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Chile's congress set to play critical role

Moderate left-wing and moderate right-wing candidates performed extremely poorly in the first round of Chile's presidential elections on 21 November. In sharp contrast, however, they did rather well in the concurrent congressional elections. This could be a key factor in shaping Chile's political future.

Chilean elections have been seen as a watershed moment, confirming deep shifts in political alignments after the social explosion of 2019, the constitutional referendum of 2020, and the election of a constitutional convention in May 2021. At presidential level, the 'old Chile' – the three-decade track record of alternation between relatively moderate centre-left and centre-right coalitions, has been dealt something of a death blow.

There were seven candidates in the running for the presidency. The two who could be said to represent the old Chile - Sebastián Sichel of Chile Podemos Más, who was aligned with the incumbent right-wing coalition of President Sebastián Piñera, and Yasna Provoste of Nuevo Pacto Social, a coalition including Democracia Cristiana (DC) and Partido Socialista (PS) - were relegated to fourth and fifth place in the race. Sichel received only 12.79% of the popular vote, placing him fourth, while Provoste gained 11.61% for fifth place. Beneath them came Marco Enríquez Ominami (a former member of the PS now representing the Partido Progresista [PRO]) in sixth place with 7.61%, and Eduardo Artés (a far-left candidate of the Unión Patriótica (UPA), who came last with 1.47%.

For obvious reasons attention has focused on the top three candidates, all of whom could be described as representatives of the 'new Chile', which remains somewhat volatile and still in a state of turbulent evolution. José Antonio Kast of Partido Republicano (PLR) took first place with 27.91% of the vote. A far-right admirer of former US president Donald Trump, Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro, and Chile's military dictator, General Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), Kast is a supporter of free-market economics and a social conservative who appeals to those worried over crime and violence and immigration (in an echo of Trump's border wall, Kast proposes digging a ditch on the northern border with Bolivia to make it more difficult for migrants to enter Chile).

Second place went to Gustavo Boric of the Apruebo Dignidad leftist coalition. Boric won 25.83% of the vote, putting him just over two percentage points behind Kast. Boric can be described as a child of the 2019 social explosion – the wave of often violent protests over poverty and inequality that swept the country. A former student leader, Boric favours a much more interventionist state. At 35, he is one of Chile's youngest-ever presidential candidates, offering a "generational shift". He describes himself as an ecologist, a feminist, and a regionalist. He has claimed that Chile was the first country to introduce the neo-liberal economic model but will also be the first country to "bury it". He admires the Podemos movement in Spain and former left-wing Uruguayan president José Mujica (2010-2015).

Parisi

Franco Parisi is also controversial in other ways. He claims to be an academic at the University of Alabama, but the university authorities say he has not worked there since 2016; he also faces allegations of sexual harassment and failing to pay alimony. He denies any wrongdoing. Some analysts believe he appeals strongly to alienated young men.

While the second-round run-off, due on 19 December, will be a two-way race between Kast and Boric, it is also worth noting the unexpected strength of Franco Parisi of Partido de la Gente (PDG), who took third place with 12.8% of the vote. His campaign was unusual in many senses. It was conducted almost entirely on social media. Parisi remained outside Chile at his home in the southern US state of Alabama for the entire campaign. A libertarian economist who constantly attacks the political “caste system”, his anti-establishment populism has been likened to Italy’s Five Star Movement led by Beppe Grillo.

While voters seem to have opted for the ‘new politics’ at presidential level, they have not done so at the congressional level. The traditional centre-right and centre-left coalitions, Nuevo Pacto Social and Chile Podemos Más, were the two most voted-for coalitions in both the lower chamber and the senate. In the lower chamber, Chile Podemos Más will hold 53 of the 155 seats; Nuevo Pacto Social, 37. The lower chamber will be fairly evenly divided on right-left lines, with a narrow advantage to the left. In the 50-seat senate, Chile Podemos Más is projected to have the largest block of 24 seats while Nuevo Pacto Social will have the second largest with 17. Here too the balance between left and right will be close, with an advantage to the right.

The two big questions are who will win the run-off, and what type of relationship will the victor have with congress. According to early opinion polls, both second-round candidates are in a technical tie: a poll published by Cadem on 22 November showed them level-pegging with 39% support each, while a poll by Pulso Ciudadano showed Boric with a narrow advantage of 35.9%-35%. The outcome will depend on endorsements from the defeated candidates and on whether the high abstention rate in the first round (only 47.3% of the registered electorate voted) varies in the second round.

Both the ‘old left’ and ‘old right’ have, as expected, endorsed their new-left and new-right equivalents, Boric and Kast, for the second round. But the volatile PDG may still play a king-making role. Parisi has said he will hold an online consultation among party members in early December to decide who to endorse, arguing that this will be decisive in the final outcome. Parisi may be overstating his case, but in a close race both the Boric and Kast campaign leaders will do what they can to woo his supporters.

One reading of the current political situation is that both presidential frontrunners will need to tack to the centre in an attempt to win over floating voters, but also to ensure future governability. Whoever wins is also likely to have to moderate their policies if they hope to get new laws approved by a legislature where no single group will exercise control. Negotiations within the main congressional blocks may end up influencing the policies of the future government almost as much as the campaign manifestos of Boric and Kast.

A final point concerns the constituent convention. Elected last May, the 155-seat convention, which sits in parallel with congress, has until March next year to agree a new constitution, with the possibility of a three-month extension. The new constitutional text would then be subject to ratification by referendum, possibly in September 2022. It has a strong representation of left-wing and independent groups. If Boric wins the second-round ballot, he is likely to have a significant degree of empathy with the constitutional changes suggested. If Kast wins, the relationship is likely to be much more difficult. Kast has expressed support for the existing 1980 constitution written during the military dictatorship and has argued against a wholesale re-write.

