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## CONTENTS

<b>LEADER</b>	<b>1</b>
Honduras plunged into uncertainty after tight elections	
<b>ANDEAN COUNTRIES</b>	
<b>VENEZUELA</b>	<b>3</b>
Military tightens grip on power	
<b>BOLIVIA</b>	<b>5</b>
Morales gets the green light	
TRACKING TRENDS	
<b>BRAZIL &amp; SOUTHERN CONE</b>	
<b>ARGENTINA</b>	<b>7</b>
Missing submarine provides headache for Macri	
<b>BRAZIL</b>	<b>9</b>
Time running out for key pension reform	
<b>BRAZIL</b>	<b>10</b>
PSDB chooses presidential candidate but splits remain	
<b>CHILE</b>	<b>11</b>
Courting the FA	
TRACKING TRENDS	
<b>MEXICO &amp; NAFTA</b>	
<b>MEXICO</b>	<b>13</b>
Meade anointed as PRI candidate	
TRACKING TRENDS	
<b>CENTRAL AMERICA &amp; CARIBBEAN</b>	
<b>PANAMA</b>	<b>15</b>
Varela pays historic visit to China	
<b>POSTSCRIPT</b>	<b>16</b>
Crucial peace legislation in Colombia	
goes down to the wire	
Quotes of the week	

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## Honduras plunged into uncertainty after tight elections

Honduras is no stranger to political convulsions but it has not seen presidential elections like those that took place on 26 November since the return to democracy in 1982. The outcome, as we go to press, remains in doubt, although it appears that President Juan Orlando Hernández is poised to seal re-election by the narrowest of margins. But his main rival, Salvador Nasralla, is not prepared to admit defeat. He is urging supporters to take to the streets to protect democracy, accusing Hernández of orchestrating electoral fraud.

All of the opinion surveys had predicted that President Hernández would coast to victory, having sidestepped a constitutional bar on re-election thanks to a contentious ruling by the supreme court of justice (CSJ). Nasralla, a popular television presenter who ran for election in 2013 on an anti-corruption platform, forged a coalition with the Partido Libertad y Refundación (Libre) of former president Manuel Zelaya (2005-2009) specifically opposing what both men denounced as an unconstitutional power grab by Hernández. The coalition was named Alianza de Oposición contra la Dictadura to remove any doubt about its defining purpose. Zelaya harboured particular resentment because eight and a half years ago he was removed from office and flown into exile in his pyjamas by the military after threatening to hold a referendum on constitutional reform to permit re-election.

It came as a shock when, after 10 hours of silence after the polls closed on 26 November, the supreme electoral tribunal (TSE) announced that Nasralla had established a significant lead of five percentage points over Hernández (45%-40%) with 57% of the vote counted. Jumping the gun, both Hernández and Nasralla had declared themselves to be the winner before any results had been released. After the release of its first bulletin, the TSE proceeded to prolong the suspense with a painstakingly slow count which showed Hernández gradually clawing back all of that deficit before, in the early hours of 30 November, nudging into the lead with 85% of ballots counted.

This caused major tension. On 28 November, TSE magistrate Marco Ramiro Lobo had said that the lead established by Nasralla, with 57% of votes counted, "will be irreversible", adding that "there will be some small variations but not to modify the final result". At the time, Lobo explained the fact that Nasralla's five-percentage-point lead had shrunk to 2.5 points with 69% of the vote counted by pointing out that the southern departments where his party, the Partido Nacional (PN), has a historic majority, were being counted. Lobo said that when counting resumed in the northern departments this would change. But Nasralla's lead had evanesced by the time the count reached 85%.

At the time of writing, with 89% of ballots counted, Hernández leads by 42.53%-41.69%, a lead of some 23,000 votes. Nasralla did indeed win all six

## Bananas

President Hernández tweeted on 29 November that Honduras was “opening new export markets...boosting the national economy”. Beneath his tweet was an image stuffed full of bananas, perhaps rather unfortunate given the current political developments.

northern departments, including the country’s second most populous, Cortés, where its largest city San Pedro Sula is departmental capital (*see map below*). But unless all of the remaining tally sheets correspond to northern departments it is difficult to see him overturning Hernández’s advantage. Hernández won in the country’s other 12 departments (including Francisco Morazán, where the capital Tegucigalpa is located), although little separated the two in four of these: Choluteca, Copán, Olancho, and Valle.

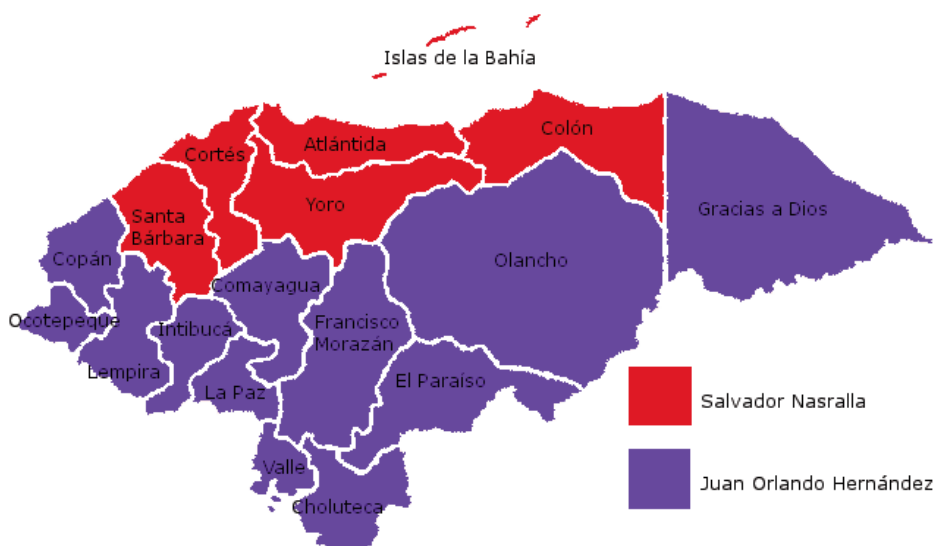
Shortly before the TSE showed Hernández pulling ahead of Nasralla, both men had signed an agreement with the Organization of American States (OAS) promising to recognise the results. It did not last long. Nasralla promptly tweeted that he would not recognise the results after all. He accused Hernández of rigging the elections and appealed to supporters to take to the streets in protest. Some soon gathered outside the TSE headquarters in Tegucigalpa, where they were dispersed with tear gas by police.

