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Opposition dismay as Maduro decrees national state of exception

While some in the Venezuelan opposition like to disparage President Nicolás Maduro as 'the bus driver' and mock his awkward efforts to ape the ways of his late predecessor, Hugo Chávez (1999-2013), Maduro, or at least those around him, learned one lesson well from the *comandante*: always to stay one step ahead of the enemy. The national state of exception decreed by Maduro on Friday 13 May was a dramatic but all too predictable move, as the Bolivarian government makes full use of the considerable legal means at its disposal. But with patience on the ground fraying fast, there is mounting concern, not only in the US, that Venezuela is heading for a potentially chaotic social reckoning.

President Maduro extended until the end of 2016 the existing state of economic emergency – first declared in January to deal with the economic crisis – and added to it a 60-day state of exception across the entire national territory, extendable for a further 60 days.

Legal experts quickly questioned the third consecutive extension of the state of economic emergency. Under the constitution, states of exception/emergency can be imposed for 60 days, once renewable. In each case, the national assembly and the supreme court (TSJ) are required to sanction the measure. The economic emergency was introduced in mid January and ran until mid March, upon which it was renewed to mid May, with TSJ support. Technically, some suggest, it cannot be extended for any longer.

Maduro justified the nationwide state of exception in terms of the need to defend Venezuela from foreign intervention, and later ordered military exercises, to include the armed Bolivarian militia (the 'fifth wing' of the revolutionary Bolivarian armed forces) for the weekend of 21-22 May. Some critics have suggested these exercises may in fact be a move by a nervous Maduro to assert authority over the military.

Maduro argues that US- and Colombia-backed shadowy right-wing forces are now moving, in concerted fashion, against left-wing governments across the region. He said that he had recalled Venezuela's ambassador to Brazil for consultations about the "coup" against President Dilma Rousseff, and railed against international media reports that US intelligence agencies fear "meltdown" in Venezuela and do not expect him to see out his term (ending on 9 January 2019).

For its part, the opposition coalition, Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD), also sees a manoeuvre by Maduro to use whatever means necessary to prevent its efforts to hold a presidential recall referendum against him, which

Under siege
“Washington is activating measures at the request of Venezuela’s fascist right, who are emboldened by the coup in Brazil.”
– *President Maduro explains the need for a state of exception.*

opinion polls suggest he would lose decisively. Senior government figures – including Deputy Diosdado Cabello, the former president of the national assembly and number two in the ruling Partido Unido Socialista de Venezuela (PSUV), and Jorge Rodríguez, the bullish mayor of the main Caracas municipality of Libertador and head of the presidential commission ‘assisting’ the national electoral council in the process to verify the 1.87m signatures submitted by the MUD on 2 May in petition of a referendum – repeat, on a daily basis, that a referendum will not take place this year (if at all).

“Don’t like Maduro? Deal with it,” Vice-President Aristóbulo Istúriz said on 18 May, spelling out in no uncertain terms that there would be “no referendum”. “Firstly they did it late, secondly they did it badly and thirdly they committed fraud,” Istúriz said. He added: “They will have to kill all of us before pulling off a parliamentary coup.”

It is also worth noting that a state of exception, in suspending constitutional rights, can plausibly be used to postpone other elections. Regional elections to renew gubernatorial posts are due in the country’s 23 states and capital district by December. And, of course, it also gives Maduro authority to put the military on the streets (and suspend the bearing of arms).

Maduro’s powers under a state of exception are such that the peaceful demonstrations convened nationwide by the MUD in support of the referendum may be deemed illegal. Henrique Capriles Radonski, head of the moderate opposition party Primero Justicia and the strongest proponent within the MUD of a recall process as the most legitimate constitutional option for the removal of Maduro, was adamant that planned demonstrations for 18 May in Caracas and other cities would go ahead. In the end the government allowed the marches to proceed, but heavily armed security forces, using tear gas, prevented them from reaching their intended target, the national electoral council (CNE). Capriles remained defiant and pledged further marches.

Capriles warned that with this latest decree the Maduro administration would be able to do “practically everything outside of the constitution, which is what establishes the limits [of power]”. He went on: “To impose this, he’d better start preparing to deploy the war tanks and military jets...And I tell the armed forces: The hour of truth is coming, to decide whether you are with the constitution or with Maduro.”

“We are talking about a desperate president, who is putting himself on the margins of legality and constitutionality,” declared Jesús Torrealba, the MUD secretary general, adding that Maduro was losing support internally. “If this state of emergency is issued without consulting the national assembly, technically we would be talking about a self-coup,” Torrealba added. After the assembly later refused to sanction the decree, Maduro responded, far from elliptically, in a press conference with foreign journalists that the assembly had lost all political validity and that it was “a matter of time before it disappears”.

In this context, the secretary general of the main hemispheric Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro, penned an acerbic letter on 18 May rejecting the government’s coup narrative and suggesting that if Maduro blocked the attempts by opposition deputies to stage a recall referendum it would be he and not them who would be in breach of the constitutional order.

“I hope that no one commits the folly of carrying out a coup d’état against you, but also that you yourself do not do so,” Almagro wrote. “It is your duty. You have an obligation to public decency to hold the recall referendum in 2016, because when politics are polarised the decision must go back to the people. That is what the constitution says. To deny the people that vote, to

Vatican mediation
The Vatican's secretary for relations with states (effectively foreign secretary), Monsignor Paul Gallagher, is scheduled to arrive in Caracas on 24 May. Gallagher is not due to meet President Maduro, who seems to have ignored recent personal letters from Pope Francis encouraging dialogue. Previous efforts by the Pope to mediate in the Venezuelan political crisis, supported by Brazil and others, got nowhere.

deny them the possibility of deciding, would make you just another petty dictator, like so many this Hemisphere has had."

Almagro's letter destroys what was already the remote prospect of the OAS playing a mediatory role in Venezuela's internal crisis. The MUD, meanwhile, would never accept the good offices of the Union of South American Nations (Unasur) which it sees as irredeemably biased. As the regional superpower, Brazil would, in theory, be well-placed for such a role, but even before the political crisis surrounding the suspension and impending impeachment trial of Rousseff it showed no appetite for involvement, and there is no chance at all of this under the administration of acting president Michel Temer.

Regional allies are getting thin on the ground now for Maduro with Temer taking power in Brazil and President Mauricio Macri a fierce critic in Argentina. But while this must bring some comfort to the MUD, if anything it will serve to provide Maduro with a fresh excuse – that Venezuela is being victimised by hostile neighbours.