PSUV tightens its grip in regional elections

The regional and municipal elections held in Venezuela on 21 November marked the first vote since 2017 that was not boycotted by the political opposition. In an election cycle that was conducted under the supervision of a European Union electoral observation mission (EU-EOM), there was hope in some quarters that a diminished opposition could regain some momentum. It was not to be – the ruling Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV) won the governorships of 20 of Venezuela’s 23 states. Whilst the EU-EOM cited a number of “irregularities” in the electoral process, it noted that the vote was an improvement on the previous three elections. Opposition disunity and voter apathy may have been the key factors in the PSUV’s victory.

The election represented an opportunity for the opposition to dent the PSUV’s dominance at the subnational level, with 23 state governorships, 335 mayorships, 253 seats in state legislatures, and 2,471 local councillor positions up for grabs. Despite fears that President Nicolás Maduro’s government would not permit a free and fair election, the presence of the EU-EOM had boosted the confidence of the opposition. Opposition parties canvassed freely, with a marked reduction in political violence compared to previous election cycles.

That climate of relative tranquillity did not translate into opposition gains at the ballot box. Turnout was low, at just 41.8%, according to the national electoral council (CNE), effectively dashing any hopes of turning the tide against the PSUV. The opposition suffered a net loss of two state governorships, winning Cojedes from the PSUV, holding Zulia and Nueva Esparta, but losing control of Táchira and Mérida.

The disappointing result for the opposition raises questions over its direction under the leadership of Juan Guaidó. He had two key tasks if the opposition was to improve its standing – drive up voter turnout, and quell infighting in a broad opposition coalition [[WR-21-46](#)]. Neither of those happened: the high abstention rate recalled Guaidó’s lost ability to conjure massive anti-government demonstrations and, in a gift to the PSUV, the perennially fractious opposition fielded more than one candidate in several races. Guaidó acknowledged these problems on 22 November, calling for the “reunification of all [opposition] factions so we can fight the regime”. Guaidó also accused Maduro of “hijacking power” by holding elections “without [necessary] preconditions” in order to “corner us in the false dilemma of whether or not to vote”.

The EU-EOM’s preliminary report, published on 23 November, found evidence of a number of irregularities in the electoral process, with the leader of the observation mission, Isabel Santos, noting that “there have been arbitrary bans on candidates for administrative reasons, there have been suspensions, or the most recognised leaders or members of some parties have been withdrawn”.

The report states that the PSUV utilised a mixture of patronage and coercion to secure votes, making “extended use of state resources” for “the delivery of goods, such as food rations, gas bottles or water tanks”. It also claims that government officials waited outside certain polling stations in all of

Dialogue

Despite promises from President Maduro in recent weeks that the government would resume its suspended dialogue with the opposition after the elections, he appeared to row back on that pledge on 21 November, saying that “the conditions are not there” for further negotiations. The dialogue process was suspended on 16 October in protest at the extradition of the financier Alex Saab from Cape Verde to the US, where he is accused of laundering money for the Maduro administration.

Capriles

Another leading opposition figure, Henrique Capriles Radonski, appears to be waiting in the wings, charging on 23 November that “today, nobody is in charge of the opposition,” and blaming the fragmentation of the opposition vote for the electoral defeat.

Venezuela’s 23 states, pressuring voters who receive state benefits to vote for the PSUV.

Furthermore, after a lull during the final weeks of campaigning, electoral violence returned on polling day. A man was shot dead and two others injured in an attack on a voting station in the town of San Francisco, Zulia state. Witnesses claim that the assault was carried out by a ‘colectivo’ – a pro-government citizens’ militia – which they said assaulted people queuing to vote before opening fire on the polling centre.

Also in San Francisco, the local campaign director for the opposition Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD) coalition, Eduardo Labrador, claimed to have been attacked in a colectivo raid on the MUD’s headquarters, posting a video on social media with a bloodied face.

Despite voicing concerns about violence and coercion, the EU-EOM found that the official results published by the CNE were “technically” accurate, and that “the automated voting system offered sufficient guarantees of integrity and confidentiality”. It adds that, “despite the persistence of structural deficiencies...electoral conditions improved in comparison to the three previous national elections [in 2020, 2018, and 2017]”. Presenting the preliminary findings to a press conference, Santos repeatedly declined to say whether the election was “free and fair” and said that a full verdict will be presented in the EU-EOM’s final report in January or February.

The report’s findings will be weaponised by both the government and the opposition. However, very few expected a level playing in these elections, and the preliminary report by the EU-EOM indicates that Guaidó will not be able to convincingly cry fraud. Instead, the pressure will be on him to regroup the opposition, put an end to the infighting among his fragmented coalition, and persuade Venezuela’s citizens to return to the streets in large numbers, which they have not done since early 2020. Should Guaidó fail to achieve this, the pressure will grow on him to step aside. Whilst he is not yet facing a formidable rebellion in the opposition ranks, discontent is likely to build in the aftermath of the election (*see sidebar*).

COLOMBIA | POLITICS

Zuluaga clinches Uribista nomination for 2022

Óscar Iván Zuluaga won the nomination of the ruling right-wing Centro Democrático (CD) for the May 2022 presidential election on 22 November, becoming the first candidate to secure a major party’s backing officially. As the designated torchbearer for Uribismo, the right-wing political movement created by former president and CD founder Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), Zuluaga can be expected to push a hardline security narrative and present a business-friendly alternative to the left-wing Senator Gustavo Petro (Colombia Humana), who leads opinion polls.

Zuluaga benefits from strong name-recognition, having reached the run-off of the 2014 election against former president Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) and served as finance minister under Uribe from 2007-2010. Despite that, he has no easy feat ahead of him. CD’s image has taken a battering in recent months, after President Iván Duque oversaw a violent crackdown on anti-government protesters between April and July [[WR-21-19](#)]. The protests focused attention on Colombia’s longstanding inequalities, which were further exacerbated by the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, leading to a surge in support for Petro – who made it to the presidential run-off in 2018 before losing to Duque.

