two years is unconstitutional.**

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador was a key proponent of the initial proposal to extend the four-year term of Zaldívar by two years, until late 2024. The extension would have meant that Zaldívar would preside over the court for the remainder of López Obrador's six-year term in office, with both men stepping down on 1 December 2024.

President López Obrador justified the proposal on the grounds that it would allow Zaldívar to steer through the government's planned reform of the judiciary. The president suggested that as a man of "integrity and honour", Zaldívar was the best, and possibly the only, person able to reform the courts and stamp out corruption. The term extension was included in a bill reforming the judiciary, approved in congress, where the ruling Movimiento Renovación Nacional (Morena) has a majority, in April.

However, noting that both men are close friends, opposition parties were suspicious of the idea, arguing it was likely to erode the necessary independence of the SCJN. Mistrustful of President López Obrador's intentions, some opposition leaders also worried that extending the term of the chief justice might set a precedent for the president to seek to lengthen his own presidential term (something which he has consistently denied, saying he intends to retire from politics in 2024).

Zaldívar himself said in August that he did not want to extend his term and would be stepping down on 31 December 2022 as originally envisaged. This was followed by a ruling of the 11-strong SCJN on 16 November that the extension was in any case unconstitutional. President López Obrador remains critical of the SCJN: in August he said Zaldívar's term extension was likely to be opposed because a majority of SCJN members were appointed by "the old regime".

Separately the government said it has submitted a short list of three candidates to replace Justice José Fernando Franco, whose SCJN term comes to an end in December. The three are Bernardo Bátiz (who was CDMX attorney general when López Obrador was governor), Eva Verónica de Givés (a legal expert who is close to the government), and Loretta Ortiz (a political ally of the president). All three currently sit on the federal judiciary council (CJF), presided over by Zaldívar. The senate must select one of the three to be appointed.

### Tensions with INE

The national electoral institute (INE), an autonomous electoral regulator that has been severely criticised by the president, said on 17 November that it would manage next year's proposed presidential recall referendum,

“Zaldívar himself said in August that he did not want to extend his term and would be stepping down on 31 December 2022 as originally envisaged. This was followed by a ruling of the 11-strong SCJN on 16 November that the extension was in any case unconstitutional. President López Obrador remains critical of the SCJN: in August he said Zaldívar's term extension was likely to be opposed because a majority of SCJN members were appointed by 'the old regime'.”

“Tension between López Obrador and INE has been building for some time, due in part to INE’s disqualification of some Morena candidates in last June’s mid-term elections.”

despite deep budget cuts imposed by the federal government in its 2022 federal budget.

INE had requested 2022 funding of M\$24.6bn (US\$1.2bn) but the latest version of the draft budget cuts that back by M\$4.9bn. The cost of the recall referendum is estimated at M\$3.8bn. INE president Lorenzo Córdoba said that the budget cuts made managing the referendum more difficult. He added that the institute planned to seek clarification from the SCJN as to whether it could reduce the number of polling stations in the referendum vote.

Plans for a mid-term presidential recall referendum were approved by congress and supported by President López Obrador as an exercise in direct democracy. Under the terms of the law, to trigger the referendum it is necessary to collect signatures representing 3% of the electoral register from at least 17 of Mexico’s 32 states (around 2.5m signatures in total). If this threshold is achieved, the referendum will be held on 27 March 2022.

However, the Va Por México opposition coalition (comprising the Partido Acción Nacional [PAN], Partido Revolucionario Institucional [PRI] and Partido de la Revolución Democrática [PRD]), has filed a case before the SCJN requesting that the recall referendum be declared unconstitutional on the grounds that it is designed purely to promote the president (López Obrador’s approval ratings remain above 60% and he is widely expected to win the referendum).

Tension between López Obrador and INE has been building for some time, due in part to INE’s disqualification of some Morena candidates in last June’s mid-term elections.

The president also blames INE for the low turn-out in a “consultation” on 1 August when voters were asked whether they endorsed investigating former presidents on corruption charges. Although over 90% of those who voted agreed, turnout was only some 7% of the electoral register.

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## TRACKING TRENDS

**MEXICO | Raising benchmark interest rate.** On 11 November Mexico’s central bank (Banxico) raised its benchmark interest rate by 25 basis points to 5.00%, following increases of the same amount in September, August, and June. Banxico said in a report that the decision was taken in response to inflationary pressures after Mexico registered annual inflation of 6.24% in October, well above Banxico’s 3% +/-1 inflation target range for 2021. The report forecasts that inflation will close this year at 6.8%, up from the 6.2% forecast in its September report.