Nasralla said he had signed the document brokered by the OAS “before the TSE’s computing system went down” for three hours on the morning of 29 November, and that it had been “a trap”. He accused the TSE of “altering the tally sheets” while the system was down. The president of the TSE, David Matamoros, acknowledged that there had been a computer failure at an unfortunate time but insisted that nothing untoward had occurred. The TSE maintains that the system was designed to guarantee transparency as all the parties and electoral observers had copies of the tally sheets reporting the aggregate vote count from each polling station.

Tension could erupt into violence in the coming days as Nasralla will refuse to accept a victory for Hernández. Even after it announces the completion of the count, the TSE will need to revise some 2,000 tally sheets containing “inconsistencies” (it is not clear how many votes are contained on these).

Whoever is eventually declared the victor will lack a majority in the 128-seat legislative assembly. But governing would be much more straightforward for Hernández. His ruling PN looks like having won 59 seats, just six shy of a majority and seven more than it currently has. Nasralla’s coalition partners, Libre and the Partido Innovación y Unidad (Pinu), look like winning 33 and four seats respectively. The defeated presidential candidate for the traditional Partido Liberal (PL), Luis Zelaya, who won around 14.89% of the vote, had mooted a deal with Nasralla in the days after the vote, but even with the PL’s projected 26 seats, this would leave him two seats short of a majority. Neither Nasralla nor Hernández would be able to muster the 86 seats required to reform the constitution.

Presidential election results by department



**Military tightens grip on power**

With crude production reaching its lowest level for three decades, and the state-run oil company Pdvsa saddled with crippling debt, Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro took the decision this week to put control of the country's oil industry in the hands of one man: Major General Manuel Quevedo. Both Nelson Martínez, the president of Pdvsa, and Eulogio del Pino, the oil minister, make way for Quevedo, whose qualifications for this dual role appear to rest upon his ability to enforce discipline. Quevedo is a national guard general. His appointment comes amid a savage purge of senior Pdvsa officials, scores of whom have been arrested in the last three months, and coincides with Maduro's elevation of three further military figures to his cabinet.

This is the first time the military has been awarded control of the country's cashcow, albeit Pdvsa is ailing after being overmilked and mismanaged. President Maduro swore-in General Quevedo as the new head of Pdvsa on 28 November, promising "a great clean-up" of the "leeches" in the company. He urged Quevedo to raise oil production by "1m more barrels per day" (in October it fell below 2m bpd for the first time since the 1980s). Returning to 3m bpd, the level of production when the late Hugo Chávez took office in 1999, has been a long-term objective of the Bolivarian government but it remains a chimera, with no strategy put in place to build towards it.

If Quevedo could arrest and reverse the decline in crude production it would be achievement enough for a neophyte replacing two oil industry veterans. But it is not clear that this is the real purpose of his appointment. Maduro said Quevedo, who is perceived to be a staunch loyalist having quashed opposition street protests in 2014, would help root out "the den of thieves, mafiosos, and bandits who thought that Pdvsa belonged to them". Quevedo himself devoted most of his two-minute speech during his investiture to promising to go after "saboteurs", arguing that "the government's actions have captured many people who had infiltrated the industry; those that are left should be worried".

Quevedo was referring to the arrest since August of more than 50 senior Pdvsa officials for alleged corruption in a cull presided over by Tarek William Saab, the attorney general appointed by the constituent assembly. Just last week six senior executives of Venezuela's US-based oil refiner Citgo were arrested in Caracas, including its president, José Ángel Pereira Ruimwyk, who was replaced by Argenis Chávez, a cousin of the late president.

**March of the generals**

Quevedo's appointment looks like serving a dual political purpose as part of an internal power play to diminish the influence of Rafael Ramírez, a titan under Chávez who presided over Pdvsa and the oil industry for over a decade until 2014, and to satisfy the military demand for greater influence within the ruling Bolivarian movement in return for propping up the government at such a problematic time.

Ramírez, who is currently serving as Venezuela's permanent representative to the United Nations, has been critical of the Maduro administration's economic policies in recent weeks and has been attacked by government officials as a consequence. He defended himself this week, citing the confidence Chávez had placed in him. In a thinly veiled allusion to Ramírez, Maduro responded by saying that "some vain people think they are the saviour of the world. Chávez saved Venezuela and put Pdvsa at the service of the country. Chávez and nobody else".

**Humanitarian aid corridor**

Vicente Díaz, an opposition delegate in preliminary talks in the Dominican Republic, argued that the government was against a humanitarian aid corridor "because it thinks it will be the prelude to a foreign invasion". Colombia's President Juan Manuel Santos implied as much this week when he said that his country had been rebuffed when offering food and medicine to relieve "the serious crisis suffered by the Venezuelan people, a crisis caused by the regime and not Colombia or any external factors as has been insinuated on so many occasions".

## State repression

Luisa Ortega told reporters that the files handed to the ICC contained evidence that 505 people had been killed, and 17,000 arbitrarily arrested, in the “really repressive” so-called

Operaciones para Liberación del Pueblo (OPL) launched in July 2015. She told reporters these amounted to “a plan of social cleansing pursued by the government: murder, torture, imprisonment, as well as a systematic and generalised attack on the civilian population”.

Quevedo was not the only member of the military to be promoted within the government’s ranks. He was replaced at the housing ministry by General Ildemaro Villarroel Arismendi. José Gregorio Vielma Mora, who lost his position as governor of the western state of Táchira in October’s regional elections, replaced Miguel Pérez Abad, a businessman, as foreign trade minister, and Major General Carlos Osorio took over from General Juan García Toussaintt, suffering from ill health, as the transport minister.

## Opposition talks

The military’s growing power within government coincides with the political opposition’s decision to engage in a fresh dialogue process to provide more democratic guarantees in Venezuela. This week the emasculated national assembly, controlled by the opposition coalition Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD), approved an agenda for the talks to be held on 1 and 2 December in the Dominican Republic. Top of this agenda is the opening of a humanitarian aid corridor to address the chronic shortages of food and medication in Venezuela. The assembly’s president, Julio Borges, said this was “the number one priority” to emerge from discussions with a range of civil society actors and the Church.

Hopes that the government might entertain the MUD’s demand for a humanitarian aid corridor were somewhat confounded by an admonition from the communications minister, Jorge Rodríguez, one of the Maduro administration’s delegates in the preliminary talks in the Dominican Republic. Rodríguez informed spokesmen for the Venezuelan bishops’ conference, with greater clarity of intent than sense, that “the only humanitarian channel that you can open is to shut your mouth” (*see page 3 sidebar*).

Borges will head the MUD delegation in the dialogue process which will also comprise representatives of the private sector, such as Jorge Roig, a former president of the umbrella business group Fedecámaras, and civil society. Extracting meaningful concessions from the government will be a huge challenge. The MUD, for instance, wants a wholesale revision of the electoral process ahead of the 2018 presidential elections, but Diosdado Cabello, the government’s strongman, was adamant at the weekend that everything would continue “absolutely the same as before”, raising questions about the point of dialogue.