Maduro will soon face some stark choices though. Despite Chávez's promise to diversify the economy away from oil, Venezuela remains more dependent than ever before on crude exports, with practically all of the food and basic goods needed by the population being imported through revenue from oil. Tumbling oil prices, however, have led to the evisceration of national reserves, which now stand at an estimated US\$8bn (albeit doubt surrounds the true state of the government's opaque finances).

This is as dangerously low for the country's economic wellbeing as the current level of the Guri dam is for its energy health. The government might be able to cover loan payments totalling several billion dollars due to fall in the third quarter but unless oil prices pick up, or the government can tap new credit lines from somewhere (China's appears to have dried up) then beyond this the spectre of default looms.

Staving off a default would mean cutting back further on imports. This appears to be in the works. According to the vice president for economic policy, Miguel Pérez Abad, the government aims to squeeze imports to just US\$20bn this year, from US\$37bn in 2015, the lowest since 2004. Imports peaked in 2012 at US\$65bn, a presidential election year, when oil averaged US\$103 per barrel (/b). The Venezuelan mix is currently trading at US\$35.3/b, and is now selling at a wide US\$10 discount to the benchmark West Texas Intermediate (WTI), which analysts attribute to Venezuelan efforts to undercut rivals in the US market.

The severe curb on imports may avoid an external default this year, economists suggest. But the political cost could be severe, especially as printing more currency is pushing inflation to even more Zimbabwe-like levels, not just eroding but erasing the purchasing power of the poor. All of this could well foment social unrest and raise the very real prospect of a repeat of the mass protests in Caracas in 1989, known as the Caracazo, when thousands were killed in clashes with the security forces.

The big question at this point, posed by Capriles this week, is what side the military would take. While the military hierarchy has a vested interest in preserving the Bolivarian Revolution (if not specifically Maduro) given the power it has accrued, including the control of half of the state governorships, the loyalty of junior officers is far less certain, especially if their families start to feel the pinch like much of the rest of the population suffering from shortages of food and other basic necessities. This might not prompt them to revolt but equally they might not feel inclined to stand in the way of popular protests.

Debate

The debate in Cusco between the two opposing technical teams in the presidential run-off covered the issues of the economy; social development; state reforms and decentralisation; and citizen security. While FP focused on providing support for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), PPK promised to invest much more in infrastructure, simplify red tape and diversify exports. Both teams promised to maintain and expand existing social welfare programmes. On citizen security, FP vowed to restore the 24 x 24 regime in the national police, under which officers could spend one day working for the force and the next for a private security company, and to construct five prisons over 4,000m above sea level for dangerous inmates. PPK said it would triple the current number of police officers, increase their salaries, and provide them with crime laboratories.

Corruption scandal could swing balance for Kuczynski

Keiko Fujimori has spent a good part of the election campaign ahead of her second-round showdown with Pedro Pablo Kuczynski on 5 June seeking to reassure voters that she is not her father. She insists that while Fujimorismo became a byword for corruption and authoritarianism under the governments of Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000), she is squeaky clean and a bona fide democrat. The scale of her task was underlined this week when it emerged that the secretary general of her Fuerza Popular (FP) party, Deputy Joaquín Ramírez, is the subject of an investigation by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The allegation by a former Peruvian pilot and ex DEA agent, Jesús Vásquez, that Ramírez laundered US\$15m for Keiko damages her credibility, and the timing is designed to have a devastating impact when nothing splits her and Kuczynski in the polls.

The technical teams of FP and Kuczynski's Peruanos por el Cambio (PPK) were engaged in a debate in Cusco on 15 May (see sidebar) when the incendiary claims about Ramírez were aired by the US Spanish language TV network, Univisión, and Peru's investigative journalism programme on América Televisión, 'Cuarto Poder'. "It is my duty as a Peruvian to denounce these people," Vásquez said. "I don't want my country to fall into bad hands, the truth must come out and I chose to speak out," he added.

Vásquez, who said he began working undercover for the DEA in 2006, explained that he first made the acquaintance of Ramírez in 2010 in the northern city of Chiclayo, and that he captured a series of conversations with him on audio, including a recording in 2013 in which Ramírez said he had laundered US\$15m at Keiko's behest to run her 2011 presidential campaign through a chain of fuel stations. A reporter for Univisión was informed by a DEA spokeswoman, Anne Judith Lambert, that Ramírez was indeed being investigated but that she could make no further comment as the probe was "sensitive" and still ongoing.

Keiko has stood by Ramírez despite his being investigated for asset laundering since 2014 by prosecutor Julia Príncipe, although his immunity from prosecution has not been lifted so this is yet to go anywhere. On 29 April 2016 the weekly *Hildebrandt en sus trece* published an article revealing that Ramírez had omitted two apartments in Miami worth around US\$3m from his asset declaration as a member of congress.

Keiko actually called in to 'Cuarto Poder' when it was live on air to deny the accusations vociferously and to rail against Kuczynski for dirty campaigning. She rang off, refusing to answer questions, but then called back later. This all shows her awareness of just how damaging the accusations could be.

Although the DEA later clarified that Keiko "is not currently, nor has been previously, under investigation", the fact that Ramírez, FP's chief financier, spokesman and part of her inner circle, is in the body's sights suggests it suspects him of drug-related links. The online investigative journalism publication *Ojo Público* has since released an article claiming that Ramírez is being investigated by the DEA for his alleged links to the drug-trafficking organisation led by Miguel Arévalo Ramírez.

Kuczynski has naturally seized upon the accusations and will seek to put Keiko on the spot in the first of two upcoming presidential debates, in Piura, the capital of the eponymous north-western region, on 22 May. "It is vital to clarify the DEA accusations linking Keiko Fujimori and Joaquín Ramírez to money laundering," he promptly tweeted.

UN support

The government will work with the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (Unicef) to reintegrate the minors. The UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, Leila Zerrougui, who was invited to witness the signing of the agreement in Havana, hailed the "important commitment" and "historic moment". She said the UN stood ready to assist with helping "children rebuild their lives and transition into a peaceful civilian life".

The argument that this is just an investigation and that nothing has been proven might be valid but it would be naïve to assume that it will not influence public opinion. Nothing separates Keiko and Kuczynski in the opinion polls so unless she can somehow dissociate herself from these accusations they could prove to be of decisive importance.

For his part Ramírez denied the accusations and promised to take legal action against Vásquez for slander. But if just a few thousand voters who are presently undecided or poised to cast blank ballots feel that where there is smoke there is fire, it could be enough for Kuczynski. First Lady Nadine Heredia expressed her hope on Twitter that "congress and the attorney general's office don't proceed with kid gloves". And, perhaps more significantly, Verónica Mendoza, the presidential candidate for the left-wing Frente Amplio (FA), who finished third in the first round of elections and has thus far refrained from endorsing Kuczynski despite her criticism of Keiko, responded to the revelations by tweeting "Drug-trafficking and asset laundering are always linked to Fujimorismo".