In a report released on 17 November, which affirmed Mexico’s long-term foreign-currency and local-currency issuer default ratings at BBB- with a stable rating outlook, international credit ratings agency Fitch said that the rise in inflation owed to rising manufactured goods prices coinciding with higher agricultural and energy prices. Fitch also said that it believes these effects are transitory, but higher prices are feeding into short-term inflation expectation. It added that it expected that “longer-than-expected supply shocks will constrain monetary policy space and will likely result in further rate hikes in 2022”.

**MEXICO | IMSS claims recovery of formal jobs.** On 12 November Mexico’s national social security institute (IMSS) released a new report which shows that as of 31 October it had registered a total of 20.77m jobs, exceeding the number observed before the start of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic in March 2020. According to the same report, in October 172,688 new jobs were created in the formal sector, representing a monthly increase of 0.8%. According to the IMSS, this is the first time in the country’s history that over 170,000 new jobs have been created in two consecutive months.



**Cracking down ahead of planned protest****Foreign response**

The crackdown by the Cuban government did not go unnoticed by the international community. On 14 November US Secretary of State Antony Blinken condemned “intimidation tactics” by Cuba’s government and was clear that Washington, which has already sanctioned the Cuban government in response to the crackdown which followed the July protests, would seek “accountability”. Meanwhile, when asked about Cuba in a 16 November press conference, United Nations Human Rights Office spokesperson Elizabeth Throssell recalled that the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly as well as to exercise opinion are “fundamental pillars of society”.

The highly anticipated ‘Civic March for Change’, a day of nationwide protest planned for 15 November, failed to materialise after the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC) government deployed what Juan Pappier, a researcher for the US-based NGO Human Rights Watch, described as a “strategy of total suppression”. The response by the government, which was clearly taking no chances following the unprecedented July protests which erupted over economic, health, and political grievances [WR-21-28], underlines the continued challenge facing dissidents who had, perhaps prematurely, hoped that the July unrest would prove a turning point.

In an unprecedented move, the dissident group Archipiélago, which emerged following the July protests, had requested permission to stage the march, known as ‘15N’, which it said was “against violence, to demand that all the rights of all Cubans be respected, for the release of political prisoners and for the solution of...differences through democratic and peaceful means”. The letter invoked Article 56 in Cuba’s 2019 constitution which recognises the right to peaceful demonstrations. The Cuban government acknowledged this constitutional right but refused the request, citing other constitutional provisions such as respect for public order. It said that the protesters, who it claimed were US-backed, were seeking a “change in Cuba’s political system” which would be at odds with a constitutional article which establishes that socialism is irrevocable.

Given the apparent intransigence on both sides, fears of violence grew ahead of the protest which, on 10 November, Cuba’s Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez reiterated his government would not tolerate, telling foreign ambassadors and diplomats that “Cuba will never allow actions of a foreign government in our territory, trying to destabilise the country”. This was backed up by clear efforts to quash the opposition ahead of 15N. In the preceding days, various high-profile figures were arrested, including historian Manuel Cuesta Morúa, Berta Soler, the leader of the local dissident group Damas de Blanco, and her husband, Angel Moya. Guillermo Fariñas, a recipient of the European Parliament’s 2010 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, was detained on 12 November, while Archipiélago’s leader, Yunior García (who has since fled to Spain), reported that his home was surrounded by government supporters on 14 November.

A 17 November statement by Spain-based human rights NGO Observatorio Cubano de Derechos Humanos (OCDH) tallied over 400 “repressive acts” relating to 15N, including over 100 repressive acts in the days leading up to it. These included 122 cases of people being confined to their homes and surrounded by a police presence; 62 summons to police stations; 50 threats; 87 arrests; and 35 instances of internet shutdown. The day itself was marked by a huge deployment of police officers and state security agents.

There is little doubt that many of the grievances which sparked the July unrest persist. In an open letter to the foreign community dated 8 November, Archipiélago said that, since April 2018, over 9,000 arbitrary arrests and over 4,200 detentions had occurred and there were currently over 600 political prisoners. It noted a “worsening humanitarian situation”, citing reports that over 70% of Cubans live in poverty, eight out of ten cannot access medicines in pharmacies, 73% consider their diet deficient, and over 80% suffer electricity cuts. The government itself has acknowledged the continued dire economic situation, which stems from the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic and US sanctions which caused Cuba’s GDP to contract 11% in 2020. Last month it slashed its GDP projection to 2.2% this year, down from the initial 6% forecast, adding that recovery was not likely “in the short term, not in

## Rising costs

In his report, Murillo said that the average salary in Cuba is CUP3,888 (US\$160), and the currency reform had envisaged the cost of the basket of goods and services for individual monthly consumption at CUP1,528. However, he said that the cost of that basket has been rising, especially in Havana and eastern provinces. For example, in March this basket was CUP2,347; in May, it was CUP2,628; in June, CUP2,700; and in August, CUP2,821. Murillo said: “This last price for August is 1.85 times the cost of the basket that we used to calculate the minimum pension, which means that those living on a pension or minimum wage, at this time, are not consuming what was foreseen.” He warned that “for a Cuban to eat something in the street today costs twice as much as designed”.

a month or two”. The impact on the population was also noted by Marino Murillo, the chairman of the PCC’s economic policy commission tasked with implementing economic reform guidelines. In a recent report outlining the results of the currency reform which took effect in January [WR-21-01], he acknowledged that the population is facing prices “up to ten times higher than what was foreseen” (*see sidebar*).