### Turning to the ICC

Two distinguished Venezuelan nationals have presented appeals to the International Criminal Court (ICC) against prominent members of the Maduro administration. Firstly, Luisa Ortega, the attorney general dismissed by the constituent assembly, appealed to the ICC to investigate Maduro for crimes against humanity and appealed for an arrest warrant to be issued for him and others, including the defence minister, General Vladimir Padrino López, the interior & justice minister, Néstor Reverol, and the director of the intelligence agency (Sebin), Gustavo González López. Secondly, the president of the penal appeals chamber of Venezuela’s parallel supreme court of justice (TSJ) in exile, Pedro Troconis, presented an accusation against senior government officials to the ICC for systematic human rights violations (*see sidebar*).

Ortega and aides arrived at the ICC armed with heavy files of papers containing in excess of 1,000 pieces of evidence among which were forensic, medical, and psychiatric reports, witness interviews, and expert testimony linking the security forces to more than 8,000 homicides during state-sponsored repression between 2015 and June 2017. Ortega said that 1,777 people were killed by police and military officials in 2015, 4,667 in 2016, and 1,846 to June 2017. Ortega said that the Maduro administration could not get off scot free just because “it’s not possible to punish these people in Venezuela”, due to the co-option of the judiciary.

## Morales gets the green light

“A blow to the constitution”. This was the response by Samuel Doria Medina, of Bolivia’s main opposition Unidad Nacional party, to the decision by the plurinational constitutional court (TCP) announced earlier this week which removes the constitutional ban on consecutive re-election. The move by the TCP, which accepted an appeal filed by the ruling Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS) back in September against the ban, allows President Evo Morales to seek a further term in 2019. The TCP’s decision has attracted particular criticism given the public referendum in February last year on whether to change the 2009 constitution to allow Morales, who came to power in 2006, to run again clearly rejected the proposed amendment.

The TCP announced on 28 November that it had accepted the appeal by the MAS against Article 168 of the 2009 constitution which permits both the president and vice-president to stand for a single consecutive re-election. Among other things the MAS had pointed to the 1969 American Convention on Human Rights (also known as the Pact of San José) which affirms the right of all citizens to be elected – an argument previously used in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and, most recently, Honduras.

Having first won election in 2005 and then again in 2009, Morales had been permitted to stand again in October 2014 on the grounds that this was his first re-election under the new constitution (approved under his government). Initially Morales had appeared to accept the 2016 referendum result, which rejected the amendment by 51.3%-48.7%, constituting his first direct electoral defeat. However, since then, the MAS has been clear that it would seek other ways around the constitutional ban.

The TCP’s ruling, which also removes the limits on re-election facing legislators, governors, mayors, and local councillors, was immediately slammed, not only by Doria Medina but other prominent opposition figures such as former presidents Carlos Mesa (2003-2005) and Jorge Quiroga (2001-2002) with the latter threatening to file a complaint before the Inter-American Human Rights System to “recover democracy”. The TCP’s decision also came in for criticism from Luis Almagro, the secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS), which is responsible for ensuring compliance with the Pact of San José. In response to the ruling, Almagro tweeted that the clause cited in the decision “does not mean the right to perpetual power”.

### Judicial elections

Opinion polls suggest the public continues to reject Morales’s re-election (see *sidebar*). One immediate test regarding the public response will come on 3 December, with elections for the country’s top courts – the TCP, the supreme court (TSJ), the environmental court (TA), and the council of magistrates (CM). These are the second elections of their kind since 2011, which the MAS itself has conceded were a failure. Reasons for this failure include a lack of public interest and information (even though voting was compulsory, nearly 60% of voters’ ballots were spoiled or left blank) as well as the poor calibre of candidates.

With Quiroga, Mesa, and Doria Medina, as well as other opposition figures such as former vice president Víctor Hugo Cárdenas (1993-1997) and the governor of Santa Cruz department Rubén Costas, already calling for the public to boycott the vote, amid concerns about the election, these calls have now intensified. They are all proposing that the vote be boycotted as a means of registering discontent with the TCP’s decision.

### Electorate

In October the electoral authorities (OEP) announced that 6.4m people had been registered to vote at a national level (out of the country’s total population of 11m). Of the total, 1.79m were registered in the La Paz department followed by the departments of Santa Cruz (1.67m) and Cochabamba (1.21m).

## Judicial elections

The Bolivian Episcopal Conference (CEB) statement concluded that far from improving the system of justice in the country, which the international NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) describes in its 2017 World Report as having been “plagued by corruption, delays, and political interference for years”, the new rules for the judicial elections had made it worse given that there were no guarantees that the elected magistrates would have been chosen on the basis of professional merits.

## Concerns

In a statement released on 22 November, Quiroga, Mesa, Doria Medina, Cárdenas, and Costas accused the MAS of a “spurious mechanism of pre-selecting candidates”. The statement complained that “this new opportunity” for overhauling the judiciary has been “truncated by the government and legislature” which will result in another “six years of a justice administration which repeats the vices and problems that have destroyed our [current] justice system”.

Also on 22 November, the Bolivian Episcopal Conference (CEB) issued a statement underlining that similar problems existed again in reference to the 2011 debacle (*see sidebar*). The CEB claimed to have discerned public “bewilderment” regarding the vote and ignorance regarding the merits of the different candidates.

## Candidates

A list of 96 candidates has been produced by the MAS-controlled legislature and approved by the electoral authorities. Of these, 36 candidates are for the nine-member TSJ; 36 for the nine-member TCP; 14 for the five-member TA; and 10 for the three-member CM.

The MAS government has been quick to highlight efforts to ensure gender parity, with equal numbers of male and female candidates running for the different courts. As regards efforts to ensure indigenous representation, a total of 24 candidates who identify as indigenous feature in the list of 96 candidates (five of the 14 TA candidates; two of the 10 CM candidates; 10 of the 36 TSJ candidates; and seven of the 36 TCP candidates).

## TRACKING TRENDS

**PERU | Power and corruption.** Peruvian political parties in congress signed an accord this week appealing to Keiko Fujimori and her party Fuerza Popular (FP) to desist from its attempts to impeach the country’s attorney general, Pablo Sánchez, for dereliction of duty [[WR-17-46](#)]. Sánchez had previously announced that Fujimori would be investigated over irregular financial contributions to her presidential campaigns in 2011 and 2016. The accord was signed by legislators from the ruling Peruanos por el Cambio (PPK), as well as Alianza para el Progreso (APP), Frente Amplio (FA), and Nuevo Perú (NP).

