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Maduro bets on early elections to exploit opposition divisions

Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro is calling snap elections eight months ahead of schedule. Venezuela has a fixed term presidential system rather than a parliamentary democracy but this trifling difficulty was overcome by a decree approved by the all-powerful government-controlled constituent assembly instructing the national electoral council (CNE) to organise presidential elections before 30 April. The national dialogue process between the Maduro administration and the political opposition is now dead in the water. The opposition will struggle to overcome its own internal differences, and government-imposed strictures, to select a consensus presidential candidate in such a short space of time without worrying about a pointless sideshow in the Dominican Republic.

The number two in the ruling Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV), Diosdado Cabello, sent a decree to bring the elections forward to the constituent assembly, where it was duly approved, on 23 January. President Maduro ratified the decree on the same day, which marked the 60th anniversary of the fall of Venezuela's last military dictatorship, under Marcos Pérez Jiménez, in 1958, and the restoration of democracy. Maduro argued that there was no better day to celebrate the deepening of Venezuelan democracy. The reaction of the political opposition, the Lima Group of 14 countries in the Americas, and assorted extra-hemispheric actors, showed their conviction that the current democracy has far more in common with the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship.

Since the fall of Pérez Jiménez presidential elections have been held on the first Sunday in December, barring exceptional circumstances, such as the death of former president Hugo Chávez (1999-2013). The present constitution makes clear that a presidential term lasts six years, with Article 231 asserting that the elected candidate "shall take office on 10 January". Maduro, who will only have served five years of his term by the time elections are held, was unfazed. "If it were up to me they [elections] would take place next Sunday," he said, "with or without the opposition".

On 24 January Maduro formally announced that he would bid for re-election. He called on supporters to form "campaign commands the length and breadth of the country" in order to obtain 10m votes "to honour a debt to Chávez". On 4 February, the 26th anniversary of Chávez's failed coup and a sacred day in Bolivarian liturgy, Maduro said a "great congress" would be held. This will feature representatives of all of the political, social, and communal elements of the Bolivarian movement to appoint candidates (Maduro humbly put his name forward to head the presidential slate), and draw up political guidelines for the next government until 2025.

Bringing the elections forward serves three purposes. Firstly, it gives the opposition virtually no time to select a consensus candidate, let alone

EU sanctions

In a statement, the government described the EU sanctions as being “in violation of the fundamental precepts of the Charter of the United Nations...and [constituting] unwarranted intervention in internal affairs...irrefutable evidence of [the EU’s] notable subordination to the supremacist and racist government of [US President] Donald Trump”. It added: “Venezuela demands respect for its sovereignty...and demands the immediate cessation of political hostility”. Venezuela’s foreign minister, Jorge Arreaza, followed this up by condemning the sanctions as “illegal and unilateral”, the same words applied by a growing number of signatories to the UN Charter to his government’s decision to bring presidential elections forward.

organise an electoral campaign around clear proposals for government. Secondly, it makes it highly unlikely that three of the four principal parties within the opposition coalition Mesa de Unidad Democrática (MUD) will be able to leap the hurdles thrown their way by the CNE in time to contest the elections. After boycotting December’s municipal elections, Primero Justicia, Acción Democrática, and Voluntad Popular were ordered to re-register, in accordance with a new law pushed through the constituent assembly [WR-17-50]. Thirdly, it gives no time to dissenting voices within the Bolivarian movement, opposed to Maduro staying on, to discuss alternative options.

Opposition and regional response

The Lima Group issued a statement insisting that the elections would “lack legitimacy and credibility”. It argued that “democratic, transparent and credible elections [would be] impossible” without adequate time for all Venezuelan political actors to participate with full guarantees, including independent international observers. The secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS), Luis Almagro, concurred. Almagro described the decree as “a farce”, arguing that with no guarantees in place it would amount to “more dictatorship”.

The US State Department gave a robust response, its spokesperson saying that the elections “would not reflect the will of the Venezuelan people, and would be seen as undemocratic and illegitimate in the eyes of the international community”. The German foreign ministry also expressed consternation. Maduro’s announcement came the day after the European Union (EU) slapped sanctions on seven senior officials in the Venezuelan government, including Cabello and the president of the CNE, Tibisay Lucena (*see sidebar*). Maduro responded by saying, “more sanctions, more elections in Venezuela. Hatred will be met by more democracy and protection for our people”. This prompted the president of the MUD-controlled national assembly, Omar Barboza, to insist that “it is not acceptable to call elections because of sanctions”. But his reaction betrayed the sense of impotence oppressing the MUD.