Farc set to be removed from US terror blacklist

The Farc appears set to be removed from the US State Department's list of foreign terrorist organisations. Media outlets broke the story on 22 November, citing sources within the US government, and State Department spokesman Ned Price appeared to confirm the news on 23 November, stating that "the Department of State has provided congress with notifications of upcoming actions we are taking with regard to" the Farc. Many advocates of the 2016 peace deal struck with the guerrilla group argue that the Farc's designation as a terrorist organisation is impeding the re-integration of ex-combatants into civilian life by hindering their opening of bank accounts and preventing them from benefitting from US-sponsored aid initiatives.

With the election still six months away, Petro is in pole position. A poll by the Centro Nacional de Consultoría (CNC), published on 13 November, put him on 22% of the intended vote, with Zuluaga scoring just 3%. Zuluaga can expect to scoop up many of the 4% of respondents who supported his main rival for the CD nomination, María Fernanda Cabal. His chances of success, however, largely hang on his ability to win over the 26% of respondents who said that they do not support any of the candidates or would cast spoiled ballots.

To achieve that, Zuluaga can be expected to push the law-and-order rhetoric of the current administration aggressively, highlighting victories such as the October capture of Colombia's most-wanted drug trafficker, Dairo Antonio Úsuga ('Otoniel'), as proof of the CD's security credentials [WR-21-43]. Accepting the party's nomination on 22 November, Zuluaga pledged to deliver "Democratic Security 2.0" in reference to Uribe's flagship security policy, which saw the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc) beaten into near-submission, but which also featured widespread and systematic human rights violations [WR-21-31]. Zuluaga has regularly criticised the 2016 peace agreement struck with the Farc, although he has said he will respect the peace deal if he wins the presidency.

Another certain line of attack will be Zuluaga's presentation of himself as a bulwark against the radical leftist proposals set out by Petro. This worked effectively for Duque in the 2018 run-off, in which Petro was painted as the "Castro-Chavista" candidate bent on turning Colombia into a socialist state. It is unclear whether this will work quite so well in 2022, however, given the hardships experienced by much of the population during the pandemic. Nevertheless, Zuluaga's emphasis on strict adherence to Colombia's debt anchor may well resonate in a country in which leftist parties have traditionally been viewed with suspicion – particularly if he ends up facing Petro in the run-off.

For now, the challenge will be getting that far. The CNC poll put Zuluaga narrowly behind the independent right-wing, anti-corruption candidate Rodolfo Hernández, centre-left candidates Sergio Fajardo (Compromiso Ciudadano) and Juan Manuel Galán (Nuevo Liberalismo), and the independent centrist Alejandro Gaviria.

BRAZIL & SOUTHERN CONE

BRAZIL | POLITICS

PSDB in disarray as Moro makes his moves

The Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB) held primaries on 21 November to choose its candidate for Brazil's October 2022 presidential elections. The decision to hold primaries – the first time that the establishment centre-right party would internally elect its presidential candidate – was taken in the hope of overcoming the PSDB's internal divisions and refreshing its image after a few years of being pushed to the national political sidelines. Instead, the inconclusive and chaotic primaries further eroded the party's credibility, giving a boost to the challenge being mounted by would-be presidential contender Sergio Moro, also to the right-of-centre.

The PSDB held the presidency for two terms under Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2003) before being relegated to the position of main opposition party during the leftist Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) governments of

Bolsonaro and PL make up

President Bolsonaro's planned affiliation with the Partido Liberal (PL) [WR-21-45] was put on hold last week amid rumours of disagreements between the president and the party leadership over how to dish out support at state level in next year's elections. But these differences have now been resolved, and a ceremony marking Bolsonaro's affiliation to the PL is due to be held on 30 November.

Lula da Silva (2003-2011) and Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016). Its political clout slipped, however, following Rousseff's impeachment, the negative impacts of the 'Lava Jato' corruption investigation, and incumbent President Jair Bolsonaro's rise to power. The PSDB suffered a crushing defeat in the 2018 general election, with its presidential candidate, Geraldo Alckmin, finishing in fourth place while failing to muster even 5% of the vote. The party also lost seats in the federal congress.

With the October 2022 general election now approaching, the PSDB has been intent on reversing its fortunes. It is currently one of several parties that are jostling for space in the centre/centre-right amid the search for a moderate 'third way' candidate who could mount a credible challenge to both Lula and Bolsonaro next year [WR-21-37]. The performance of the PSDB's presidential nominee in early polls will be key to determining how much weight the party carries in negotiations over a possible consensus 'third way' candidate in the coming months.

But the party is plagued by deep divisions. Although it has largely been independent from the Bolsonaro administration in the federal legislature, and formally declared itself to be in opposition in September this year, following Bolsonaro's increasingly authoritarian discourse, a number of its representatives align with 'bolsonarismo'.

During the primaries last week, a PSDB federal deputy, Mara Rocha, was caught on camera shouting that she will be leaving the party to support Bolsonaro next year. Elected lawmakers cannot easily change parties outside of a designated pre-electoral window.

The primaries were supposed to help paper over internal divisions by encouraging party members to throw their weight behind a democratically chosen candidate. Three names were on the ballot: João Doria, the state governor of São Paulo; Eduardo Leite, the governor for the southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul; and Arthur Virgílio, a former senator and former mayor of Manaus, the state capital of Amazonas.

The primaries were expected to be an open race between Doria and Leite; both have been endorsed by important sectors of the party and have waged a bitter campaign in recent weeks. Doria, a former television presenter who came to politics relatively late, has never made any secret of his presidential ambitions; Leite, 36, entered municipal politics in his twenties and has only recently risen to national prominence within the party. Both endorsed Bolsonaro in the 2018 presidential runoff, with Doria in particular riding the now-president's coattails to victory, but both are now seeking to distance themselves from the unpopular president.

The PSDB's general state of confusion ended up being reflected during its primaries on 21 November. Only elected representatives – such as governors, mayors, and federal lawmakers – and current and former party leaders were permitted to vote in person, at a conference centre rented out in Brasília for the occasion; the bulk of the PSDB's 45,000-odd affiliates were supposed to vote via an app. However, technical issues meant the majority were unable to cast their vote – by the end of the day, fewer than 10% of those registered to vote had done so, including party heavyweights such as former president Cardoso. Members who were going to vote online but were authorised to vote in person turned up at the centre in Brasília, causing confusion and the risk that some may have voted twice.