Separately, the FP disciplinary committee suspended for 120 days Deputy Kenji Fujimori, Keiko’s disaffected brother, for publicly disagreeing with the party line. Kenji tweeted his response to the decision: “Fujimorismo is not Fuerza Popular, the people make Fujimorismo”.

**VENEZUELA | Petrocaribe bounty.** Venezuela will write off the US\$100m debt of Dominica accrued through the Petrocaribe regional energy alliance providing oil at preferential prices, the foreign minister, Jorge Arreaza, said last week. Arreaza said Venezuela was aware of “the difficult conditions that our brother people in Dominica are enduring after the passage of Hurricane Maria [in September]” and this would free up reconstruction funds for Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit.

The president of the opposition-controlled national assembly, Julio Borges, slammed the decision. “Gifting US\$100m is the most conclusive proof that [President] Nicolás Maduro doesn’t care about Venezuelans. They exchanged US\$100m for a vote in the Organization of American States. An important sum of money that could have been used on food and medicine,” Borges said. “While we are living through the worst humanitarian crisis of our history, they continue with a plan to destroy the country: 10% of inhabitants are eating rubbish, 80% are losing weight, children are dying from malnutrition in our hospitals, there is a 90% shortage of medication, the pharmacies are empty, and we are indebted to the max, to breaking point,” Borges added. “We cannot afford the luxury of letting other countries off payments”.

**Missing submarine provides headache for Macri****'Queen of the seas'  
among missing**

Last week the Argentine navy released the names of the 44-strong crew of the ARA San Juan submarine that has gone missing and is now feared to have been sunk. This revealed that among the crew was Eliana María Krawczyk. Nicknamed 'the queen of the seas', in 2012 Krawczyk became Argentina's and Latin America's first female submariner. After serving for four years onboard the ARA Salta submarine, Krawczyk only joined the crew of the ARA San Juan in May.

An Argentine navy submarine and its 44-strong crew has disappeared in the South Atlantic. It is believed that the ARA San Juan suffered some technical problems while on a routine mission and that it has sunk. But with the vessel yet to be found the government led by President Mauricio Macri is under pressure to determine exactly what happened and if any officials have any questions to answer over what looks to be a national tragedy. Local press reports have been critical of the handling of the emergency by the authorities after uncovering evidence suggesting that the incident may be the result of a series of acts of gross negligence and corruption dating back years. Should this be confirmed, it could spark public discontent against the government and force Macri to take drastic action.

The ARA San Juan, a German-built TR-1700 class diesel-electric submarine acquired by the Argentine navy in 1982 but modified in 2006, disappeared on 15 November. The submarine, the most modern in the Argentine navy, was making its way back from the port of Ushuaia in Argentina's extreme south to its home port of Mar del Plata, in the province of Buenos Aires, after concluding a routine patrol mission of Argentina's southern seas. But as it was passing through the Golfo de San Jorge bay in southern Patagonia, the ARA San Juan reported that it had suffered a leak that had affected its batteries, producing a fire that was brought under control. A few hours later, however, all contact with the vessel was lost.

The Argentine navy then launched a search mission only to report a few days later that maritime surveillance equipment had detected an acoustic anomaly consistent with an explosion near the ARA San Juan's last known location. This prompted the launch of an international search and rescue operation involving 13 different countries to try to find the submarine and save its crew. But these efforts have so far proved to be fruitless.

Amid the general anguish over the fate of the crew (reported to have had sufficient oxygen inside the submerged vessel to survive for 7-10 days), the Argentine press revealed that there had been concerns about the state of the ARA San Juan ever since its modification but in particular after the public tender process for the acquisition of new batteries was affected by allegations of irregularities and corruption.

More disturbingly, following the leak of the classified communications log between the ARA San Juan and its base at Mar del Plata, the local press has suggested that the naval authorities failed to recognise the incident reported by the vessel as a potential emergency and to seek to provide it with immediate assistance (it is claimed that the log shows that the naval authorities were slow to react to the submarine's report of a technical fault and that the information about this was withheld from the government).

The press also unearthed a February report by the training command and army enlistment (COAA) warning that the entity did not currently have the necessary equipment or personnel to carry out rescue operations at depths in excess of 30m and recommending that orders be issued for no vessels or personnel to conduct any operations below that limit. However, the ARA San Juan was allowed to continue operating at depths of around 70m.

## Moody's lift

The international rating agency Moody's raised Argentina's credit rating one notch from B3 to B2 on 29 November with a stable outlook. The decision by Moody's comes as a fillip for President Mauricio Macri whose government is currently trying to push through congress major labour and fiscal reforms to boost investment and spur national development.

The local press reports point to a chronic lack of investment in the maintenance of Argentina's navy fleet dating back to the previous administration but also to negligence and incompetence on the part of the incumbent naval authorities and government officials. All of this prompted a federal judge, Marta Yáñez, to open a formal investigation to try to determine what happened to the ARA San Juan and to ascertain whether any government officials may have questions to answer. As part of this investigation, on 28 November Yáñez summoned Defence Minister Oscar Aguad to appear before her to provide evidence. Yáñez said that, as the responsible government minister, Aguad had a duty to provide a full explanation of "what happened and when it happened".

But Yáñez did not rule out summoning other navy and government officials once she has gathered more information about the case. Against this backdrop, Yáñez called on President Macri to declassify all the navy files related to the incident. This puts pressure on Macri to act. Macri is reportedly planning to conduct a major shake up of the naval command and the defence ministry over his dissatisfaction with their handling of the incident, once the ARA San Juan is found and light has been shed on what happened. However, Macri may be wary of taking such a step for fear that it may reveal further government failings.

For now, the official line is that the government and navy are in close cooperation. Speaking on 28 November, Argentina's cabinet chief, Marcos Peña, defended the efforts by the Argentine navy to try to find the submarine. Peña said that the navy was leading a commendable search operation. "We have nothing to object to about the work of the navy, which we feel has been very professional and always working in tandem with the government", Peña said, adding that finding the submarine is "the government's and country's top priority".

## Mapuche conflict flares up again

In addition to the disappearance of the ARA San Juan submarine, the government has also been dealing with a new flare up in the conflict involving the invasion of lands in Argentina's southern Patagonia area by indigenous Mapuche groups, who claim them as ancestral territory. This flare up came after a Mapuche protester was killed on 25 November during a forceful eviction by the security forces of members of the Lof Lafken Winkul Mapu group that had invaded lands located inside a national park in the locality of Villa Mascardi, Río Negro province.