Opposition in disarray

“Unity to recover democracy!” the opposition figurehead Henrique Capriles (barred from running) tweeted in response to the decree. The opposition, however, is far from presenting a united front at present. The MUD was bitterly divided over whether to enter a dialogue process with the Maduro administration in the Dominican Republic last month. One of its key demands in the talks was an accord to provide guarantees for free and fair presidential elections to be held, with the restructuring of the government-controlled CNE, and the presence of a credible international monitoring mission, seen as prerequisites. Deputy Luis Florido, an MUD negotiator, described the dialogue process now as “moribund” after the unilateral decision to bring the elections forward. Mexico announced that it would no longer be a guarantor of the negotiations. “The date of the election was one of the most important things being negotiated...The announcement in Caracas is regrettable because it strips the negotiation process of seriousness,” Mexico’s foreign minister, Luis Videgaray, explained.

More radical factions within the MUD argued that they had been confirmed in their suspicion that the government never had any intention of negotiating sincerely; that the outcome was entirely predictable; and that the moderate wing of the coalition was foolhardy to participate in the talks in the first place. This does not mean that the radical factions will be in the ascendancy when it comes to selecting a presidential candidate.

The moderate leader of Avanzada Progresista (AP), Henri Falcón, threw his hat into the ring after Maduro’s announcement. Falcón was second in a recent opinion poll of MUD presidential aspirants, published by Hinterlaces, with 14%. Falcón said there would be no time for primary elections, the

Venezuela- Colombia tension

The UN Secretary General António Guterres offered more aid to Colombia during a visit to the country last week to help with the influx of Venezuelan immigrants. President Maduro claimed that this was false and that Colombians were actually coming to Venezuela for medical assistance. “Almost 10m Colombians live abroad because of poverty, misery, and war,” Maduro said. Colombia’s President Juan Manuel Santos responded by saying: “Nobody believes that a country like Venezuela, which suffers shortages of basic products, where illnesses that have not appeared for decades on our continent, such as diphtheria and measles, are thriving...is capable of providing attention to Colombians...” He added: “President Maduro, don’t try and use the Colombian people to conceal the enormous failings of your failed revolution.”

MUD’s initial plan, and that a consensus candidate would need to be chosen. He said opposition leaders were “not cut from the same cloth...but shared the same goal: to save Venezuela”. He promised to treat supporters of Chavismo with respect, while arguing that restoring autonomy and credibility to state institutions was essential, along with confronting hyperinflation, and boosting oil production.

Henry Ramos Allup, the secretary general of AD, who has also announced his intention to seek the presidency (but might be blocked from doing so given AD is likely to be barred from competing) was fourth in the Hinterlaces poll with 7%. Top of the poll was a complete outsider: Lorenzo Mendoza, the president of the food and drinks producer Empresas Polar, with 20%. Mendoza has not revealed whether he is interested in running for election but the fact that he sits atop the survey is an indication that there is considerable public rejection of the MUD as well as the Maduro administration. The key difference is that the government has the power to coerce voters to back Maduro by requiring them to register identification cards at PSUV stands outside polling stations; these are the same cards they must show to be entitled to receive food parcels.

Acute food shortages have led to an unprecedented wave of Venezuelans fleeing the country. The pollster Consultores 21 published a survey this week of 2,000 people, which estimated that 4m had emigrated based on the number of people who say a member of their direct family has left; 40% of respondents expressed a desire to leave the country (rising to 50% among those aged between 18 and 24).

The figure of 4m is a very rough estimate, but Colombia’s immigration authorities reported on 19 January that there are more than 550,000 Venezuelans living in Colombia, the majority illegally, this number increasing by 62% in the last six months alone. As many as 796,000 Venezuelans obtained a Colombian visa in 2017 but only 276,000 of these (34%) returned, the Colombian authorities claimed. The other 520,000 stayed in Colombia or moved on to third countries. Colombian authorities reported that 231,000 Venezuelans crossed the bridge from Colombia’s southern department of Nariño to Ecuador in 2017; this figure was just 32,000 in 2016.

Pérez killing

The latest in the long line of talks between the government and the MUD actually broke down days before President Maduro’s electoral thunderbolt. The MUD withdrew from the dialogue process in the Dominican Republic on 18 January over what it denounced as the extrajudicial killing of Oscar Pérez, the rogue officer from the investigative police (CICPC). Pérez was killed after his hideout in El Junquito in western Caracas came under sustained bombardment from armoured cars and anti-aircraft guns [[WR-18-02](#)]. The government has said very little about the incident but the use of overwhelming and disproportionate force lends credence to Pérez’s claim on social media shortly before his death that there was no intention of taking him alive (perhaps to utter the immortal words of Chávez after his arrest in 1992 that his coup attempt had failed “por ahora”, the beginning of his love affair with the Venezuelan public).

The opposition had shown no interest in Pérez until the interior minister, General Néstor Reverol, claimed that MUD leaders in the dialogue process had cooperated with locating Pérez. In a letter to the host of the talks, Dominican President Danilo Medina, the MUD said it was “unacceptable...to tarnish a process...with irresponsible and totally false accusations”.