COLOMBIA | POLITICS & SECURITY

Major accord over minors

After weeks of scant progress government and guerrilla negotiating teams in Cuba took two significant steps in the space of three days this week: firstly, they agreed to enshrine a final accord struck in Havana in the Colombian constitution and legal system to make it difficult for a future government to reverse; secondly, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc) committed to identify and release all of the minors presently in guerrilla camps. Separately, the maximum leader of the Farc, 'Timochenko' (Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri) made an unusual appeal, reaching out to his chief adversary, and principal opponent to the peace process in Colombia, Senator Alvaro Uribe (former president 2002-2010).

On 12 May the two negotiating teams announced that an eventual accord would be granted constitutional status with the object of preventing future governments from annulling what has been painstakingly negotiated in Cuba. By conferring 'special agreement' status on the final accord it will also adhere to article 3 of the 1949 Geneva conventions that regulate international humanitarian law.

The two teams also agreed that once the final accord is signed, congress would approve a law incorporating it into the national legal system. This will require a two-thirds majority, which the ruling coalition comfortably enjoys with the guaranteed support of the left-wing opposition. Congress will not be able to change a comma of the accord, simply vote "yes" or "no" to enshrine it in law.

While this is a key part of the final of the six points contained in the accord on implementation and ratification, no announcement was made about the nature of a popular referendum, which President Juan Manuel Santos has promised to hold. A recent opinion poll by Gallup Colombia in the country's five largest cities showed that Santos enjoys the lowest approval rating since he took office in 2010, just 21% (exactly half the level of support he enjoyed just last December).

The dramatic fall owes to concerns about a deterioration in public security and the economy. Notwithstanding Santos's loss of popularity and scepticism about whether the peace process would be concluded, 66% of respondents said they would vote in favour of a final accord with the Farc, up 13 percentage points on the last poll in February.

'Operation Agamemnon'

The government launched 'Operation Agamemnon' over a year ago to try and capture 'Otoniel' (Dario Antonio Usuga), the leader of Clan Úsuga, and his chief lieutenants. Although President Santos hailed on Twitter the "neutralisation" of 56 members of Clan Úsuga in the last week alone (and 1,283 so far this year), Otoniel et al remain at large.

The second agreement reached by the two negotiating teams related to the Farc's so-called child soldiers. The Farc agreed to release minors of 15 and under to Colombia's family welfare agency as soon as a final accord is struck, while those of 16 and 17 will go before the special transitional justice system, although they will not be prosecuted for rebellion and associated crimes but rather be treated as victims of the armed conflict.

The Farc has not provided any firm figures for the number of minors in its ranks but it has committed to do so. The head of the Farc negotiating team, 'Iván Márquez' (Luciano Marín Arango), insisted the Farc did not actually recruit minors at all and that those that were in its ranks were there because they were victims of paramilitary violence and "we gave them refuge and protection".

Uribe responded to the first of the two accords struck this week by accusing the government of "imposing the texts from Havana, forcing their incorporation in the Colombian constitution and legal system...with disdain for democracy, causing political uncertainty". Uribe has called for "civil resistance" to an eventual peace accord for making far too many concessions to the Farc, foremost among which he said was "impunity for heinous crimes".

Uncharacteristically goaded into a response, President Santos snapped back shortly afterwards that "in my government nobody has been imprisoned for having bought re-election (an allusion to bribery of members of congress in 2004 to permit Uribe's 2006 re-election), and "the presidential family...does not have a single stain, neither do my sons nor my brothers" (Uribe's brother Santiago was arrested on charges of murder and conspiracy last February).

Timochenko, meanwhile, responded to Uribe with an equability normally associated with Santos. In a piece entitled 'Doctor Uribe, let's talk', Timochenko said he would be happy to meet Uribe "in Cuba or anywhere in Colombia" to discuss "your call for national resistance to peace". Timochenko said that since the peace process began in November 2012 he had learnt that "passion and polarisation are bad advisers, that nobody is the owner of absolute truth and that peace is a collective construction". He added: "You were a formidable adversary that gave us no quarter...we extend an olive branch."

Uribe pondered his response for a few days. When he did reply he stressed that he was not against peace at all. "Peace is not up for discussion, its efficacy is up for discussion, its sustainability and the risk for our democracy". He then raised many of his oft-expressed concerns with the peace process. He did not respond to Timochenko's invitation to meet.

Biggest drug bust in history

At least eight tonnes of cocaine were seized by Colombian police on 15 May in what President Santos described as the biggest confiscation in the country's history. The cocaine belonged to Clan Úsuga (Los Urabeños), the emerging criminal group (Bacrim) seen as providing the biggest threat to peace in a post-accord Colombia. The counter-narcotics police carried out a 12-hour operation on a banana estate in Nuevo Colón, outside the port city of Turbo in the north-western department of Antioquia, not far from the Panamanian border. The specific area is located in the region of Urabá, Clan Úsuga's stronghold.

A massive cache of drugs was found 2.5 metres underground beneath cement. The police suspects it belonged to the second-in-command of Clan Úsuga, 'Gavilán' (Roberto Vargas Gutiérrez) for whom there is a Col\$500m (US\$165,000) reward. Three people were captured and three escaped.

The defence minister, Luis Carlos Villegas, said the seizure was "a landmark in the fight against drug-trafficking". He said it constituted a big hit to the finances of Clan Úsuga, as the cocaine would have had a commercial value of US\$250m. By the same token it demonstrates just how much cocaine Clan Úsuga is shifting and how wealthy it must be (*see sidebar*).

Greenpeace accusation

Greenpeace released a statement accusing the Colombian authorities of not upholding a February ruling by the constitutional court prohibiting mining in the country's highland areas. The ruling came in the wake of a complaint filed by the left-wing opposition Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA) against government plans to allow mining activity in these ecosystems, which provide 70% of Colombia's drinking water. However, Greenpeace denounced that despite the ruling, coal mining activity appears to have been allowed in the Páramo de Pisba area of central Boyacá department. "The most worrying thing is that the authorities in charge of executing the ruling, such as the Autonomous Regional Corporations (CAR) and the Environment Ministry are ignoring their responsibilities, allowing mines to continue functioning," it argued.