Rafael Nahuel died in hospital from a bullet wound that he sustained as members of Argentina's naval prefecture (PNA) carried out a judicial order to evict the Mapuche protesters. The PNA said that its units had to resort to firing warning shots after they came under attack from the Mapuche protesters, who allegedly threw rocks and also fired shots at the PNA. However, a preliminary forensic report confirmed that Nahuel had been wounded by a bullet from a PNA-issue 9mm pistol, dismissing allegations made by the PNA that Nahuel may have been killed by shots fired by the Mapuche protestors themselves.

News of Nahuel's death sparked violent protests in the Río Negro city of Bariloche as well as in the national capital Buenos Aires, where demonstrators vandalised the Río Negro government house. The fact that Nahuel's death coincided with the funeral of pro-Mapuche activist Santiago Maldonado, who back in August disappeared during a Mapuche protest dispersed by the security forces in Chubut province, and whose body was found floating in a nearby river weeks later, led civil-society and human rights groups to stage a large march in central Buenos Aires to protest against Nahuel's death and the general repression of the Mapuche.

The demonstrators also called for the resignation of Security Minister Patricia Bullrich, who had also come in for serious criticism over Maldonado's disappearance, and who has defended the PNA's efforts to impose "the rule of law".



## Time running out for key pension reform

### Temer

Allies of President Michel Temer are already trying to figure out how to protect him from prosecution when he finishes his term of office in December 2018. Temer has no plans to run for any elected position meaning that he will lose his privileged status, protecting him from the reach of lower courts. One suggestion currently circulating is to appoint him as an ambassador somewhere to ensure diplomatic immunity. Such a move would depend on the support of the next administration.

If a vote on pension reform is to happen at all this year, it is more likely to happen on 13 December than 6 December, according to the government's deputy leader in the federal lower chamber of congress, Beto Mansur. His comments, on 29 November, sent the Real sinking to a three-week low and caused the São Paulo stock exchange (Bovespa) to sell off. Investors are growing increasingly gloomy about the chance of any kind of reform to Brazil's bloated and unsustainable pension system.

Time is running out for the bill, with congressional recess fast approaching. Few analysts believe there is any chance of the bill prospering in 2018, an election year. At present the government estimates it has around 250 of the 308 votes it needs to pass the constitutional amendment.

The proposal would set a minimum retirement age of 62 for women and 65 for men, establish a minimum contribution period of at least 15 years, and equalise the differences between public sector and private sector pensions. The version currently before the lower chamber would save the government around R\$480bn (US\$150bn) over the next 10 years.

President Michel Temer announced a series of meetings with party leaders this weekend in a final push. The government has indicated it is willing to go for a vote even without the certainty that it will win, but supporters of the reform are urging the administration to abandon the idea, fearing that it will expose them to the wrath of their voters in October next year with potentially nothing in return. At the last dinner Temer held to win over legislators only around 180 of the 300 guests invited showed up.

Adding to the government's woes is the increasing intransigence of its most significant ally, the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB). The party has announced that it will leave the government at its forthcoming convention on 9 December.

The Temer administration had hoped that, despite its departure, party members were inclined to support the reform on ideological grounds. However, part of the party is now pushing for further watering down of the reform. But Eliseu Padilha, the cabinet chief, said on 29 November that the bill had already been cut "to the bone" and that there was no room for further changes.

A general strike to oppose the reform, organised by Brazil's major trade unions, is planned for 6 December.

In the government's favour, there are some signs that the idea of reform is becoming more palatable to Brazilians. The administration has launched a R\$72m advertising campaign in an effort to present the changes as essential to maintaining spending on other vital public services but also as a way of eliminating the unfair benefits of those in the public sector.

Still, it may be too little, too late. According to Zeina Latif, the chief-economist of XP investments, the market is already showing signs of strain. "The indicators have become much more sensitive and they are reacting negatively to any outside changes," she said. "The instability has only increased with the crisis within the PSDB, the difficulty in approving reform and the fact centrist parties still don't have a strong name for the 2018 election."

## PSDB chooses presidential candidate but splits remain

Senior members of the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB) Brazil's second-largest party, told reporters earlier this week that Geraldo Alckmin, the governor of São Paulo state, would be chosen as the party's president at its convention in Brasília on 9 December. That move is the first stage towards confirming Alckmin as the party's presidential candidate, finally putting an end to months of speculation over who would get the nod. Though the decision has put to bed one of the issues dividing the notoriously fractious party, it remains split over whether to support the government's key pension reform legislation.

Alckmin's decision to take up the presidency of the party was confirmed at a dinner with former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2003) on 27 November. Both of his main rivals within the party have slipped in recent months, with Senator Aécio Neves, the losing presidential candidate from 2014, facing serious corruption allegations, and São Paulo Mayor João Doria haemorrhaging popularity. Arthur Virgílio, the mayor of Manaus, is still interested in running, which may mean that the party holds a primary contest. Still, barring a dramatic turn of events, Alckmin will be confirmed as the PSDB's presidential pick early next year.

Though he currently fares poorly in opinion polls for 2018, Alckmin has a number of considerable advantages. First, the support of the PSDB which controls municipalities across the country and also has access to a big slice of the free-to-air radio and television advertising allocated to political parties in the run-up to elections. Secondly, the field is wide open. The current frontrunner, former president Lula da Silva (2003-2011), may be barred from running if an appeals court upholds his conviction on corruption charges. Jair Bolsonaro, the far-right congressman currently polling second, may simply prove too extreme for many, and third-placed candidate Marina Silva has a track record of fading fast in aggressive presidential campaigns.

While many analysts have warned of the likely success of outsider candidates, some of those names are starting to fall by the wayside. Luciano Huck, a well-known TV presenter, long tipped as a 2018 hopeful, ruled himself out of the running earlier this week. So too did Sérgio Moro, the lead judge in the sprawling corruption investigation 'Operation Carwash'. There is still time for a wildcard to emerge, and former supreme court judge Joaquim Barbosa is reportedly toying with the idea. Still, it appears that despite the convulsions that have shaken Brazilian politics in recent years, and led to record levels of distrust in the country's politicians, the 2018 race may end up being a more conventional affair than many anticipated.

### Best of Frenemies

Less than 18 months after the traumatic impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016), her Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) is already in talks to form electoral alliances with the party that overthrew her. Despite repeatedly condemning the impeachment as a "coup" and the now-ruling Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB) as "coup-mongers", PT leaders in at least seven states are in talks with their PMDB counterparts to shore up deals for gubernatorial and senate elections. Even Gleisi Hoffmann, the PT's national president, needs PMDB support to retain her senate seat in Paraná. Notably both former presidents Lula da Silva and Rousseff herself have toned down their criticism of the PMDB in recent weeks, conscious of the necessity of alliances in Brazil's fragmented political system.