Tarek William Saab, the de facto attorney general, has said nothing about Pérez’s killing. His predecessor, Luisa Ortega, who fled into exile, said that it was a flagrant violation of UN codes of conduct on the use of force by the authorities against adverse political movements, including terrorists, which should be proportional and progressive. Ortega said she would add the case to the files she handed to the International Criminal Court (ICC) last November calling for Maduro, and other members of his administration, to be investigated for crimes against humanity, including 505 alleged cases of extrajudicial execution.

Polls

Sergio Fajardo leads the most recent electoral poll, published in the local daily *El Tiempo* on 17 December, with 15.7% of voting intentions. Trailing him is Iván Duque with 11.3%, while Gustavo Petro is third with 9.9% and the independent former vice president, Germán Vargas Lleras (2014-2017), is fourth with 9.3%. Humberto De la Calle is on 6.5%; Marta Lucía Ramírez on 5.5%; Alejandro Ordóñez on 1.6%; Clara López on 3.5%; and Carlos Caicedo on just 0.8%. No candidate is anywhere near to the required 50%+1 to win in the first round but in all second-round scenarios Fajardo currently comes out on top, with Ramírez closest to him (54.2% to 36.5%).

Political realignments cause pre-electoral tension

Colombia's main political parties are seeking to thin out the crowded field by forging new electoral alliances ahead of presidential elections on 27 May. This is proving to be divisive on both the Left and the Right of the political spectrum.

Over 15 candidates have registered to run in the first round of the presidential election. The surfeit of candidates owes to the fact that the constituent parties of the ruling centre-right Unidad Nacional coalition are not fielding a consensus candidate after President Juan Manuel Santos failed to identify a clear political heir. But it also owes to the fact that neither the opposition on the Right nor the Left have so far coalesced behind a single candidate. Yet recognising that only two candidates can make it into a potential second round, opposition groups are now seeking to narrow the field by forging new electoral alliances. This involves getting rival presidential aspirants to agree on general policy platforms and on mechanisms for selecting a consensus candidate.

This is not an easy process but there are signs that the opposition on the Left and the Right are setting the foundations for broad coalitions. Some centre-left candidates had already established the Coalición Colombia alliance and selected the former governor of Antioquia department, Sergio Fajardo, as its presidential candidate. But in a bid to try to build an even bigger coalition, other leftist candidates such as Clara López of Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA), Gustavo Petro of Progresistas, and Carlos Caicedo of Fuerza Ciudadana invited Fajardo and the candidate of the centrist Partido Liberal (PL), Humberto de la Calle, to join forces, choosing a candidate via a popular consultation process.

López, Petro, and Caicedo appealed to Fajardo and De la Calle's commitment to upholding the peace accord that the Santos administration signed with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc) and to uniting to prevent a right-wing candidate opposed to the accord from coming to power. But, after weeks of talks, no agreement could be reached, and on 22 January, the deadline for alliances to register ahead of the election, Fajardo, De la Calle, and López declined to take part, leaving only Petro and Caicedo in the proto-alliance.

The outcome is a blow for Petro, who continues to poll well (*see sidebar*) and is seen as the likely winner of the consultation process. It is also a blow to the Left's prospects as a whole. However, there is a chance that a broad alliance may still be formed after De la Calle, for one, insisted that he is prepared to explore this possibility after the first round. This suggests that the PL and leftist parties could unite behind whichever candidate makes it into a second round if the opponent hails from the Right.

'No' coalition takes shape

Meanwhile candidates on the Right, who are all critical of the peace deal with the Farc and have proposed introducing significant changes if elected, have now succeeded in establishing a broad electoral alliance. Also on 22 January, the presidential candidate of the main right-wing opposition Centro Democrático (CD), Iván Duque, and the two presidential pre-candidates of the centre-right opposition Partido Conservador (PC), Marta Lucía Ramírez and Alejandro Ordóñez, agreed to take part in a public consultation process and establish an electoral alliance to support the bid of whoever comes out on top in this process.

No electoral effect on economic policy

On 17 January Colombia's finance minister, Mauricio Cárdenas, said that the country's upcoming presidential election should have "no impact" on Colombia's general economic policies. The various presidential candidates may have very different policy views, but Cárdenas said that "elections in Colombia have never been a factor of [economic] uncertainty or distrust, and this year should be no exception". Cárdenas insisted that "Colombia has a long tradition of fiscal discipline and prudent economic management", and that "a change to the country's economic model is not expected". Cárdenas said that after overcoming the recent oil price shock, and after signing a peace deal with the Farc, "Colombia's economic prospects are very positive".

The agreement was struck after weeks of negotiations between the CD leader and former president Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010) and PC leader and former president Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002). Both Uribe and Pastrana were opposed to the peace deal with the Farc and successfully joined forces in the 'no' campaign against the approval of the deal during the 2016 national referendum. In a bid to replicate that success, Uribe and Pastrana agreed to unite behind either Uribe's protégé Duque or Pastrana's protégé Ramírez. This agreement almost fell apart after some PC factions insisted that Ordóñez also be included in the equation.