Amid recriminations from the different candidates' teams and disagreements on how best to proceed, the PSDB leadership was obliged to suspend the primaries. At the time of writing, they were planning on concluding them on 28 November, and were in the process of testing alternative apps to avoid a repeat of last week's confusion. But the damage has been done: what was supposed to be an innovative and unifying exercise in party democracy ended up being a shambolic display of incompetence.

Alckmin

A doctor by training with a long political career, and whose insipid personality led him to be nicknamed a 'picolé de chuchu' (an ice lolly of the flavour of an aqueous and largely tasteless vegetable) in the 2018 election, Geraldo Alckmin would be a moderating figure in a Lula campaign and help appeal to the financial markets.

The sense is that this misstep strengthens the position of Sergio Moro. Moro, a former judge who rose to fame for his work on 'Lava Jato' cases before serving as Bolsonaro's justice minister (2019-2020), recently affiliated himself with Podemos (PODE), a party on the right.

On 17 November, Moro told *TV Globo* that he "feels ready" to lead a political project for PODE next year. He revealed that he has been seeking economic advice from Affonso Celso Pastore, who was central bank president in the final years of the military dictatorship (1983-1985).

In recent days, Moro has publicly remarked upon a number of developments concerning his potential presidential rivals, including comments by Lula on Nicaragua's elections and the Bolsonaro government's new social programme named Auxílio Brasil.

Although he trails both Lula and Bolsonaro in the polls, Moro is positioned third, well ahead of any other prospective 'third way' candidate. A survey by Paraná Pesquisas, released on 22 November, gives Moro around 11% of voting intentions in two separate first round scenarios (which include either Doria or Leite as potential candidates), behind Bolsonaro on around 29% and Lula on about 35%.

Moro's disadvantages include his high rejection levels, his past association with Bolsonaro, and his lack of a political persona. But these could be overcome if he squeezes out other candidates in the centre and consolidates his current position as the strongest 'third way' option.

Alckmin and Lula?

In a sign of just how volatile Brazilian politics are at present, there is speculation that Geraldo Alckmin of the PSDB could be the running mate of Lula of the PT next year. Once from rival parties (although Alckmin is in the process of leaving the PSDB), both men have given signs of being prepared to consign their differences to the past (*see sidebar*).

Lula vs Bolsonaro abroad

While centrist presidential pre-candidates have been seeking to make their mark in Brazil, the current frontrunners in next year's election, arch-rivals Lula and Bolsonaro, were raising their profile abroad.

Lula, who has said that he will declare his candidacy in February or March next year, visited Germany, Belgium, France, and Spain last week on a trip that would have been fitting for a sitting head of state: he met Germany's next chancellor, Olaf Scholz; was given a standing ovation in the European Parliament; was received with the honours befitting a state visit by France's President Emmanuel Macron; and met with Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez. In every country, he also delivered a withering critique of the Bolsonaro administration's record and expounded upon the need to rebuild Brazil.

Bar an ill-judged comment to Spanish daily *El País* on Nicaragua's authoritarian president Daniel Ortega, whom he refuses to condemn outright, Lula projected the image of an internationally well-regarded statesman, in stark contrast to the current Brazilian president.

Lula's European tour contrasted with both Bolsonaro's awkward and isolated experience at the G20 summit in Italy earlier in the month [WR-21-44] - and with the head of state's simultaneous trip around the Persian Gulf last week. Accompanied by a large ministerial delegation, Bolsonaro visited the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar, supposedly to drum up investment; but he came home with little to show for his trip.

Environmental credibility dead in the water

Soya producers side with Bolsonaro

On 23 November, Brazil's national association of soya producers (Aprosoja) issued a strongly worded statement criticising proposed legislation recently announced by the European Union (EU), which would introduce tougher regulations for EU importers of certain commodities, including soya and beef, as part of the EU's efforts to end deforestation in its supply chain. Aprosoja's criticisms that the EU is disguising trade protectionism as environmental concern, disregarding Brazilian sovereignty, and acting like a colonial power, as well as its claims that Brazil already does more than enough to protect its forests, echo the discourse favoured by President Bolsonaro on these issues.

New data on deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon, released by the government's Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais (Inpe) on 18 November, has further damaged President Jair Bolsonaro's reputation abroad, for two reasons. Firstly, annual deforestation has surged to a 15-year high. Secondly, the Bolsonaro administration deliberately held back on making this data public until after the conclusion of the United Nations Conference on Climate Change (COP26) in Glasgow, Scotland. Brazil has now lost whatever shred of environmental credibility it had succeeded in gaining at the COP26.

The Inpe's report based on Prodes satellite data, which is released once a year and provides more reliable figures than the Deter data released on a monthly basis, indicates that deforestation in the year August 2020-July 2021 totalled 13,235km². This represents a 22% increase on the previous year. It is also the highest figure recorded since 2006, when 14,286km² of Amazon forest were cleared.

The figures are all the more shocking as Deter data had suggested that deforestation levels had remained stable this year, or maybe even diminished, compared with last year. As part of a change of strategy intended to project a greener image, the Bolsonaro administration had been touting indications of falling deforestation as a sign of the supposed success of its environmental policies – but it has now presided over three successive annual peaks in deforestation.

The Inpe's report was made public in the week following the end of the COP26 in Scotland, and during which Brazil's environment minister, Joaquim Leite, skirted the issue of current deforestation levels even as the country pledged to zero illegal deforestation by 2028. Prodes data would normally have been available by the time of the climate conference; and it has now emerged that the Bolsonaro government deliberately kept the Inpe's data a secret, seemingly to avoid a backlash and increased pressure from the international community during the two-week summit.