However, the government is no doubt banking on economic recovery following the 15 November reopening of the crucial tourism sector with the lifting of border restrictions imposed during the pandemic. According to the national statistics institute (ONEI), 280,913 international tourists arrived in Cuba in the first nine months of 2021, just 22.6% of the number registered in the same period in 2020. The government is also no doubt hopeful that the health situation will continue to improve amid reports of a slowdown in new infections (with 22,744 new infections reported over the past four weeks, down from the record monthly high of 268,259 in August). It also reports that 83.2% of the population that can be vaccinated have been fully inoculated with home-grown vaccines Abdala and Soberana 02 and Soberana Plus which, while authorised for emergency use by the local regulator, await approval from the World Health Organization (WHO).

## EL SALVADOR | SECURITY

### A leaf out of Ortega’s book?

**Over 50 civil-society groups together with international human rights organisations have sounded the alarm about a new ‘foreign agents law’ proposed by the Nuevas Ideas (NI) government led by President Nayib Bukele. The Bukele administration maintains that the bill is necessary to prevent foreign interference in domestic affairs. However, civil-society groups, already on the alert over President Bukele’s perceived authoritarian tendencies, warn that it could be used to quash dissent. They invoke parallels with Nicaragua where the government led by President Daniel Ortega passed a similar law last year which his detractors maintain was used to repress the opposition and led to the shuttering of a string of NGOs ahead of the recent general election, which was widely slammed as a sham.**

The initiative was presented on 9 November by Interior Minister Juan Carlos Bidegain before the 84-member unicameral legislature, in which the NI has a two-thirds majority. Likening it to the US Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), Bidegain said that the bill, which contemplates the creation of a foreign agents’ registry attached to the interior ministry, seeks to establish a legal framework which “would make transparent international donations to different organisations”. The bill also establishes a 40% tax on foreign donations to such organisations. Some sectors are exempt, such as businesses with “strictly commercial” aims, diplomatic missions, and humanitarian, religious, and academic activities (among others). However, those implicitly included would be organisations working on anti-corruption, transparency, human rights, and rule of law, many of which have been critical of Bukele. Also drawing concern, the bill stipulates that those registered as “foreign agents” are barred from carrying out “political activities” that aim to alter “public order” or that “endanger or threaten national security or the social and political stability of the country”.

The initiative has already prompted an outcry both domestically and abroad, from groups like US-based NGO Human Rights Watch and press watchdogs like the Inter American Press Association as well as from United Nations Special Rapporteurs Mary Lawlor (Human Rights Defenders) and Clément Voule (Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association). Xenia Hernández, the executive director of civil-society group Fundación Democracia, Transparencia y Justicia (DTJ), told national daily *El Diario de Hoy* that this initiative “mirrors what Ortega has done”, while executive

## Foreign agents law

In a statement dated 12 November urging El Salvador to shelve the proposed foreign agents law, HRW notes that it has documented that other countries, such as Russia and Nicaragua, have used similar “foreign agents” laws to silence civil society. It highlights that the European Parliament has condemned Russia’s law – which is the subject of multiple challenges before the European Court of Human Rights – as a tool to stifle dissent, and the Council of Europe commissioner for human rights has made clear that it violates international norms.

director of local civil society group Acción Ciudadana, Eduardo Escobar, told the same source that these laws have served in other countries to “suffocate” NGOs.

The unveiling of the initiative came days after President Bukele accused the US government, which has increasingly made known its discontent with his administration over democracy-related issues [WR-21-21], of financing the political opposition. This followed the 4 November announcement by administrator of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), Samantha Power, of a five-year US\$300m initiative to “empower local organisations” in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. According to Power, the initiative seeks to address the drivers of irregular migration to the US – in line with US President Joe Biden’s plan for Central America. President Bukele tweeted in response “what would the US government say if we financed its political opposition...because this is what these NGOs do and everyone knows it”.

## NICARAGUA | DIPLOMACY

### Making good a threat

The US, UK, and Canada have all announced new sanctions on Nicaraguan officials and institutions following the 7 November general election which was widely panned as undemocratic [WR-21-45]. US President Joe Biden took the added step of announcing that President Daniel Ortega, First Lady and Vice President Rosario Murillo, their family, and members of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) government would be banned from entering the US. With further sanctions likely, it remains unclear what action the Organization of American States (OAS) will take following a recent resolution which declared that the elections were “not free, fair or transparent and have no democratic legitimacy”.