In the end the parties agreed to enter into an alliance, with the popular consultation process to be staged alongside legislative elections on 11 March. Duque, Ramírez, and Ordóñez have differing policy stances – with Ordóñez being the most right-wing and Ramírez the most centrist. Whoever ends up being the candidate will be well placed to make it through to the second round.

Peace talks with ELN resumed

Barely a week after ordering the suspension of the peace talks with the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) in Ecuador [\[WR-18-01\]](#), President Santos decided to resume them on 21 January. Following the visit by the United Nations Secretary General António Guterres, who urged the Santos government and the ELN to return to the negotiating table [\[WR-18-02\]](#), and after the ELN leadership showed its predisposition to resume the talks and to negotiate a new ceasefire, Santos ordered the government negotiating team led by Gustavo Bell to return to Quito.

"Heeding the call of the United Nations, Gustavo Bell will travel to Quito to explore the possibility of negotiating a new ceasefire and resuming the [peace] negotiations with the ELN," Santos said on *Twitter*. His announcement came amid a continued wave of violence in Colombia, where the ELN has launched more attacks targeting the security forces and oil infrastructure and where the armed forces have led operations against the guerrilla group that have claimed the lives of two ELN column leaders.

PERU | POLITICS

Kuczynski's woes continue

President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski might have expected a brief respite this week as Pope Francis carried out a three-day visit to Peru. Instead the pope's unvarnished reference to the political crisis in the country put him in an awkward position. Kuczynski compounded his problems with a casual aside to the pontiff which earned a stiff rebuke from the main opposition Fuerza Popular (FP, Fujimoristas). Kuczynski could be on borrowed time. The FP is largely consumed by infighting between Keiko and Kenji Fujimori at present, but once this is resolved in the not-too-distant future Kuczynski will be in the firing line again.

Pope Francis became the first pontiff to visit the Amazon for more than 30 years on 19 January when he addressed some 4,000 native indigenous people at a stadium in Puerto Maldonado in the south-eastern region of Madre de Dios. The pope gave an impassioned defence of indigenous rights in the face of ever-encroaching threats to their lands, and environmental conservation, due to "consumerist greed". He visited Trujillo, in the north-western region of La Libertad, the following day before concluding his visit to Peru with an open air mass in Santiago de Surco, a district set on a hillside in metropolitan Lima, attended by some 1.3m people. But in between all this the pope made some candid comments about corruption and the state of politics in Peru.

"What is happening in Peru where each time a president leaves office he is put in jail?" the pope asked rhetorically during a meeting with Peruvian bishops in Lima. "[Ollanta] Humala [2011-2016] is in jail, [Alejandro] Toledo [2001-2006] is in jail [he is actually wanted on corruption charges but at

Protests

Marco Arana, the leader of the left-wing Frente Amplio (FA), is seeking to gather congressional support for another vote to impeach President Kuczynski for betraying the public over Alberto Fujimori's pardon. Along with the leftist Nuevo Perú (NP) and the umbrella trade union Confederación General de Trabajadores del Perú (CGTP), the FA participated in large demonstrations on 11 January condemning the pardon. An estimated 19,000 Peruvians participated in nationwide protests, just over half of this total in Lima.

large], [Alberto] Fujimori [1990-2000] was in prison until recently, Alan García [1985-1990; 2006-2011] isn't sure if he is in or out. What is wrong morally? The system raises questions," he added.

The pope also mentioned the bribery case involving the Brazilian construction firm Odebrecht, which has ensnared President Kuczynski. "[It is] a quid pro quo that is not healthy political negotiation but a case of 'I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine'" he said. During an appearance alongside Kuczynski, the pope condemned "a corruption crisis," albeit one affecting not just governments but all parts of society, including the Church.

Kuczynski kept his own counsel. He did not employ the same tactic when responding to a comment the pope made in reference to the throngs of people who lined his route to the airport in Lima before catching his return flight to the Vatican. "The love of the people is marvellous," the pope said. "The only bad thing here is the politicians," Kuczynski responded jocularly. The president of congress, Luis Galarreta, of the FP, accused Kuczynski of making an "ill-judged remark". Galarreta also criticised Kuczynski for trying to conflate his "impractical notion of political reconciliation" with the reconciliation promoted by the pope.

There is no sign of reconciliation within the FP, engaged in internecine conflict between Keiko and Kenji Fujimori, who faces a disciplinary process along with nine other deputies who abstained from voting to impeach Kuczynski last month. There is no ideological, or programmatic, difference between the two factions; it is simply a power clash. FP Deputy Héctor Becerril accused Kenjistas of "striking a pact with corruption". Kenji accused Keikistas of "double standards...disrespecting democracy [and] conspiring against the country's governability".