COLOMBIA | Illegal mining. Colombia's mining association (ACM) released a statement on 12 May denouncing the existence of illegal mining activity in 307 of the country's 1,102 municipalities. According to the statement, Colombia should have received approximately Col\$200bn (US\$67.87m) in taxes from this illegal activity.

ACM's president Santiago Ángel Urdinola highlighted the necessity to implement a large scale policy in the country to stop illegal mining, adding that in a post-accord scenario following the expected signing of a peace deal between the government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc) guerrillas, it would be crucial to stop the growing illegal mining activity and the increasing involvement of criminal groups in it. In addition, Urdinola reiterated the need to adopt legislation enforcing "exemplary sanctions" which would prohibit environmental and social damages generated by illegal mining.

ACM also suggested the adoption of a "national mining pact", which would design a common strategy with local communities, judicial and legislative institutions, national authorities, departments and municipalities, to set up the foundations to reach a "culture of legality" in the areas currently affected by illegal mining activity.

The ACM's statement came on the same day as the international environmental organisation Greenpeace accused the Colombian government of failing to uphold environmental legislation designed to limit the damage caused by mining (see sidebar). The focus on illegal mining also comes after earlier this month the former energy & mining minister, Luis Ernesto Mejía (2002-2006), said that the government should adopt a "differential policy" for the various types of mining activities carried out in the country. Mejía, a member of the Diálogo sobre Minería en Colombia (GDIAM) mining advocacy group set up by the Social Science Research Council and the Ford Foundation, explained that the government's current position has led to a "very basic" analysis of the mining sector, which consists of "legal, artisanal, ancestral, illegal and criminal producers", who are all "put together in the same bag".

Mejía, who was presenting the results of a GDIAM study entitled 'Proposal for a shared vision of mining in Colombia', went on to add that "We believe that the starting point is to clearly differentiate the different types [of mining] so we can make policy proposals that benefit everyone". According to Mejía, doing this would allow the government to design mining legislation that ensures that this activity is inclusive, competitive and resilient. He explained that social inclusion, respect for the environment and the fair distribution of revenues from mining operations are essential to the existence of a sustainable mining sector and that the government had to understand this.

Emphasising the "absolutely fundamental importance" of environmental issues, Mejía noted that "You cannot analyse mining in Colombia like you do in Chile or Peru or South Africa. Colombia has a level of biodiversity that these countries do not have. We have much more to protect and we have much more to lose than any other country".

PERU | Still ticking along. On 16 May Peru's national statistics institute (Inei) released its latest economic growth figures, which show that the country's GDP increased by 3.72% in March 2016, compared to the same month in 2015. The result means that Peru's domestic economy has posted positive economic growth for the past 80 consecutive months. The Inei also noted that the March figures brought the cumulative 2016 first quarter growth rate to 4.42% and the quarterly year-on-year growth rate to 3.86%.

According to an Inei statement, the March results were mainly explained by the "positive evolution of external demand", illustrated by an 8.8% increase in exports, particularly traditional exports which increased by 15.7% compared to March 2015. Inei director Aníbal Sánchez said that the mining & hydrocarbons, construction, transport, and trade & telecommunications sectors accounted for 80% of the March growth figure. This, in turn, helped to boost first quarter exports, which increased by a solid 16.1% on the back of a 24% increase in traditional exports. Shipments of fishmeal increased by 632.1%; coffee shipments increased by 220.6%; copper by 37.7%; gold by 6.5%; and zinc by 7.7%.

Temer's first week characterised by missteps

Alongside Saudi Arabia, the Solomon Islands and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Brazil now ranks with just a handful of states with no female representatives in the national cabinet. Neither does the new government of acting president Michel Temer feature any black or mixed-race members, despite over 50% of the Brazilian population classifying themselves as such. Perhaps as befits an unelected government, it is also unrepresentative of the country.

While the new government's defenders insist that it should be judged on substance rather than the gender or ethnicity of its cabinet ministers, a subsequent desperate scramble for women to fill secretarial roles in the ministries in the wake of widespread criticism in the Brazilian media suggest that acting president Temer, 75, underestimated the importance of optics in modern politics. A constitutional lawyer, whose political career to date has thrived as a fixer behind the scenes, Temer's initial misstep appears to have been the first of several revealing a man out of touch with contemporary public opinion.

The decision by Temer's government to shut down the ministry of culture (or rather fold it into the ministry of education) appears similarly ill-judged. It saved little money, and antagonised vast swathes of Brazil's internationally renowned artistic community, many of whom are now using their status to trumpet the Rousseff government line that the impeachment process is, to all intents and purposes, a "coup". Likewise, Temer's decision to appoint seven cabinet ministers, out of 23, who are under investigation in 'Operation Car Wash', seems like a high-risk strategy, unless he has mapped out carefully how to shut down the inquiry into corruption involving the state oil company Petrobras.

Finally, Temer's ministers have so far proven rather adept at misspeaking. The justice minister, Alexandre de Moraes, of the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), hinted in a newspaper interview that Temer might ignore the tradition of appointing a new attorney general based on the recommendations of federal prosecutors. The president's office had to rebut that assertion after an outcry.

Similar damage control was also necessary after the new health minister, Ricardo Barros, of the conservative Partido Progressista (PP), (whose political career has been largely funded by a private health insurer), suggested the public health service might have to be cut back. Without more discipline and coherence, the interim government could soon alienate even its well-wishers.

Health was one of two ministries awarded to the PP by Temer. The other was agriculture, which went to Blairo Maggi, one of Brazil's biggest soy farmers, two-term governor of the western state of Mato Grosso and current federal senator for the state. The PSDB picked up two further ministries in addition to the justice ministry: foreign affairs went to party bigwig and former presidential candidate José Serra; and cities to Bruno Araújo, a federal deputy for the north-eastern state of Pernambuco. Eight further parties won representation in the cabinet with one ministry apiece (*see cabinet list below*).

Temer's Partido do Movimento Democrático do Brasil (PMDB) secured seven ministries. In addition to the chief of staff, Eliseu Padilha, the PMDB acquired the planning, development and management ministry through Romero Jucá, the party president and federal senator for Brazil's northernmost state of Roraima; national integration (Helder Barbalho, who had held cabinet positions under Rousseff); social and agrarian development (Osmar

Marcela Temer

Marcela Temer, the 32-year old wife of the 75-year old acting president, is due to occupy a role in the "social area" of the new government, according to an interview Michel Temer gave over the weekend. According to the interim president, she is qualified by virtue of her training as a lawyer. Subsequent investigation, however, showed that she never passed the bar exam in Brazil and is not a member of the Order of Brazilian Attorneys (OAB).