The three countries have previously sanctioned Nicaraguan individuals and institutions (in the form of asset freezes and travel bans) in recent years over human rights and democracy-related concerns. On 15 November, in a concerted effort, the US targeted a further nine individuals and the attorney general’s office; the UK sanctioned eight individuals; and Canada, 11. This also followed President Biden’s promulgation last week of the ‘Renacer Act’ which would “dramatically increase US diplomatic engagement” in Nicaragua.

Three days earlier, following a general assembly which took place in Guatemala from 10-12 November, the OAS, whose previous efforts to pressure the Ortega government over democracy-related concerns had little impact, issued a resolution. As well as rejecting the legitimacy of the vote and reiterating calls for political prisoners to be released, it concludes that, based on the principles set out in the Charter of the OAS and the Inter-American Democratic Charter, democratic institutions in Nicaragua have been seriously undermined by the government. The resolution instructs the OAS permanent council to undertake an immediate collective assessment of the situation, to be completed no later than 30 November and for unspecified “appropriate action” to be taken. Some speculate that this “appropriate action” could result in OAS member countries declaring a rupture of the democratic order in Nicaragua, triggering the suspension or termination of its member state status.

Yet in a sign that the FSLN could be seeking to pre-empt this, and is unperturbed by the prospect of Nicaragua becoming a pariah state, on 16 November the FSLN-controlled legislature approved a resolution calling on President Ortega to denounce the OAS charter, citing foreign intervention in Nicaragua’s affairs. Eliseo Nuñez, a local political analyst and opposition member, tweeted that if Ortega denounces the charter, it would initiate a two-year process for Nicaragua to exit the organisation.



## POSTSCRIPT

### Playing the apathy card in Venezuela?

#### Quotes of the week

“Never forget that the triumph isn't to win, it's to never accept defeat.”

*Argentina's President Alberto Fernández tries to downplay his government's defeat in the 14 November mid-term congressional elections.*

“In the choice between force and dialogue...I'm going for dialogue and agreement, but the state cannot allow itself to be forced into submission by them.”

*Ecuador's President Guillermo Lasso on the decision to facilitate dialogue between criminal gangs to reduce violence in the country's prisons.*

“Apparently some of my colleagues in Washington dressed for nothing, for their party which did not take place.”

*Cuba's Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez responds to the lack of turnout for the 15 November day of planned protest, following a massive deployment of security forces and a reported crackdown in the days prior to it.*

In the run-up to the 21 November regional elections, in which 21m eligible Venezuelan voters are set to elect roughly 3,000 officials including councillors, mayors, and 23 state governors, President Nicolás Maduro's government has allowed the opposition a greater degree of political freedom than usual. But it may be playing an apathy card.

The elections promise to be unusual. For the first time in four years, the opposition parties agreed to participate, despite continuing fears of electoral fraud. Around 300 election observers, mainly from the European Union (EU), have been deployed. While the ruling Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) continues to dominate the judiciary, the media, and the electoral council (CNE), using the resources of the state to gain votes (for example by distributing subsidised meals to supporters), there has been little sign of its other favoured instrument of control: political repression. Opposition candidates have been able to hold public meetings in relative freedom.

Referring to the gangs of motorcycle-riding armed government supporters that have attacked members of the opposition in previous elections, former CNE head Andrés Caleca, asked “Where are the *colectivos*? Hidden. Hidden because there is an international observation mission”. The government does seem to be calculating that at least three factors will work in its favour: first, the opposition's chronic inability to unite; second, a very small economic recovery as oil prices rise and the economy becomes more dollarised; and in third place, the likelihood of voter apathy and low turnout.

In southern Bolívar state two rival opposition candidates came to blows in front of a startled head of the EU electoral observation mission. In Miranda state, the opposition presented two rival gubernatorial candidates, making a PSUV victory more likely (one of them, Carlos Ocariz, eventually stepped down ten days before the polls). Henrique Capriles, an opposition leader and former presidential candidate who has argued in favour of participating in the polls, said that the government was in any case actively seeking a high abstention rate, since a high turnout normally favours the opposition. Local consultancy Datanálisis has calculated that if the abstention rate exceeds 55% the ruling PSUV-led coalition may end up winning 18 of the 23 state governorships.

One of the effects of the electoral fragmentation of the opposition has been to weaken the leadership role of Juan Guaidó, who is still recognised by the US and other governments as the legitimate president of Venezuela. The Maduro government can be expected to take further “divide and rule” measures in the weeks after the elections.

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