A resolution of the internal dispute might be put on hold until after the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (CorteIDH) determines on 2 February whether the Peruvian state violated its international obligations as a result of Kuczynski's pardon of Fujimori, with regard to the Barrios Altos and La Cantuta massacres in 1991 and 1992 for which he had been convicted to 25 years in prison. The president of Peru's judiciary, Duberlí Rodríguez, said the CorteIDH ruling would be binding for the Peruvian state.

TRACKING TRENDS

ECUADOR | Bond issue. The economy & finance ministry announced on 18 January that it has successfully placed US\$3bn in sovereign bonds in international capital markets. This is Ecuador's first debt issue of the year, and according to a ministerial statement the 10-year bonds were placed at an interest rate of 7.87%. It is the lowest interest rate offered by such bonds since Ecuador returned to international markets in 2014.

The ministry said that the funds raised by the bond issue would be used to fund part of the government's 2018 investment plan. It also highlighted that the high demand for the bonds, which were oversubscribed to the tune of US\$10bn, shows that foreign investors remain confident about the country's economy, which according to estimates from the central bank (BCE) grew by 1.5% in 2017, above market expectations of 1%.

Meanwhile, in another sign of the government's intention to integrate the country's economy into the global economic system, the foreign trade minister, Pablo Campana, is attending the World Economic Forum (WEF) annual meeting held between 23 and 26 January in Davos, Switzerland, to try to drum up investor interest in Ecuador. This is the first time that Ecuadorean government officials will take part in the WEF Davos meeting. President Lenín Moreno claimed this week that while he was a left-winger convergences with business sectors and right-wing politicians were "a good thing", adding that some of his former comrades "are stuck in socialism of the last century".

Court dismisses Lula's appeal

Judges at a Brazilian appeals court (TRF-4) voted unanimously on 24 January to uphold the conviction against former president Lula da Silva (2003-2011) from the leftist Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) for corruption and money laundering. This means Lula is more likely to end up in prison than become Brazil's next president in this October's elections.

Lula was found guilty by a three-judge panel. In another blow for the PT leader, they voted to increase his jail sentence to 12 years and one month, up from nine years and six months. Judge João Pedro Gebran Neto said he found "more than ample evidence" that Lula was "an actor, if not the protagonist of a vast corruption scheme". He is still a free man until lawyers have exhausted all other appeals channels before the superior court of justice (STJ) and the supreme court (STF).

Lula is the frontrunner in early polls for October's presidential election. But he could be barred from running for a third term as president under Brazil's clean slate law ('Lei da Ficha Limpa'). The final decision about whether he can run ultimately lies with Brazil's electoral court (TSE). Currently, the odds are not in his favour.

Markets rallied on the decreased probability that Lula would win this year's election. The São Paulo stock exchange (Bovespa) surged by 3.72%, and the value of Brazil's currency, the real, rose. Investors had feared Lula would roll back the market-friendly reforms pursued by President Michel Temer, including privatisation initiatives.

If Lula cannot run, this leaves the electoral field wide open. In that case, the biggest beneficiary could be the ultra-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro from the Partido Social Cristão (PSC), who is currently second in the polls. But other presidential contenders are keen to keep Lula in the race, fearing social unrest and greater political fragmentation in his absence.

Not the end of the story

Pointedly, Lula did not attend the appeals trial in Porto Alegre. Instead, he watched judges cast their votes from São Bernardo do Campo in São Paulo state, a historic PT stronghold where the metalworkers' union is headquartered. This was a highly symbolic choice since it is where his political career began and where he famously lost his little finger in an accident.

In a speech to PT supporters, a defiant Lula said he would fight to defend his innocence at higher courts. He added that the threat of jail would not affect his political ambitions. "[Former South African president Nelson] Mandela was imprisoned. But that did not stop him from fighting," Lula said.

The deadline for Lula to register as the PT's presidential candidate is 15 August. If the TSE annuls his candidacy, the party would have until 17 September (20 days before the election) to name a replacement.

Party leader Gleisi Hoffmann vehemently rejected the possibility that the PT would field a 'Plan B' candidate instead of Lula. But behind the scenes, alternative presidential contenders could be positioning themselves to run. The most popular are former São Paulo mayor Fernando Haddad and former Bahia

Prosecutors on mounting political pressure

Gotardo Gerum, a prosecutor for Brazil's public federal ministry (MPF), said Lula's trial had elevated political tensions in Brazil. He likened PT supporters to "riot police" who defend Lula to "guarantee the perpetuation of a personal political project and do not accept any other outcome except Lula's acquittal".

Reflections on prison

Geraldo Alckmin, a presidential aspirant for the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), said the “Lula novella” would not be over after the appeals court hearing. “There is still room for appeal, but the important thing is not to worry about rivals, it is worrying about the electorate. Ultimately, it is the people who will decide,” Alckmin posted on *Twitter*.

governor Jacques Wagner. Without Lula, voter intentions for the PT would fall from 34% to single digits, according to the most recent DataFolha poll.