A union of civil servants first accused the government of failing to divulge the numbers last week [[WR-21-46](#)]. Speaking anonymously, three cabinet ministers then told the *Associated Press* that, in a meeting in late October before the COP26 began, Bolsonaro and several of his ministers decided to wait until after the conference to release the numbers (Leite publicly denies having had knowledge of these figures prior to last week). The Inpe's report, now available online, is dated 27 October.

From a reputational point of view, the damage is severe. European diplomats speaking to *Reuters* expressed "shock and disappointment". Cautious hopes at Brazil's COP26 climate commitments have been dashed as its targets look unattainable, even if there were a political will to reach them. "The era of treating Bolsonaro's government as a credible partner capable of reversing the catastrophic damage in the Amazon is now over," writes Brian Winter, a member of the Americas Society/Council of the Americas and editor-in-chief of *Americas Quarterly*.

Leite appears to still be fighting a losing battle to salvage Brazil's credibility on environmental efforts. The deforestation numbers are "unacceptable", and Brazil will be more "forceful" in its efforts to fight illegal forest clearing, Leite said in a press conference on 22 November. He is not supported in this approach by his boss. Speaking during his weekly Facebook Live address on 19 November, Bolsonaro dismissed the latest news on deforestation as lies propagated by individuals who are intent on harming Brazil.

New small print on mega projects

It appeared discreetly in the official gazette (DOF) on 22 November, set to take effect within 24 hours of publication. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and other officials said it was no more than a tidying-up operation, destined to cut red tape. But it has caused a storm of protest by business and opposition parties, and possibly, a wave of court cases.

“It” is a decree that was signed by President López Obrador. It allows the government to declare a wide range of public sector investment projects, ranging through airports, railways, and refineries, to be of “public interest and national security”.

Projects within this category must then be given provisional approval by regulatory agencies within five days of presentation. If no response is made, they will be deemed to have received provisional approval. The rule is set to remain in place for a year. Project sponsors will still need to secure the necessary permits but can now do so after the work has begun.

Criticism ensues

A wide range of civil society groups, business associations, and opposition parties quickly condemned the initiative. They suspect it is designed to sweep away regulatory checks, delays, and scrutiny affecting López Obrador’s pet public sector projects, which include the new Felipe Ángeles Mexico City airport, the Tulum airport, the Tren Maya tourist railway, and the giant Dos Bocas refinery in his native state of Tabasco.

Taken together the cost of these projects is around 1% of Mexico’s GDP. López Obrador has been frustrated by delays. Indigenous communities’ opposition to the route of the Tren Maya, for example, has forced it to be changed various times. He still hopes it will be completed by the end of 2023. The Dos Bocas refinery has also been encountering delays.

José Ramón Cossío, a former supreme court justice, described the order as “evidently unconstitutional”. Right-wing opposition deputy Felipe Fernando Macías said it would allow the government to escape necessary scrutiny. Business lobby Consejo Coordinador Empresarial (CCE) said it risked putting some projects “above the law”. The CCE noted that it is for congress, not the López Obrador administration, to declare whether something is or is not an issue of national security.

The Mexican bar association said the rule violates principles of free competition and the separation of powers. The data protection agency (Inai) said it was assessing whether the decree restricted the right to information. Senator Lilly Téllez of the right-wing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) said she would start a legal challenge adding: “they are going to need a lawyer because we are going to win”.

In response, López Obrador sought to minimise the significance of the initiative. He said it was not even a decree, but purely an internal agreement within government departments to cut red tape and speed up the approvals process. It had nothing to do with transparency, he maintained, since government ministries and departments are required to publish their accounts and remain open to scrutiny.

Concamin criticism

Another business group, Concamin, said the government should reconsider the new decree, which it described as a move that was unconstitutional, caused suspicion over possible acts of corruption, and violated principles of free competition. Concamin also warned that it might be used to avoid competitive tendering.

Migrants

It is not clear at this stage whether the visa deal is a “one off” or whether it is the beginning of a new coordinated strategy to limit the number of migrants in transit through to the US.

Loretta Ortiz joins the supreme court

Having received a shortlist of three candidates, the senate voted on 23 November to appoint Loretta Ortiz Ahlf to fill a vacancy on the 11-strong supreme court (SCJN). This was the third time Ortiz had been put forward as a candidate. Ortiz has a strong reputation as an academic but is also politically connected – she is a founder member of the ruling left-wing Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena) of President López Obrador, which is also the largest party in the senate.

In previous senate hearings, some senators questioned whether she had a conflict of interest, since she is married to José Agustín Ortiz, head of the specialised prosecutor’s office for electoral crime (FEDE) and considered to be a close associate of López Obrador.

López Obrador has now appointed four justices in total to the SCJN. To repeal laws or resolve matters of constitutionality, the SCJN requires a special majority of eight out of the 11 justices. This means that, were they to act together, the four justices appointed by López Obrador could conceivably exercise a veto power.

MEXICO | POLITICS

New move on immigrant ‘caravans’

The number of undocumented migrants from Central America and Haiti who are endeavouring to travel through Mexico’s southern border and head northwards to the US has surged massively this year. In what looks like a potential change of policy, Mexico may now begin offering some of them visas to stay.

Until recently, illegal immigrants entering Mexico in large pedestrian ‘caravans’ had fairly limited options. They could be forcibly sent back across the border by the Mexican national guard (GN); a minority would get as far as the US from where some of them could also be deported; some might stay illegally in Mexico; and some might be able to get residence papers in Mexico, for example by applying for refugee status.

In an unusual deal, thousands of mainly Haitian migrants forming part of a caravan in southern Mexico that recently left Tapachula heading north have been offered visas by the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) on condition that they stop their march and agree instead to be dispersed and settled in nine or 10 Mexican states.

Officials told *Reuters* news agency off the record that, in return, migrant leaders had been asked to vouch they would not assemble any further caravans in future. The ‘dispersion states’ included Puebla, Edomex, Hidalgo, Querétaro, Colima, Jalisco, and Guerrero. Advocacy groups say that getting migrants out of Tapachula, near the southern border, which is severely overcrowded, is a positive development.