US says no “coup” in Brazil

In the most emphatic comments of the US administration to date on the impeachment process in Brazil, Michael Fitzpatrick, the representative to the OAS, said on 18 May that there was no “white coup” in the country and that the suspension of Dilma Rousseff had proceeded according to the constitution. “There is evident respect for the democratic institutions,” he said. “A clear separation of powers rules a state of rights and there is a peaceful solution to the dispute.”

Terra, a federal deputy for the southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul); secretary of government (Geddel Vieira Lima); tourism (Henrique Eduardo Alves); and sport (Leonardo Picciani).

New leader of government in lower house

Meanwhile, Temer’s pick to lead the interim government’s deputies in the federal lower chamber of congress is a criminal defendant facing a supreme court investigation in three separate cases relating to conspiracy and embezzlement. He has also been accused of involvement in attempted murder. André Moura, from the Partido Social Cristão (PSC), is a close ally of Eduardo Cunha (PMDB), the speaker of the lower chamber recently suspended from office by the supreme court.

Although the PSC is a relatively small party, with just nine federal deputies, including the extreme right-winger Jair Bolsanaro and the controversial evangelical pastor Marcos Feliciano, Moura is considered a centrist who has long been willing to do Cunha’s bidding. Moura led the congressional committee that recommended a reduction in the age of criminal responsibility and he repeatedly voted against an investigation into Cunha at the congressional ethics committee.

The charges against Moura relate to his time as mayor of Pirambu, a town in the poor, north-eastern state of Sergipe. Moura held the mayoralty for two terms. According to the case against him at the supreme court he continued to claim for goods and services pertaining to the mayoralty after he left the post, including food, mobile phones, and a fleet of municipal vehicles. He and his wife also continued to draw a salary of between R\$30,000 (US\$8,400) to R\$50,000 a month. When the subsequent mayor of Pirambu, Juarez Batista dos Santos, told Moura the town could no longer sustain the payments, he was threatened and finally attacked in his home by four masked gunmen. It is alleged that they were acting on orders from Moura.

Temer’s party politically diverse but all white male cabinet

Temer’s party politically diverse but all white male cabinet		
Chief of staff	Eliseu Padilha	(PMDB)
Planning, development and management	Romero Jucá	(PMDB)
Secretary of government	Geddel Vieira Lima	(PMDB)
National integration	Helder Barbalho	(PMDB)
Social and agrarian development	Osmar Terra	(PMDB)
Tourism	Henrique Eduardo Alves	(PMDB)
Sport	Leonardo Picciani	(PMDB)
Finance	Henrique Meirelles	-
Justice and Citizenship	Alexandre de Moraes	(PSDB)
Foreign affairs	José Serra	(PSDB)
Cities	Bruno Araújo	(PSDB)
Agriculture	Blairo Maggi	Partido Progressista (PP)
Health	Ricardo Barros	(PP)
Science & technology	Gilberto Kassab	Partido Social Democrático (PSD)
Education & culture	Mendonça Filho	Democratas (DEM)
Defence	Raul Jungmann	Partido Popular Socialista (PPS)
Development, industry & trade	Marcos Pereira	Partido Republicano Brasileiro (PRB)
Transport, ports & civil aviation	Maurício Quintella	Partido da República (PR)
Labour	Ronaldo Nogueira de Oliveira	Partido Trabalhista Brasileiro (PTB)
Mines & energy	Fernando Bezerra Coelho Filho	Partido Socialista Brasileiro (PSB)
Environment	José Sarney Filho	Partido Verde (PV)
Oversight, transparency & control	Fabiano Augusto Martins Silveira	-
Institutional security	Sérgio Etchegoyen	-
Central bank president	Ilan Goldfajn	-
Attorney general	Fábio Medina Osório	-

Lula accused of obstruction of justice

According to recent opinion polls, former president Lula da Silva (2003-2011) remains the leading candidate for the 2018 presidential elections, at least in the first round. But there is at least a chance that his bid for a return to the presidency may be complicated by jail time. On 18 May, *Jornal Nacional*, the main evening news bulletin on the Globo network, broadcast the substance of the federal attorney-general's case against Lula. The former president is accused of obstruction of justice by attempting to buy the silence of Nestor Cerveró, a former director at the state-controlled oil company Petrobras.

Based on the testimony of Delcídio do Amaral, the former lead federal senator of the left-wing Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), the attorney's office argues that Lula, along with José Carlos Bumlai, a farmer and friend of the president, and his son, Marcos, attempted to pay R\$250,000 (US\$70,000) to ensure Cerveró's silence. Investigators from 'Operation Car Wash', the inquiry into corruption involving Petrobras, examined emails from the Instituto Lula and found that the former president met Amaral at least five times between April and August of last year, a period that coincided with a series of payments made to Cerveró.

According to the concluding remarks of the attorney general's report, Lula "impeded...the criminal investigation that involved a criminal organisation, occupying a central role, determining and directing criminal activities..." The Instituto Lula responded to the report by insisting that the former president had "never" attempted to influence Cerveró's actions, nor had he interfered with 'Operation Car Wash'.

José Dirceu

On 18 May, Sérgio Moro, the lead investigative judge in 'Operation Car Wash', sentenced José Dirceu, Lula's former chief of staff, to 23 years in prison for corruption, money laundering and organised crime. This is the most severe sentence to be handed down so far in the Petrolão scandal. Dirceu had previously been jailed for his role as one of the architects of the *mensalão* cash-for-votes scandal that almost brought down the first Lula government. The former chief of staff can appeal against Moro's decision, though he will remain in preventative detention. The severity of the sentence against him is potentially an ominous sign for Lula.

Electricity costs to rise

In the first piece of legislation to pass since the advent of Brazil's interim government, on 18 May the federal lower chamber of congress passed a bill that would see consumers pay more for energy. The bill allows distributors of Eletrobras, the state-run energy company, to extend the deadline for determining their new contracts. The practical effect of such a decision is likely to be an increase in the cost to consumers of at least R\$3.3bn over the next five years, or a 0.4% rise in energy bills.

A rise in energy costs may complicate the government's hopes of bringing down inflation; it will also eat into workers' falling income. Furthermore, the suspension of Eletrobras shares over discrepancies in its accounts could point to further, politically explosive instances of corruption in another state-run company.

While the energy watchdog Aneel criticised the decision, its defenders argued that it was necessary to save Eletrobras. The energy company is currently in turmoil, with trading of its shares suspended in New York on 18 May after it failed, for the third time, to file an audit with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Eletrobras

Over the past few days shares in Eletrobras have slumped by over 12% as its delisting in New York City became ever more likely. KPMG, the company's auditors, had refused to sign off on its accounts following several internal investigations into corruption at the state-run enterprise. The new minister for mines and energy, Fernando Coelho Filho, expects the company's shares to be suspended for at least three months.