Victory for the judiciary

Lula’s sentence marks a major milestone for Brazil’s judiciary. He is the first former president to be convicted of a criminal offence by ordinary courts, as the crackdown on political impunity continues.

While noting the political sensitivities of this particular case, Judge Neto argues this shows the judiciary is operating independently from public opinion and that nobody, no matter how influential, is above the law. “The election of a candidate, particularly for the presidency, brings with it a certain hope of the population for a better way of life...but corruption should be understood within a wider context, in light of its diffuse and perverse effects,” he said.

Some Brazilians hope Lula’s trial will help renew Brazil’s political system and promote greater transparency. Others accuse the judiciary of singling out Lula over dozens of other corrupt politicians, most of whom are still in office, meaning they are protected from prosecution in common courts under Brazil’s legal system, which gives them ‘foro privilegiado’, or legal immunity.

Sea of discontent

On the day of Lula’s trial, a sea of supporters in red, and critics clad in yellow and green, staged protests in at least 23 states and the federal district (DF). Most of the protests passed without incident; a testament to the tightened security provisions, especially in Porto Alegre where local authorities deployed helicopters and sharpshooters to monitor the scenes from above, and navy boats and horsemen kept the peace from below. However, some unrest was reported in João Pessoa, the capital of the north-eastern state of Paraíba, where six people were injured during clashes between protesters and police.

The rival groups of brightly coloured demonstrators provided a stark visual reminder of the polarisation of Brazilian politics. PT supporters held up caricatures of federal prosecutors superimposed on the devil’s face. Meanwhile Lula’s critics blew up huge dolls of the ex-president sporting convicts’ clothing known as ‘pixulecos’.

This ‘heroes-and-villains’ mentality could create a climate of radicalisation as the election draws near. The president of the federal lower chamber of congress, Rodrigo Maia, cautioned Lula’s trial should “not become a spectacle”. He was speaking alongside President Temer at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland, where government officials were attempting to ease investor concerns about political uncertainty in an electoral year.

Weighing up the evidence

The appeals court upheld a 2017 conviction from federal judge Sérgio Moro, who accused Lula of accepting R\$3.7m (US\$2.3m) in bribes from construction company OAS to buy a luxury apartment in Guarajá (São Paulo state) in return for political favours. As evidence, the prosecution supplied bank statements from OAS and plea-bargaining testimonies from executives, including former CEO Leo Pinheiro.

Lula’s team of defence lawyers denied the accusations. They claim there are no documents to prove Lula owns the apartment. Another argument is that although the bribe money left OAS accounts, there is no proof it was spent on the apartment. Moreover, they have questioned the impartiality of the investigation and claim their client is the victim of “political persecution”.

In addition to the Guarajá case, Lula is accused of six other counts of corruption as part of ‘Operation Car Wash’.

Pope's visit marred by controversy

His “worst overseas visit since his election” in 2013. This was how a leading newspaper in neighbouring Argentina, *Clarín*, described Pope Francis’s three-day visit to Chile last week. The pontiff’s stopover in Chile was always likely to be challenging: the credibility of the Catholic Church, which had links to the dictatorship led by General Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), had received a further blow in Chile due to a sex abuse scandal which made headlines in 2015. While Pope Francis initially reached out to these victims, his final words in the country are widely considered to have done further harm.

That the number of Chileans identifying as Catholics is on the slide was suggested by a recent survey on Catholicism and other religions by regional pollster Latinobarómetro. Published on 12 January, three days before the pope arrived in Chile, it showed that 45% of Chileans identified as Catholic in 2017, down from 74% in 1995. The same poll showed that trust in the Catholic Church in Chile has fallen to just 36%, lower than any other country in Latin America. Honduras was the highest, at 78%, followed by Paraguay (77%). The average for Latin America was 65%.

Back in 2015, Pope Francis had faced criticism in Chile with his appointment of Bishop Juan Barros to head the small diocese of Osorno in Los Lagos Region. The appointment was contentious as Barros had been accused of protecting his former mentor, Father Fernando Karadima, who was found guilty in a Vatican investigation in 2011 of abusing teenage boys over many years. Karadima has denied the allegations while Barros said he was unaware of any wrongdoing.

Indicative of continued anger regarding the case, even ahead of the Pope’s visit vandals fire-bombed three churches in Santiago, warning in a leaflet that “the next bombs will be in your cassock”. The local authorities were also taking no chances with some 4,000 police officers deployed to enhance security during the pope’s trip. According to the final report by the Carabineros militarised police, released on 20 January, 89 people were arrested in total during the visit in relation to unrest and vandalism to national monuments, mainly in Santiago.