### Unemployment

Unemployment stands at 12.2% for the three months ending in October, according to data released by the government statistics agency (Ibge) on 30 November. That translates into 12.7m people without a job. The rate marks an improvement on the three months from May to July this year, when unemployment stood at 12.8%.

## Courting the FA

### Congress

Courting Frente Amplio (FA) is not just about the second round of presidential elections on 17 December but governance for the eventual victor. Politically, the balance of power in Chile changed significantly after the congressional elections held concurrently with the first round. Neither of the country's two main coalitions, Senator Alejandro Guillier's Nueva Mayoría and Sebastián Piñera's Chile Vamos, obtained a majority in the enlarged lower chamber of congress or the senate. Frente Amplio increased its presence significantly from three deputies to 20 in the lower chamber, and it holds the balance of power.

One of the big surprises of the 19 November general election was the strong performance by the presidential candidate of the leftist Frente Amplio (FA), Beatriz Sánchez [[WR-17-46](#)]. With the dust barely settled on the presidential first round, the two run-off candidates, former president Sebastián Piñera (2010-2014) of the right-wing opposition Chile Vamos and Senator Alejandro Guillier, the candidate backed by the ruling centre-left Nueva Mayoría (NM) coalition, are now clearly focusing their efforts on seeking to win over the FA opposition coalition of small leftist parties and movements ahead of the second round on 17 December.

In a major U-turn, on 23 November, Piñera – who took 36.7% of the vote in the first round, far below the 45% forecast by opinion surveys prior to the election – said that he now agreed with the idea of free universal education. His remarks raised eyebrows given that he has long criticised the free higher education initiative promoted by the government led by President Michelle Bachelet.

In a move designed to appeal to the FA, which includes members of the student protest movement among its ranks, Piñera told a campaign rally that “we would all like education to be free for all”, adding that “if Chile’s economy returns to strong growth, and if the fiscal situation allows it, we will deliver this”. Slammed by Bachelet who accused him of electioneering, Piñera’s volte face has also been linked to the addition of Senator Manuel José Ossandón to his campaign team, ahead of the run-off. Ossandón, who ran against Piñera in the July Chile Vamos primaries, had previously said that he would only endorse Piñera if free higher education was incorporated into his government plan.

Meanwhile Guillier, who managed 22.6% of the vote in the first round to 20.3% for Sánchez, has also been courting the FA. On 27 November he launched his new campaign ‘Together for a more just Chile’ which included a clear gesture to Sánchez’s support base. Guillier said that he would put an end to the state-guaranteed university student loan scheme (CAE) and would immediately pardon the debt of the 40% poorest indebted under the scheme, a move which would cost “some US\$350m or 0.14% of GDP”.

Pardoning debts owed under the CAE has been a key demand of the FA and student protesters although the education ministry (Mineduc) has long said that it was impossible. According to Mineduc figures cited in the local press earlier this year, the total CAE debt is equivalent to 3.26% of GDP, around some US\$8.2bn.

Since the first round, Guillier has received the official endorsement of the centre-left Democracia Cristiana (DC), following its unprecedented decision to break with the ruling coalition and field its own candidate, Carolina Goic, in the first round. Goic took just 5.88% while Marco Enríquez-Ominami, the leader of the left-leaning Partido Progresista (PRO) took 5.71%.

The FA leadership demurred, reluctant to compromise the coalition’s credibility. But on 29 November members of its largest constituent party, Revolución Democrática (RD), voted decisively to endorse Guillier in order to prevent the Right from returning to power in Chile. In return for its backing, the RD called on Guillier to adopt some of the FA’s campaign promises. Five other members of the FA – the small parties Poder Ciudadano, Humanista, Ecologista Verde, Igualdad, and Liberal – have said that they will not endorse either of the run-off candidates, leaving their supporters free to make their own choice.

## Frente Amplio divided over Guillier

In a press release explaining its decision not to back either of the run-off candidates, Poder Ciudadano (PC) said that the Frente Amplio is a political project distinct to Chile Vamos and Nueva Mayoría and “was seeking to change the current neoliberal model that maintains inequalities intact”.

## First post-electoral survey

The first electoral survey released by local pollster Cadem showed Piñera and Guillier in a technical tie – with Piñera on 39.8% of vote preferences to 37.3% for Guillier, while 22.9% of respondents said they did not know for whom they would vote. Released on 27 November, the survey, which interviewed 1,442 people across the country and had a 2.6% error margin, also showed that 67% of respondents had definitely decided to vote and 14% would ‘probably vote’. In the first round, participation was just 46.7% of the 14.34m registered voters.

## TRACKING TRENDS

**BRAZIL | Brazil registers record trade surplus.** Brazil recorded a trade surplus of US\$2.93bn in November, according to data released by the industry and trade ministry (MDIC). This brings Brazil’s accumulated trade surplus for the first 11 months of the year to a record US\$61.39bn. That is already bigger than the entire trade surplus for last year (US\$47.7bn), which was itself the largest since financial records began in 1989.

For the whole of this year, the MDIC expects Brazil to post a trade surplus of between US\$65bn and US\$70bn. A survey of financial analysts from Brazil’s central bank (BCB) estimates that the trade surplus will reach US\$65.5bn for 2017.

**BRAZIL | Groupon announces merger with Peixe Urbano.** On 27 November, discount vouchers site Groupon LATAM, owned by investment fund Mountain Nazca, announced it would acquire competitor Peixe Urbano, which operates in Brazil and is owned by Chinese online search giant Baidu. The value of the acquisition is not yet known and the deal is still pending approval from Brazil’s competition authority, Cade.

In a statement, representatives from Groupon and Peixe Urbano said that their operations would not be affected by the merger and consumers would eventually benefit from greater consumer choice. “It’s the sum of two giants. We have joined the leadership from Groupon Brazil in the beauty and local travel market with the expertise of Peixe Urbano in gastronomy and entertainment. At the end of the day, it is the consumer who benefits from getting the best of both worlds,” the president of Groupon Brazil, Félix Lulion, said.

For its part, Peixe Urbano can offer the addition of a ‘buy now’ button, which works better for spontaneous Brazilian consumers than the traditional discount voucher model where users may have to wait six months before the offer is valid. “The use of immediate vouchers corresponds to 90% of restaurant booking requests using the Peixe Urbano platform,” Alex Tabor, co-founder and chief executive of Peixe Urbano, said.

**URUGUAY | Electricity exports.** On 26 November the Administración del Mercado Eléctrico (Adme), the official entity in charge of administering Uruguay’s electricity market, released new data which shows that the country has exported some US\$93m worth of electricity to Argentina and Brazil from January to November this year.