Education sector mobilises once again**Warnings**

Commenting on the latest national strike called by the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (CNTE), and the government's reaction to it, Manuel Gil Antón, a professor at the Colegio de México centre for sociological studies, warned that the conflict could once again escalate. "We have seen the CNTE's capability to mobilise teachers diminished by the government's threats [of dismissals], but it [the CNTE] is still capable of mobilising an important sector in many states; and if dismissals do follow, we could see a major political conflict," Gil said.

Unrest is once again taking hold of Mexico's education sector. Two latent conflicts in the sector have almost simultaneously flared up and are threatening to turn into major public protests that could undermine and even derail the efforts by the federal government led by President Enrique Peña Nieto to overhaul the country's education system before the end of its term in 2018. The situation is putting the federal education minister, Aurelio Nuño Mayer, under mounting political pressure to resolve these issues and continue to advance the government's objectives in what has been a 'problem' portfolio for the Peña Nieto administration.

After coming to power in 2012, President Peña Nieto said that shaking up Mexico's education system in order to improve the quality of education provision in the country, and promote future economic growth, was one of his main objectives. In a bid to achieve this, the Peña Nieto government promoted and pushed through the federal congress a broad education reform in 2012-2013. Since then the government has been trying to implement the reform.

Opposition to the reform is such that there have been sporadic widespread protests against it ever since 2012. While the government has faced these down by insisting that the full implementation of the reform will be beneficial for the sector and the country, some aspects of the reform remain controversial and resistance appears to be quite entrenched. One of the current goals of the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (CNTE), Mexico's second largest teachers' union, is reminding the government of that and forcing it to reconsider the reform. As part of this the CNTE affiliates, which remain staunchly opposed to the introduction of regular competency tests for public sector teachers, staged a march in Mexico City in repudiation of the reform on 15 May to mark 'national teachers' day'.

CNTE defiance

Thousands of CNTE affiliates (up to 15,000 according to the CNTE) arrived in Mexico from various states to march to the headquarters of the federal interior ministry (Segob) and present a document with their objections to the reform and demands that it be scratched. Calling for the establishment of a new dialogue table to resume the negotiations with the government over the reform that broke down last year, CNTE leaders said that the teachers were prepared to camp outside the Segob until being received by the government. They also called for an indefinite national teachers' strike from 16 May.

The Mexico City march was peaceful and not very disruptive, but the simultaneous demonstrations staged in cities in some of the southern states where the CNTE has a strong presence, such as Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Guerrero, were more disruptive as the protesters blockaded some major highways. Moreover, the CNTE claimed that some 11,000 schools across the country would have to close as a result of the strike action, as some 200,000 teachers would adhere to it. The federal education ministry (SEP) responded to the CNTE's protests by issuing a public statement signed by Minister Nuño on 17 May in which he called on the 24,167 teachers that failed to show up for work on 16 and 17 May to return to work by 18 May or face economic sanctions or even dismissal, as per the new regulations introduced as part of the education reform.

In the statement, Nuño warned the striking teachers that the SEP had 26,000 teachers on standby (among retired and newly qualified teachers) to take over any vacancies resulting from dismissals. "We don't want to dismiss

A global actor in the fight for LGBT rights

After unveiling the initiative that seeks to incorporate same-sex marriage into Mexico's constitution, President Peña Nieto said that his government would also introduce changes to the federal civil code to ensure not only that it fully accommodates this but that the code's language is not in any way discriminatory. Noting that this would imply introducing changes to allow for the issuing of birth certificates and passports with a "new gender identity", Peña Nieto said that the government hoped to work with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights advocacy groups on these changes. "We'd like Mexico to become a global actor in the fight for the rights of the LGBT community," Peña Nieto said.

teachers... but we are prepared to do so and we have replacements," Nuño warned. But the CNTE leadership adopted a defiant stance against Nuño. Some 400 CNTE members demonstrated outside the SEP headquarters in Mexico City on 17 May in rejection of the statement and calling for Nuño's resignation. CNTE leader Rubén Núñez challenged Nuño to make good his threat and dismiss all striking teachers, insisting that the SEP did not have sufficient substitutes for the striking teachers. "We are prepared for Nuño to sack us but he is going to have to sack the thousands of us that are striking...let him show us our qualified replacements because we are education professionals," Núñez said.

IPN protest

Just as the CNTE re-launched its protest campaign, so too did the students from the Instituto Politécnico Nacional (IPN), an autonomous public higher education institute. The IPN conflict began after the SEP announced in 2014 that as part of the education reform it would seek to introduce changes to the IPN's charter so as to increase the SEP's influence over its administration and curriculum. The move was rejected by IPN students and teachers as an attempt to undermine its autonomy. After weeks of strikes by IPN students, the two sides reached a compromise in late 2015 under which the IPN would come under greater SEP control but still remain largely autonomous.

However following the publication of the IPN's new charter in mid-April, students in some of the IPN's 98 colleges ('vocacionales') rejected the changes arguing that these went beyond what had been agreed. In particular, the students complained about the new process by which their representatives to the IPN council are to be selected. Nuño tried to convince the students to accept the changes, but they refused and launched an indefinite strike taking over various 'vocacionales' on 20 April. With Nuño refusing to negotiate, the students decided to stage a march to Los Pinos presidential residence on 16 May to deliver a document addressed to President Peña Nieto, in which they set out their demands and a solution to the conflict.

Seemingly concerned that the IPN protesters could join forces with the CNTE – which publicly expressed its support for the students – and stage wider protests, Peña Nieto reacted to the IPN march by issuing a public statement instructing Nuño to provide a response to the student's demands "as soon as possible". Nuño, who was appointed by Peña Nieto in August 2015 with clear instructions to implement the education reform, must now deal with the twin challenges of appeasing the IPN students and bringing the CNTE into line. Certainly, the latest protest actions look like another test of the government's resolve to deliver its much-touted reform.

Institutionalising same-sex marriage

On 17 May, 'the national day against homophobia', President Peña Nieto announced that he had approved a new initiative that introduces changes to the national constitution in order to recognise the validity of same-sex marriages across the country. While same-sex marriage has been legal in Mexico City since 2006 and, increasingly, more Mexican states have adopted similar legislation, it remained illegal in many states. This led local human rights NGOs to file a complaint with the supreme court (SCJN) arguing that such legislation was unconstitutional. The SCJN agreed and ordered all legislation to be amended accordingly.