Initially, the Pope appeared to send out a conciliatory message in Santiago, where he began his trip, apologising for sex abuse scandals committed by Catholic priests against minors in Chile. However, his decision to celebrate mass with Barros on 16 January prompted widespread criticism – from Karadima’s victims as well as civil-rights groups such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender movement (Movilh). This criticism intensified after the pope’s remarks made on 18 January, during the last part of his trip in the northern city of Iquique, in which he appeared to accuse victims of slander. “The day they bring me proof against Bishop Barros, I’ll speak...there is not one shred of proof against him. It’s all slander. Is that clear?”

The remarks caused outrage: Germán Silva, a political scientist at Santiago’s Universidad Mayor described them as “a tremendous error”, while on 22 January a key US cardinal, Sean O’Malley, released a statement in which he said that “it is understandable” that these comments were “a source of great pain for survivors of sexual abuse by clergy or any other perpetrator”. During the papal flight back to the Vatican on 23 January the pope apologised for his choice of words “hurting [victims] without realising it”.

Mapuche

As well as Santiago and Iquique, the Pope also visited Temuco, the capital of the southern Araucanía region where the indigenous Mapuche lay claim to ancestral lands. His stopover there, on 17 January, similarly fell flat despite

Mapuche response to Pope’s visit

Mapuche leader Aucán Huilcamán of the land rights group Consejo de Todas las Tierras described the Pope’s mass in Temuco as “tepid”, “ambiguous”, and “imprecise”. He accused the Catholic Church of failing to take “responsibility for the genocide committed against the Mapuche people” and called for an “apology for the genocide, the confiscation of territory, and a plan to make up for the damage done”.

World Bank ranking

Chile currently ranks 55th out of 190 countries on the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business list, down from 34th in 2014, the year President Bachelet took office. Its ranking declined to 41st in 2015, 48th in 2016, and 57th in 2017.

gestures to the Mapuche. In Temuco, he held a mass at the Maquehue Air Base, a highly symbolic venue given that, under Pinochet, it was used to house a centre where indigenous people were tortured. Acknowledging that “grave human rights violations” had been committed at the air base, the pope also addressed the current dispute between the Mapuches and the state, calling for unity and an end to the violence. While considered an allusion to ongoing arson attacks to have taken place in the area, attributed to the Mapuche cause, the pope was explicit that this “violence” was the result of empty promises, alluding to “elegant solutions [proposed by the government] which never materialise”. However, this still failed to satisfy indigenous organisations such as the land rights group Consejo de Todas las Tierras (*see page nine sidebar*).

Doing Business Index

While Pope Francis's visit was likely to attract media attention, Chile made international headlines for another reason last week – the World Bank's admission that its annual ranking of countries by ease of doing business had been compromised by politicised methodology, with Chile the main victim.

In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) published on 12 January, the World Bank's chief economist, Paul Romer, apologised to Chile for changes to the report's methodology that he said “conveyed the wrong impression” about the business environment under the centre-left government led by President Michelle Bachelet, whose four-year term ends in March.

Romer told the WSJ that the decline in Chile's rankings (*see sidebar*) was the result of methodological changes, rather than a deterioration of the country's business environment and could have been politically motivated. He told the WSJ he would revise the reports and that he intends to correct and republish the rankings for the past four years.

The Bachelet government was quick to respond, requesting a full investigation from the World Bank, while Economy Minister Jorge Rodríguez Grossi said in a statement that “it is rare to see action this immoral”. In a press release issued on 13 January the World Bank said that “in light of the concerns expressed by...Romer in the media and our commitment to integrity and transparency, we will conduct an external review of Chile's indicators in the Doing Business report.”

URUGUAY | POLITICS & ECONOMY

Autoconvocados flex their muscles

Independent agricultural producers, describing themselves as ‘autoconvocados’, have staged a mass demonstration calling for the government led by President Tabaré Vázquez to provide economic assistance for the agricultural sector. This was the first such demonstration by Uruguayan agricultural producers in over a decade, increasing the political pressure on the Vázquez government to address the longstanding demands of the sector, which has been mobilising in support of these since the start of the year [WR-18-01]. The ruling left-wing Frente Amplio (FA) government may try to dismiss the efforts by agricultural lobbies to press these demands as coming from ‘big agri-business’ but it is much harder to label the autoconvocados in the same way, making their protest more difficult to ignore.

The autoconvocados movement emerged after President Vázquez agreed to hold a meeting with representatives from the country's three main agricultural organisations to discuss the sector's demands, but that meeting produced no concrete results. Believing that this showed that Vázquez did not consider the sector's demands to be urgent, the autoconvocados decided to stage public demonstrations and ‘tractorcades’ around the country to ratchet up the pressure. This irritated Vázquez, who said he was prepared to meet and discuss demands with agricultural leaders but could not meet all agricultural producers.

Accusations

Following the Durazno protest, FA leaders such as Senator Constanza Moreira said that it had been marked by “extreme ideologisation” and “hate” against the government and the Left. “Sowing hate against the FA and the state is like going back to the cold war,” Moreira said. She also questioned whether the autoconvocados represented subsistence farmers and agricultural workers. “How many of them were there?” Moreira asked rhetorically. This was echoed by Vice President Lucía Topolansky, who said that she found it “odd” that the issue of the high cost of renting agricultural lands was not raised by the autoconvocados - insinuating that they represent only landowners. However, Topolansky recognised that “some sectors have problems and we need to address them”.