The value of Uruguay’s electricity exports this year is 42 times higher than that registered in the comparable period last year. The Adme data shows that the increase in electricity exports was driven by higher sales to Brazil, where 945,500 megawatt hours (MWh) have been transferred in the spot market at prices ranging from US\$70 per MWh to US\$150 per MWh starting from May. This increase in sales to Brazil offset the 18% year-on-year fall in electricity transfers to Argentina so far in 2017, which currently stands at 541,800MWh.

The positive electricity export figures for the first nine months of the year have led Adme to forecast that Uruguay will export a record US\$120m worth of electricity to its neighbours this year. Adme expects that transfers to Brazil will continue in the same vein into December given the low level of rain registered in south-eastern Brazil, which means that the electricity generation capacity of Brazil’s hydroelectric plants remains limited, while demand for electricity in Brazil is expected to remain strong into 2018.

## Meade anointed as PRI candidate

Mexico's President Enrique Peña Nieto announced on 27 November that his finance minister, José Antonio Meade, had resigned his position and would be standing as a presidential pre-candidate for the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). In doing so Peña Nieto revived a time-honoured tradition in the PRI, clearing up doubt over whether the so-called *destape* ('unveiling') of the president's chosen successor at the conclusion of his *sexenio* would survive the PRI's 12-year hiatus from power and the pressures of a much-changed Mexican political milieu.

During the PRI's 71-year grip on power in Mexico, a president always chose his successor from his cabinet. This practice was naturally set aside during the PRI's 12 years in opposition but the ritual appears to have been resurrected now that it is back in power. After his resignation, and fulsome endorsement by President Peña Nieto, Meade was then feted by the PRI's troika of political institutions in accordance with a tradition designed to unify the PRI and avoid factional rifts. Meade addressed the Confederación de Trabajadores de México (CTM) trade union affiliated to the PRI. He was then received by the Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Populares (CNOP), which represents the middle and lower classes within the party, and finally the Confederación Nacional Campesina (CNC), the PRI union of farm workers.

"I am convinced this party is the best option," Meade said during his appearance before the CTM. "Only united can we make Mexico a great power and win the next elections." Carlos Aceves, the leader of the CTM, lavished praise on Meade who he described as "the candidate of hope", receiving a long ovation. Aceves said the PRI was "made in the mould of José Antonio and José Antonio is made in the mould of the PRI". This is significant because Meade is the first beneficiary of the *destape* not to be a member of the PRI. Party statutes were recently amended for his benefit in a convention.

The interior minister, Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, is the most popular presidential aspirant among PRI voters in opinion polls. On 22 November the Mexican daily *El Financiero* published a poll showing that among the PRI faithful Meade enjoys just 11% support, well below Osorio Chong's 46%. But Osorio Chong recently ruled himself out of the reckoning. Osorio Chong could have been more readily taken to task by the opposition for not only failing to deliver a sustained improvement in the public security situation but also for presiding over what looks like being the most violent year on record [[WR-17-46](#)].

### Safe pair of hands

Meade is far less of a liability. While announcing his intention to run as the PRI's presidential candidate he said he had served Mexico "for 20 uninterrupted years with integrity and honesty". Being unsullied by corruption is a big selling point as this scourge is one of the primary reasons why Peña Nieto's government is the least popular since accurate polling began. Meade's reputation for integrity and efficiency spans two governments – Peña Nieto's and that of his predecessor Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) of the right-wing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) – and four cabinet ministries: energy, finance, social development, and foreign affairs.

Meade also has the ability to appeal beyond PRI supporters to independents. It was noteworthy that Calderonistas hailed him as the best PRI candidate.

### Banxico

President Peña Nieto appointed Alejandro Díaz de León as the new governor of Mexico's central bank (Banxico) on 28 November to replace Agustín Carstens, who is stepping down at the end of the month after spending 10 years at the helm. Following his appointment, Díaz said that his main priority as Banxico governor will be to bring inflation back down to the bank's target, warning that "we cannot assume that the downwards inflation trajectory will necessarily progress as expected".

## Nafta renegotiations

During a 29 November visit to Washington DC, Mexico's economy minister, Ildefonso Guajardo, acknowledged that the renegotiations of the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta) have been progressing much slower than expected and suggested that they could be extended until the end of 2018. At the start of the renegotiations in August the Nafta members expressed hopes of concluding the process in early 2018 to avoid it being affected by the campaigning ahead of Mexico's July 2018 general election and the US's November 2018 mid-term elections; and to minimise the effects that the uncertainty over these could have on the regional economy. But Guajardo said: "These negotiations will take whatever time is necessary. It will be unhealthy to set deadlines...the important thing is to reach a good deal."

He could attract votes from PAN supporters disenchanted with the Frente Ciudadano por México (FCM) electoral alliance with the left-wing Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), and the ambition of the PAN party president Ricardo Anaya. Meade will appeal to many (not just PAN voters) who fear a victory for Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the presidential candidate of the radical left-wing Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena).

Meade is also the clear choice of the private sector for his orthodoxy in economic policy, commitment to fiscal stability, and openness to dialogue. It is not clear, however, whether this owes in part because of his predilection for avoiding conflicts, and how he will fare when coming up against a consummate streetfighter like López Obrador. Given the FCM's painful gestation, the PRI has polarised the presidential contest as a straight shoot-out with López Obrador, with Meade's propensity for conciliation and stability the antithesis of López Obrador's combativeness and volatility.

The PRI will formally decide on 3 December whether it has one or more pre-candidates for Mexico's pre-campaign period which will run from 14 December until 18 February. But in spite of some dissidents disapproving of the *destape* and favouring internal elections, it is highly unlikely that anyone will oppose Meade when he has the full backing of Peña Nieto and the PRI powerbrokers.

### Economic team shaken up

President Peña Nieto appointed the director of the state-owned oil firm Pemex, José Antonio González Anaya, as the new head of the finance ministry (SHCP) to replace José Antonio Meade. Peña Nieto also announced that the vacancy at the helm of Pemex would be filled by Carlos Treviño, hitherto the firm's corporate director.

Following his appointment, González said that he would seek to maintain the general economic policy line adopted by the SHCP during the Peña Nieto administration. González said that his main objectives were to support the country's macroeconomic stability and to seek to promote increased economic growth. His appointment was welcomed by Mexico's banking association (ABM). The influential confederation of Mexican employers (Coparmex) also welcomed González's appointment but noted that there are three major pending initiatives for him to address: the creation of an independent fiscal council to advise on fiscal policy; the promotion of a meaningful fiscal reform to widen the taxpayer base; and the development and implementation of a contingency plan to counteract the effects of the fiscal reform that is currently being debated by the US Congress.