In presenting the new initiative Peña Nieto said that it would amend constitutional Art. 4 so that it recognises that "marriage is an indiscriminate human right... that cannot be denied for reasons of ethnicity, disability or social, health, religious, gender or sexual preferences". The initiative must now be approved by the federal congress, which is expected to be a formality, and a majority of the 31 state congresses, which could prove to be more difficult.

Opposition complaints

Luis Abinader called for members of the national electoral council (JCE) and the supreme electoral court (TSE) to be replaced immediately by “honourable individuals” with no political affiliation. He accused the JCE of “thinking it is above the law”. He also said the PRM would not accept any result other than those declared after a manual count; all the congressional and municipal elections used a new electronic counting system, severely criticised by the PRM. The JCE has only finished counting in 92 of the 158 mayoral elections and none of the 234 municipal district contests so far.

Medina cruises but make-up of congress unclear

President Danilo Medina secured re-election with a decisive victory over his principal rival Luis Abinader on 15 May. Medina’s triumph means that when he completes his next term in 2020 the ruling Partido de la Liberación Dominicana (PLD) will have been in power for the longest continuous stretch of any other political party since the fall of the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo in 1961. Doubt still surrounds the outcome of the concurrent congressional and municipal elections, due to a slow count. The PLD will retain a large majority in the 32-seat senate but Abinader’s Partido Revolucionario Moderno (PRM) will be hoping to reduce the size of its majority in the 190-seat chamber of deputies.

As we go to press, with 87% of the presidential vote counted, President Medina leads Abinader by a thumping 61.7% to 35.1%. This would be the second largest margin of victory recorded in the Dominican Republic’s history after the 84.7% obtained in 1974 (in elections boycotted by the main opposition) by former president Joaquín Balaguer, Trujillo’s protégé who served two separate spells in power (1966-1978; 1986-1996) for the party he founded, Partido Reformista Social Cristiano (PRSC).

Unlike Balaguer, who combined paternalism and authoritarianism, Medina is not a classic caudillo, but in his concession speech on 17 May Abinader accused the ruling PLD of other practices associated with Balaguer’s administrations. Abinader denounced “all kinds of irregularities”, ranging from clientelism and the abuse of state resources to vote-buying. “We cannot continue to accept a democracy taken hostage, we’re going to recover it,” Abinader said. He called for the de-politicisation of government social assistance, and the restoration of the separation of powers, which he accused the PLD of eroding to the detriment of Dominican institutions (*see sidebar*).

In his victory speech, Medina called for unity, congratulating the PRM, which was contesting its first presidential election since breaking away from the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD), formerly the main opposition. The PRD struck an electoral alliance with Medina after concluding that it could not prevent the PLD from extending its stranglehold on power, reluctantly accepting its subordination to a party which broke away from the PRD in 1973.

The PRD is banking on a reward for its support, such as prominent cabinet ministries, but it is a very risky strategy. The latest JCE bulletins suggest that the PRD will lose a significant congressional presence as much of its traditional support transferred to the PRM. The PRSC, meanwhile, looks like reaping the benefits of switching its allegiance from the PLD to the PRM, with at least one senate seat and more seats in the chamber of deputies.

For Medina, the immediate future looks bright. In marked contrast to the gloom surrounding the economic prospects of much of the rest of the region, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is predicting that the Dominican economy will grow by 5.4% in 2016 thanks to domestic demand, low oil prices and the US recovery, boosting key sectors of the economy such as tourism. This should keep Medina’s popularity high but he does face pressing challenges, such as improving the country’s poor standard of healthcare, tackling public insecurity, and (a perennial voter complaint) combating corruption in public life.

Another deadline comes and goes

CIEVE

The five members of the new verification mission are: Erick Gaillard (picked by the order of Haitian chartered accountants); Marc Donald Jean (a former senator and member of the council of elders [2004]) nominated by the Episcopal/Anglican Church; Gédéon Jean (nominated by members of the previous official commission tasked with evaluating the 25 October first round [CEEI]); François Benoit (a former adviser to the provisional electoral council [CEP] [2005-2006]); and Pierre Wilfrid Sanon, designated by the Haitian association of construction companies.

“Deep disappointment” was the response by United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to the failure by Haitian authorities to “meet the election and inauguration deadlines agreed upon in the February political accord” signed by former president Michel Martelly (2011-2016) and the heads of congress ahead of his departure on 7 February [WR-16-06]. The UNSC statement was issued on 14 May, the date set by the February accord for the new president to be installed – a deadline which was not met following the failure to stage the delayed presidential and partial legislative run-off elections (scheduled for 24 April) [WR-16-14]. With interim president Jocelerme Privert now floating October as the date for the elections to take place, the international community is starting to lose patience.

In its statement, the UNSC welcomed the reconstitution of the provisional electoral council (CEP) (installed on 30 March). It also “noted” the establishment of a new five-member verification commission (CIEVE) (*see box*) by Privert which remains vehemently resisted by Martelly’s Parti Haïtien Tèt Kalé [PHTK], whose presidential candidate, Jovenel Moïse, is currently due to face Jude Célestin of the opposition Ligue Alternative Pour le Progrès et l’Emancipation Haïtienne [Lapeh] party in the run-off.

The UNSC statement also said that it “looked forward to the planned field visit of Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Hervé Ladsous to Haiti” – at an unspecified date – which is aimed at “conveying to Haitian actors the sense of urgency expressed by the Council towards a swift conclusion of the electoral cycle”. The planned visit follows that by Haiti Special Coordinator and US Deputy Assistant Secretary Kenneth Merten to Port-au-Prince on 28 April. According to a US State Department press release, the aim of Merten’s visit was “to assess progress toward the completion of the 2015 electoral process and the installation of a democratically elected government in Haiti”.

That the US (and the rest of the international community) is growing frustrated with the continued delay in staging the vote, which was cancelled amid widespread allegations of fraud marring the 25 October first round, was indicated by US Secretary of State John Kerry last month. In remarks to the US media published on 17 April, Kerry said that “The Haitian players, the so-called leaders, need to understand there’s a clear limit to the patience, the willingness of the international community to condone this process of delay”. Also last month, the Haitian media cited an interview given by Merten to the Washington-based radio station *La voix de l’Amérique*, in which he said “If you need a verification commission, have it and do it quickly”. The media also cited Merten as warning that “If this verification commission takes time...it will force us to reconsider the support we give to elections”. The elections have cost the US US\$33m so far – over 50% of the total cost. The Office of US Foreign Assistance Haiti funding request for 2016 is for US\$242m.