What is evident is that the number of migrants continues to surge. According to the Mexican government, approximately 190,000 undocumented migrants entered Mexico in the first nine months of this year, which is roughly three times 2020 arrivals, when the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic limited mobility. Official data also shows that 74,300 were deported during that nine-month period.

Filippo Grandi, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), visited Mexico on 22 November and signed an agreement to train and strengthen Mexico’s council for aid to refugees, the Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (Comar). Comar said that also in the first nine months of this year it had received 116,500 requests for asylum in Mexico. It

Peso drops, bonds dip

Reflecting the worries of financial markets and investors about the appointment of Victoria Rodríguez Ceja as governor of Banxico, on 24 November the peso dropped 1.8% against the US dollar, while the price of 10-year Mexican bonds also dipped.

is expected the full-year number will rise to 130,000, of which some 52,000 would be from Haitians.

Government officials said most asylum applications were likely to be turned down because applicants were fleeing difficult economic conditions, rather than being the victims of political persecution. Grandi said the obligation was to protect all migrants and develop alternatives that would help relieve the pressure on the asylum system.

MEXICO | ECONOMY

Change of plan at Banxico

There has been a change of plan at Mexico's central bank, the Banco de México (Banxico). After months of waiting for senate hearings to confirm his appointment as governor of Banxico, former finance minister Arturo Herrera suddenly discovered he no longer had the backing of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Instead, López Obrador has announced that Victoria Rodríguez Ceja, a finance ministry official, is to get the job. Financial markets have been taken aback by the abrupt change.

Financial markets and investors had got used to the idea that Herrera, former finance minister under President López Obrador (2019-2021) and someone they saw as a safe pair of hands, would become the new Banxico governor, so they were caught off balance by the change.

The change came at a sensitive time since Mexico's inflation rate has been pushing up (it is projected to reach 7.3% by year-end, a 20-year high) and Banxico has been tightening its interest rates. There are also concerns that López Obrador might seek to reduce Banxico's independence, although he has denied that this is his intention.

Speaking at a press conference, López Obrador confirmed he had withdrawn his support for Herrera but gave no reason for the change. He praised Rodríguez Ceja's work as deputy finance minister in charge of government expenditure since 2018 and said she had helped deliver fiscal stability, adding that it was important to have females in key jobs (she will become the first female governor of Banxico).

Rodríguez Ceja has also had roles relating to debt and financial management, but critics note she has less specific monetary policy experience. Alberto Ramos, of the investment bank Goldman Sachs, responded to the announcement by saying that "the risk is that the new nominee is either not sufficiently independent from the government, or not sufficiently experienced for what is ultimately a highly technical job, or both".

Financial analysts remain wary of what they see as López Obrador's plans to align Banxico more closely with his political project, known as the 'fourth transformation' (or 4T for short). He has said the Banxico governor needs to be an economist with a social and moral dimension. More importantly he has talked of giving Banxico a dual function, not only to control inflation, but also to stimulate economic growth.

Most mainstream economists argue that central banks should be independent and exclusively focused on controlling inflation. Herrera also took that view. He is on record as saying that economic stimulus can cause bottlenecks and inflation and that the bank should not have potentially conflicting policy aims.

Henry unveils new cabinet

Haiti's prime minister, Ariel Henry, this week swore-in a cabinet which includes eight new ministers. The move puts paid to speculation which has mounted since he struck a deal in September with various opposition groups to forge a unity government [WR-21-38] to address the political and security crisis which has intensified since the July assassination of President Jovenel Moïse (2017-2021). The challenges facing the new government are huge – as well as the staging of long overdue elections, the need to address the security crisis remains paramount. This recently made headlines following the mass kidnapping of 17 North American missionaries as well as gangs' blockading of fuel supplies [WR-21-43].

Henry swore-in his new cabinet members on 24 November. Indicative of concessions to the opposition, new appointments include Ricard Pierre, a former senator for the opposition Pitit Dessalines, who receives the planning & foreign cooperation portfolio, and Rosemond Pradel, secretary general of opposition party Fusion, who resumes his former post as public works minister, which he held from 1993-1994. Pradel was a signatory of the September accord, along with other opposition groups such as the radical Secteur Démocratique et Populaire (SDP), whose leader André Michel was present at the inauguration ceremony.

Other key changes include Henry's replacement of his political rival Claude Joseph as foreign minister, with Jean Victor Géneus, a former minister for Haitians living abroad. Lawyer Berto Dorcé takes over as justice minister while former education minister Nesmy Manigat (2014-2016) and former public health minister Alex Larsen (2008-2011) will resume their old jobs. Meanwhile, Odney Pierre Ricot, a former director of programming and research at the social affairs ministry, will now head up this ministry. Raymonde Rival is the new youth & sports minister.

The inauguration of the new cabinet comes as the government's weakness continues to be exposed by the manoeuvring (not least over access to fuel) of gang leaders, such as former police officer Jimmy Chérizier, amid the power vacuum which has intensified following Moïse's assassination. Following gangs' blocking of access to major fuel terminals last month over demands that Henry resign, on 12 November Chérizier announced that his G9 An Fanmi e Alye alliance of gangs would allow trucks to access the Varreux port terminal in the capital Port-au-Prince.

Chérizier said that this "truce" was to allow for Henry to resign and a "week of reflection" among Haitians to commemorate the 18 November 1803 Battle of Vertières, a major battle of the Second War of Haitian Independence. He warned that the blockade would resume if Henry did not resign – a threat which has yet to be fulfilled.

With government officials telling the media that the government would not negotiate with criminals, and the prime minister's office publicly denying rumours that it had paid G9 An Fanmi e Alye HTG400m (US\$401,500) to restore access to fuel supplies, the authorities nonetheless appeared powerless in the face of the blockade. While prior to Chérizier's announcement the national police (PNd'H) announced that it had created security cordons to help ensure the delivery of fuel, on 9 November PNd'H director Frantz Elbé

Core Group statement

The Core Group statement also condemned the violent criminal acts that have been exacerbating "the already deep suffering of Haitians" and hampering the work of the PNd'H, and it urged Haiti's "political and economic actors" to act responsibly in the interest of the Haitian people, and to prioritise the restoration of law and order as well as the normal functioning of strategic infrastructure.