After his promotion, Treviño said that, like González, he is committed to maintaining and expanding the strategic alliances forged by Pemex as part of the 2013-2014 energy reform, which opened up Mexico's oil sector to increased private participation by ending Pemex's monopoly on oil production and allowing the firm to establish joint ventures with private firms. Treviño added that under him Pemex will strive to meet its oil production targets and continue its transformation into a "more modern and competitive firm".

### TRACKING TRENDS

**MEXICO | Growth projections.** Mexico's central bank (Banxico) has revised down its GDP growth forecast for the year to 1.8%-2.3%, from 2%-2.5%. Banxico cited as grounds for its decision the impact of two major earthquakes that hit Mexico in September and a fall in national oil production to the lowest level in more than 20 years.

Banxico warned that downside risks for Mexico's economy include the continued uncertainty surrounding the future of the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta), the terms of which are currently being renegotiated by Mexico, Canada, and the US (*see sidebar*). As for inflation, Banxico acknowledged that this is still running well above its official target of 3% (with the year-on-year inflation rate running at around 6%) but that this is starting to trend back down towards its target, which it now believes will be achieved by the end of 2018.

**Varela pays historic visit to China**

Less than six months after Panama became the second country in Central America to make the diplomatic switch from Taiwan to mainland China [WR-17-23], President Juan Carlos Varela paid his first visit to Beijing. There he met China's President Xi Jinping and the two leaders announced a string of agreements.

According to a Panamanian presidential press release, during President Varela's trip, which ran from 16-22 November, the two leaders "witnessed the adoption of some 20 documents, including 19 agreements and a joint declaration [which]...lay the foundations for this new stage [in diplomatic relations]". Of the 19 agreements, 11 focus on economic and trade issues, with the two sides agreeing to formalise policies for trade and investment promotion, as well as to finance development projects and infrastructure, and also lay the foundations to facilitate and promote Panamanian exports to China.

During the visit to China – in which he inaugurated Panama's first embassy (after China opened its embassy in Panama City in September) – Varela also attended a Panama-China Trade Forum, jointly hosted by the China Council for Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT) and Panama's Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MICI), which on 17 November had signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). Varela flagged up Panama's key advantages for some 300 business representatives at the event. He cited the recent expansion of the Panama Canal which, completed in 2016, was inaugurated by a ship owned by a Chinese company, Cosco Shipping, and the Colón Free Zone (ZLC). He also said Panama would participate in projects under China's 'Belt and Road' global infrastructure development initiative as well as promote connectivity in sectors such as maritime transport, telecommunications and logistics, and infrastructure construction.

Examples of this future cooperation with regard to infrastructure, announced during Varela's visit, include the agreement that the two countries would "carry out a pre-feasibility study for a rail transport system that links the provinces of Panamá and Chiriquí". The two sides also signed agreements vis-à-vis maritime cooperation, with China authorising Panama to receive the status of 'Most Favoured Nation', whereby ships receive benefits in port tariffs and preferential treatment in Chinese ports. The agreement also stipulates the reciprocal recognition of seafarer titles issued by Panama and China, guarantees regarding the safety of navigation and environmental protection, and improvements in technological and scientific exchange of information.

**Previous visits**

President Varela's visit follows a five-day trip to China in August by a high-level government delegation headed by Security Minister Alexis Bethancourt and the director of the national security council, Rolando López, which included officials from the ministries of foreign affairs, economy & finance, and trade & industry, as well as Panama's maritime and tourism authorities.

As well as trade, one issue described by the Panamanian presidential office as being of "extreme priority" at the time of the visit was security: the delegations reportedly discussed plans to "work together in the fight against illegal migration, to ensure the legitimate interests and rights of our nationals, cooperation and exchange of information in order to pursue criminals and illicit money, and exchange and cooperation in the training of officials".

**Economic agreements**

As regards economic agreements, President Varela announced a deal between Panama's economy & finance (MEF) ministry and the China Development Bank (CDB) which would lay the foundations for financing large infrastructure projects in Panama and establish CDB headquarters in Panama. The MEF also signed another agreement for the two countries to begin feasibility studies to negotiate a free trade agreement (FTA).

## Quotes of the week

“We’ve already won the elections. I’m not going to tolerate this and there are no reliable institutions in Honduras to defend us.”

*Honduran presidential candidate Salvador Nasralla calls for street protests in the face of adverse election results.*

“The return of the *dedazo* in its full splendour. The ritual takes us back 25 years in time. This is an embarrassment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”

*Margarita Zavala, an independent in Mexico’s presidential race, on the PRI’s imminent selection of José Antonio Meade as its presidential candidate.*

“In six months the country has gone back 20 years; six months of a meticulous operation to destroy the 10 years of Citizens’ Revolution.”

*Ecuador’s former president Rafael Correa on his successor President Lenín Moreno, “the biggest traitor, governing with the Right, with the bankers”.*

## POSTSCRIPT

### Crucial peace legislation in Colombia goes down to the wire

Colombia’s congressional marathon is turning into a sprint. As we go to press on 30 November, the fast track mechanism to expedite the passage through congress of reforms to implement the peace accord with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc) is coming to an end. The government led by President Juan Manuel Santos is making a last-ditch effort to persuade the senate and lower chamber of congress to give final approval to the transitional justice system (JEP), a cornerstone of the peace accord. It is also trying to salvage something from the wreckage of its political and electoral reform, conclusively sunk by congress this week, by securing the reservation of 16 seats in the lower chamber for areas of the country most affected by the armed conflict.

The government is seeking clarity from the council of state as to what happens with peace-related legislation that is partially approved once fast track expires. There is some speculation that President Santos could declare a state of emergency to save the peace process. The congressional debates throw into stark relief the evaporation of his power. Santos may have nine months left in office but he is a lame duck, the solid congressional majority he enjoyed through the ruling Unidad Nacional coalition for much of his eight-year mandate having melted away. Legislative elections will take place in March, followed by presidential elections in May, and members of congress and their parties are far more intent on jockeying for position than approving peace legislation.

The Farc’s maximum leader ‘Timochenko’ (Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri) met Santos on 24 November to seek some reassurance amid the uncertainty. Both men expressed their commitment to complying with the peace accord, but it is not clear precisely what this accord will eventually look like in practice. In addition to eleventh-hour changes proposed to the JEP, congress has rejected a political and electoral reform from which the government is trying to rescue legislation to create 16 lower chamber seats designed to increase representation for conflict areas until 2022. Victims’ associations are preparing to name candidates for these seats, but members of congress from the right-wing Centro Democrático (CD) and the Partido Conservador (PC) are opposed to the legislation, arguing that Farc dissidents retain a powerful influence over voters in these areas.

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