Verification commission

On 28 April, four days after the latest deadline to stage the elections, the new five member CIEVE was installed (*see sidebar*) and began its work in earnest on 11 May. According to the local press, the commission will, among other things, verify 25% of the total 13,000 official result sheets (*procès verbaux*) from October’s first round (up from 15% initially proposed), and has a month to produce a report on its findings. The need for the CIEVE was widely recognised given that another official commission (CEEI) appointed last year by Martelly found that 92% of 1,771 tally sheets selected at random contained “serious irregularities”.

Migrants

On 9 May Panama temporarily closed its border with Colombia in response to the continued flow of Cubans from the neighbouring country, without specifying an exact re-opening date. Panama and Mexico have reached agreement for an airlift of some 4,000 Cubans to Mexico's Ciudad Juárez, from where they must make their own way to the US. President Juan Carlos Varela said this was an "exceptional" solution to those migrants currently in Panama and echoed his regional peers in calling for an end to the Cuban Adjustment Act. Costa Rica took similar action in the first quarter, with Cuban migrants stranded in the country permitted to buy a US\$555 ticket that included a flight to El Salvador and a bus journey into Mexico, from where they then continued towards the US. It is no wonder some Central American migrants might feel resentful – few of them can claim such 'special' treatment.

Alarming rise in Cuban rafters

Fears that the Cuban Adjustment Act will be revoked as part of the normalisation of relations between the US and Cuba has prompted a well-documented surge in illegal Cuban migration towards the US. While the Cuban migrant crisis in Central America has received considerable attention, the US coast guard warns also of a crisis at sea, with the Cuban migrant flow in the Florida Straits now at its highest level since 2012.

Despite the fact that the Cuban government in January 2013 relaxed its migration rules, eliminating in particular the need for an exit visa from the country, thousands of Cubans still attempt to reach US soil illegally every year, where, under the Cuban Adjustment Act, in effect since 1966, they are given special immediate leave to remain, with fast-track permanent residency approval after a year. Following the Cuban rafters' crisis of 1994, the law was amended in talks between US and Cuban authorities so that would-be migrants detained at sea would be sent home or to a third country, while those making it onto US coastland would be allowed in. The reform became known as the 'wet-foot, dry foot' policy. The Cuban government has remained critical of it ever since, alleging that it still encourages dangerous illegal migration. Having long demanded the derogation of the Cuban Adjustment Act, Havana has repeated this call more vocally since the US move to restore relations in December 2014.

Fearful that the Act would indeed be revoked, increasingly more Cubans have been trying to reach the US illegally. Indeed the ongoing Cuban migrant crisis in Central America has given rise to a new term – 'dusty foot' – in reference to the thousands of Cubans arriving into the US across the Mexican border, by way of places like Ecuador, Costa Rica and Panama (see *sidebar*). According to US Customs and Border Protection data, 27,088 Cubans crossed the Mexican border or arrived in the US by air between 1 October 2015 and end February 2016. In Fiscal Year 2015 (1 October 2014-30 September 2015), total recorded land and air arrivals reached 40,000, the highest in a decade. The forecast this year is 48,000.

The US coastguard defines the 'Cuban migrant flow' as the number of arrivals, interceptions and sightings at sea. For Fiscal Year 2015, it put the flow at 4,476, the highest since 2012, when the total was about 1,870, similar to the yearly average since 2009. The coastguard puts the flow already this fiscal year (which began on 1 October 2015) at 3,563. At that rate, it warns, the total flow will easily exceed last year's number well before the end of the fiscal year on 30 September.

In line with this trend, interceptions are rising too, with at least 2,350 Cubans detained at sea since 1 October last year, most of whom were returned to Cuba. Total interddictions last (fiscal) year totalled 2,927. That was the most since 2010, when the total was 422, the lowest since the 1994 rafter crisis. Again, last year's number looks set to be breached in the very near term. In early May alone, the coast guard intercepted and repatriated 52 Cubans.

While US and Cuban officials were positive about the latest meeting in Havana of the bilateral commission set up last year to manage the normalisation process, US officials once again resisted calls for the removal of the Adjustment Act, calls that are now being echoed by governments in Central America and even by US authorities over the Mexican border, who cite tensions in border zones as Cubans fly across into the arms of waiting relatives or support groups, in stark contrast to the hostile reception and harsh treatment often meted out to desperate Central Americans.

Quotes of the week

“I said it in January, I said it in February, I said it in April, I said it in May, none of the options that the Right has come up with to end the Revolution and topple me has historic political viability and none of them will be successful.”

Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro.

“It is really absurd to talk about a coup d'état or handing the country over to the Farc, when it is totally the reverse: the Farc is submitting to our constitution and our laws.”

Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos responds to former president Alvaro Uribe over the latest accord struck in Cuba.

“In politics nobody loses, when you work for your people you cannot despair because people are intelligent.”

Dominican President Danilo Medina reaches out to the opposition to work with his government, eliciting from his rival, Luis Abinader, the response “we were not defeated, because we won”.

Brazil lashes out at Rousseff's regional allies

Brazil's foreign ministry, Itamaraty, reacted combatively to criticism from leftist regional governments during the first week of the administration of acting president Michel Temer. Itamaraty issued a statement “rejecting emphatically the protests by the governments of Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, as well as Alba [the Venezuelan-led leftist integration bloc]...for propagating falsehoods about Brazil's internal political process [which, it argued, was] completely respectful of the federal democratic institutions and constitution”.

While right-leaning governments in Argentina and Colombia were swift to express “respect for the institutional process” in Brazil, Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro (whose own position is under threat from his country's national congress) did not mince his words. Maduro described President Dilma Rousseff's suspension from power pending an impeachment trial as “a coup” and withdrew the country's ambassador.

The secretary general of the Union of South American Nations (Unasur), Ernesto Samper, said that if Brazil “continues with this process [and impeaches Rousseff], it could lead to a rupture that would require countries to analyse whether to apply the democratic clause”. The response from Itamaraty was curt. Samper's comments, it said, were “incompatible with the functions he exercises and with the mandate he received from the [12] South American nations”.

The most acerbic, and threatening, response from the Temer administration was reserved for El Salvador, whose president, Salvador Sánchez Cerén, reacted to Rousseff's suspension by denouncing what he said had “the appearance of a coup”. Itamaraty accused El Salvador of “profound ignorance of Brazil's constitution and laws”, adding that it found this “especially strange given that El Salvador...is the chief beneficiary of Brazilian technical cooperation in Central America”, and expressing hope that “El Salvador's government reconsiders its position”. Sánchez Cerén responded by saying that his government “has never proposed severing relations with Brazil”.

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