Fuel shortages

The lack of fuel has also affected other essential goods and services, such as potable water. On 7 November Haiti's national water agency Dinepa announced that it currently lacked fuel to continue pumping drinking water to numerous areas of the capital.

admitted that the measures hitherto taken to allow for the safe distribution of fuel had failed to produce results.

He said that while a security corridor had been set up from the Varreux port terminal and goods such as rice, cooking oil, and cement were getting through, gangs were blocking tanker lorries carrying fuel.

Indicative of the blockade's impact, on 10 November NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) warned that "nearly all public and private health facilities in Port-au-Prince have stopped or limited admissions to only acute cases, or closed their doors due to similar problems". MSF added that further closures were possible, "with some hospitals expected to run out of fuel for generators" imminently.

On 12 November the Core Group (which comprises the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General, Organization of American States [OAS], European Union, and US, among other foreign representatives) issued a statement expressing concern about the fuel supply crisis and its humanitarian, social, and economic impact on the Haitian population (*see sidebar*).

Security crisis continues

Gangs also made headlines of late following the mass kidnapping on 16 October of 17 North American missionaries from the US group Christian Aid Ministries [WR-21-42]. On 21 November the US group announced that it had learned that two of the 17 hostages, who had been kidnapped by the 400 Mawozo gang, had been released and were "safe, in good spirits, and being cared for", while adding that it could not give the names of those released, why they were freed or other information.

Yet security concerns remain rife. On 10 November the US embassy in Port-au-Prince posted an alert urging US citizens to "make plans to depart Haiti now via commercial means", citing "the current security situation and infrastructure challenges".

The following day the Canadian government announced that it was temporarily withdrawing non-essential Canadian employees as well as family members of Canadian embassy staff from Haiti.

HONDURAS | POLITICS

Final stages of campaign overshadowed by violence

No fewer than four election-related murders took place between 13-15 November, reigniting concerns about violence ahead of the 28 November general elections. With presidential candidate for the leftist main opposition Alianza por el Pueblo alliance, Xiomara Castro, the current frontrunner, ahead of Tegucigalpa mayor Nasry Asfura, of the conservative ruling Partido Nacional (PN) [WR-21-44], which has been in office since 2010, election-watchers fear a repeat of the violence, irregularities and polarisation afflicting the 2017 vote. This in turn illustrates Honduras's continued failure to recover from the hammer blow dealt to its democratic institutions by the 2009 coup which ejected Castro's husband Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009).

On 15 November Darío Juárez, a candidate for the opposition Partido Liberal (PL) for the deputy mayoralty of Concordia municipality in the eastern department of Olancho, was shot dead by unknown perpetrators. The previous day Luis Gustavo Castellanos, a PL member, was killed in

Political extortion

Cespad says that the PN's one-time approval of the "Bono Vida Mejor-Bicentenario" (Decree PCM-218-2021), with a budget of L1.35bn (US\$56m), has placed the delivery of nationwide cash payments at the centre of its proselytising activity. The think tank adds that "the bonuses, less than a month before the elections, are and will be functioning as a kind of political extortion mechanism and a clear pay-per-vote transaction".

a shoot-out during a campaign event in San Jerónimo municipality in the western department of Copán.

On 13 November Elvir Casaña, a local leader of Partido Libertad y Refundación (Libre), one of the main parties in the Alianza por el Pueblo, was shot dead in San Luis municipality in the contiguous department of Santa Bárbara. The same day Francisco Gaitán, the PL mayor of Cantarranas municipality in the southern department of Francisco Morazán, who was seeking re-election, was also shot dead.

This deadly violence prompted a response from US Assistant Secretary for the Western Hemisphere Brian Nichols who tweeted on 16 November that the US "condemns the violence against political candidates" and "all forms of electoral violence". It drew concerns from electoral observation missions deployed by the European Union and Organization of American States (OAS), while on 23 November, the United Nations (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Michelle Bachelet, expressed her "deep concern".

An OHCHR statement notes that since primary elections were called in September 2020, the UN Human Rights Office in Honduras has recorded 63 cases of political violence, including 29 killings, 14 attacks, 12 instances of aggressive behaviour, as well as seven people directly threatened and one kidnapped.

In comparison, a letter dated 15 November, signed by over 20 US congress members, addressed to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken underlining fears about "increased potential for violence". It noted that in the period leading up to the 2017 elections, the OHCHR documented 13 violent deaths of political candidates.

Violence is not the only concern ahead of the election in which think tanks such as International Crisis Group (ICG) point out that the PN and President Juan Orlando Hernández (who ICG says is reportedly looking into ways to protect himself from possible prosecution in the US on drug trafficking charges [[WR-21-14](#)]) have a "huge stake".

A 21 November report by local think tank Centro de Estudio para la Democracia (Cespad) highlighted seven main risks facing the current electoral process. As well as political violence, these include the role of the national electoral council (CNE) which, along with an electoral court of justice (TJE), were created to replace the electoral authority following the 2017 vote. These new bodies are split equally among the three main parties (PN, Libre, and PL), prompting concerns that agreements on solutions are unlikely if the electoral results are contested.

Cespad also identifies as key risks, operational procedures on voting day, given delays to the acquisition of services and equipment related to the preliminary rapid vote count (TREP) system and biometric equipment to carry out finger printing at polling stations (JRVs).

Other concerns include delays in the delivery of identification documents to the public for voting and the process of addressing inconsistencies, in addition to the lack of an electoral procedural law that would enable the TJE to carry out its functions satisfactorily.

Vote-buying

Cespad also highlights as a risk, the use of public resources in vote-buying. It accuses the PN of using vouchers from the Vida Mejor (Better Life) cash transfer programme as part of efforts to win support, which it says "repeats the pattern of partisan instrumentalisation that the PN used in the 2013 and 2017 election years", a practice it dubs "a serious risk for a transparent, competitive, fair and equitable election" (*see sidebar*).

Leaving the OAS

Last week President Daniel Ortega denounced the charter of the Organization of American States (OAS), effectively triggering Nicaragua's official withdrawal from the hemispheric body, a process expected to take two years. This follows the recent OAS resolution [WR-21-46] deeming that the 7 November election, which produced a victory for Ortega, was "not free, fair or transparent and has no democratic legitimacy". Nicaragua's decision to cut ties with the OAS once again underlines its growing isolation on the international stage following the election which was widely discredited.

On 19 November, Nicaragua's foreign minister Denis Moncada confirmed Ortega's decision to denounce the OAS charter, a move approved days earlier by the legislature, on the grounds that the OAS had meddled in Nicaragua's domestic affairs. Predictably the decision was backed by allies such as Cuba (which the OAS suspended in 1962) and Venezuela, which in 2017 began a two-year process to withdraw from the hemispheric body, although in January 2019 the OAS approved a resolution refusing to accept the legitimacy of Nicolás Maduro's second term and subsequently accepted Gustavo Tarre, the envoy of Venezuela's opposition leader Juan Guaidó, as Venezuela's representative to the OAS.

OAS secretary general Luis Almagro confirmed receipt of the Nicaraguan government's decision but failed to comment further. The full implications of the move have yet to emerge although the topic is likely to be addressed at a meeting due to be held by the OAS permanent council before the end of the month. However, on 20 November the OAS's Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) issued a statement lamenting the decision, warning about its impact on the Nicaraguan people and on victims of "human rights violations in a context where serious human rights violations are being committed" (*see box*).

New human rights report

The IACHR's statement came two days after 15 Nicaraguan human rights organisations including Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (Cenidh) and Colectivo de Derechos Humanos Nicaragua Nunca Más, among other groups, presented a report (which the IACHR endorsed) which accused President Ortega of crimes against humanity.

President Ortega has faced similar accusations in the past related to the government crackdown on its opponents following unrest which erupted in April 2018. However, this was the first report to include the period up to and including the election. Entitled '*Dictatorship and repression in Nicaragua: the fight against impunity*', the report tallies at least 355 dead and some 2,000 injured by state agents or civilians acting in acquiescence with these forces, since 2018. It reports at least 1,614 victims of arbitrary detention for having participated in acts of protest or opposition, with over 100,000 people forced to flee the country and over 90 journalists forced into exile.

The report also outlines six stages of repression since April 2018, starting with generalised repression of citizens' protest and including the imposition of a state of terror via Operation Clean-up (where parastatal Ortegaista groups in coordination with the state security forces carried out extrajudicial executions to dismantle roadblocks); arbitrary arrests and the detention of political prisoners; express kidnappings, torture, and the use of clandestine prisons; and the imprisonment and criminalisation of electoral opponents.

Back in February, Cenidh, along with Paris-based human rights NGO International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), published a report which monitored the country over the 2018-2020 period and came to similar conclusions.

Parrales

On 22 November Edgard Parrales, Nicaragua's former ambassador to the OAS (1982-1986) under the first Ortega government (1979-1990), was detained in Managua after he reportedly said Ortega's moves to withdraw from the OAS would not take effect immediately. Parrales was cited by the media as saying "it is not so easy to get out of the OAS...It takes two years for this to take effect, during which Nicaragua is still committed by the statutes to respect human rights." Parrales' arrest was condemned by human rights watchers such as José Miguel Vivanco, the Americas director of US-based NGO Human Rights Watch, who tweeted: "Ortega's message is clear: He is going to go after anyone who criticises him."

Quotes of the week

“We hold the conductor’s baton in Chilean politics and our party will choose democratically and collectively who will become the next president.”

Chile’s Franco Parisi, the anti-establishment populist presidential candidate who finished third in the first round, announces an online consultation among party members in early December to decide who to endorse in the run-off.

“Everything is ready for it to be a marriage and for us to be happy forever.”

Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro ahead of a ceremony marking his affiliation to the Partido Liberal due to be held on 30 November.

“The OAS continues to be an instrument created by the US to project its meddling and hegemonic policy of intervention, of threat and of aggression against the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.”

Nicaragua’s Foreign Minister Denis Moncada explains Nicaragua’s decision to leave the OAS.

POSTSCRIPT

Argentina’s *Clarín* attacked

In the evening of 22 November, a group of nine hooded men threw various Molotov cocktails at the offices of Grupo Clarín, Argentina’s biggest, and opposition-aligned, media group.

The attack, at 11pm at night in Barracas, a neighbourhood in the south-east of the city of Buenos Aires, was caught on CCTV and involved the use of seven or eight incendiary devices. The building was closed at the time, with Grupo Clarín confirming there was only limited material damage, with no victims or personal injuries.

A police and court investigation has been launched, with reports that two motorcycles that may have been used by the attackers are being sought. Media reports also say that police were able to retrieve a fingerprint, but a check against the national registry drew a blank, fuelling speculation that one of the attackers might have been a foreign national.

The attack has been widely condemned as negative for press freedom. President Alberto Fernández said that any form of violence was a threat to “democratic co-existence”. Former president Mauricio Macri (2015-2019) said it was an “unacceptable reminder of past violence”.

Vice President Cristina Fernández, who was president from 2007-2015, who led a long legal dispute with Grupo Clarín (the government at the time sought to break up the conglomerate), was also quick to condemn the attack, re-tweeting a statement from the La Campora faction of the ruling coalition condemning violence and hate speech. The attack was also condemned by local and international media associations.

Various journalists have speculated about the identity and motives of the attackers. Some have pointed out that *Clarín* had published a series of reports on the rise of drug trafficking in the Greater Buenos Aires area. Eduardo Valdes, a deputy for the ruling left-of-centre Frente de Todos (FdT) coalition, has suggested that the attackers could have been rogue policemen, linked to a recent scandal over the police shooting of Lucas Gonzalez, a young football player. *Clarín* had also covered that case in detail.

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