Vázquez’s remarks incensed the autoconvocados, who called for a national protest march and congress in the central department of Durazno on 23 January. The plan was to make a show of strength to the government and use the opportunity to come up with a specific set of demands. The group said that they expected as many as 50,000 people to take part in the mobilisation and that this should send a clear message to the government. The turnout expectations were not met but nonetheless thousands of people (8,000-10,000 according to police estimates) took part in the event, making it the largest demonstration staged by the agricultural sector since the FA came to power in 2005.

The demonstration was also a success in that the attendees succeeded in drafting a specific set of demands. These include a reduction in electricity tariffs, a cap on fuel price increases (both set by the government), new tax breaks for the sector, and a more freely floating peso/US dollar exchange rate (managed by the central bank) so that they can benefit from the relative strength of the dollar. The autoconvocados complained that all of these factors have eroded the sector’s competitiveness, making agricultural production economically unviable. They also approved a statement criticising the government’s economic policy for increasing the tax burden on productive sectors to finance ever-growing spending.

Prior to the Durazno protest, some FA members accused the autoconvocados of being mobilised by the political opposition as part of a plan to undermine the FA’s image ahead of next year’s general elections. Following the criticism of FA economic policies, there were more such accusations (*see sidebar*). But while the centre-right opposition has backed the autoconvocados (and some prominent opposition leaders attended the Durazno protest), this appears to be a genuine grassroots protest movement, posing a threat to the FA government. The last time Uruguay’s agricultural sector held mass protests was at the height of the 2002 economic crisis. Back then the FA backed the protests, and this helped it win its first general election in 2004.

TRACKING TRENDS

BRAZIL | Record homicides. Brazil registered a record number of deaths for lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) people last year. In 2017, 445 LGBT people died, of which 387 were murdered and the remaining 58 committed suicide. This is the highest figure recorded since the survey began 38 years ago and marks a 30% increase on 2016 when 343 deaths were registered. The majority of these were the victims of homophobic crimes, which could be linked to the recent rise of far-right political movements.

The study is carried out by tallying the number of deaths reported in local media, but the phenomenon could be even bigger given that many cases do not receive any media coverage.

BRAZIL | Job loss. Brazil lost over 328,000 jobs in December 2017, according to data from the national employment register *Cadastro Geral de Empregados e Desempregados* (Caged). Net employment for the whole of 2017 was also negative, frustrating expectations that the labour reform of the government led by President Michel Temer would open up more vacancies.

Currently, around 12.2% of Brazilians are unemployed, leaving 12.7m without work according to 2017 third-quarter figures from the national statistics institute (Ibge). But a report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) published on 23 January suggests unemployment levels should decrease to 11.9% by the end of 2018. Researchers from ILO expect the jobs market to pick up now the economy is growing again following the recession of more than two years. Less encouragingly, the report found that the number of poor quality vacancies would also increase, leaving many workers without long-term job security.

Homicides and oil pipeline theft surge

After a bright start to his term in office in 2012, President Enrique Peña Nieto looks like leaving under a dark cloud in December this year. Two damning reports were released over the course of the last week. One showed intentional homicides hitting a record high in 2017, eclipsing even the worst year under Peña Nieto's predecessor Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (2006-2012). The other showed that cases of illegal oil pipeline theft also reached a record high in 2017.

There were 25,339 homicide investigation files opened by the authorities in 2017, representing 29,168 victims, according to a report published by the secretariat of the national public security system (SESNSP) on 20 January. This equates to 69 murders per day, eclipsing the 61 per day recorded in 2011, the bloodiest year of the Calderón administration. It is the highest figure since records began in 1997, and amounts to a 19% increase on the total number of homicides recorded in 2016. And the SESNSP consistently reports about 10% fewer homicides than the national statistics institute (Inegi), which is yet to release data.

The murder rate for the final quarter of 2017 hit an average of 86.4 per day. There were 2,219 homicides in December alone, up more than 20% on the same month a year earlier. The annual number of homicides increased in as many as 28 of Mexico's 32 states. Nearly one-third of the country's states (10) saw more than 1,000 homicide cases. As recently as 2015 this was just four.

In absolute terms the southern state of Guerrero had the highest number of homicide cases in 2017 with 2,318, followed by Baja California with 2,092. The most violent state in relative terms was Colima, with an average of 94 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. It was followed by one of the country's traditionally safer states, Baja California Sur, which has seen a huge increase in the last five years, jumping from 35 homicides in 2012 to 560 in 2017.

The most dramatic increase in homicides was recorded in the small western state of Nayarit where the murder rate jumped from 3.13 cases per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016 to 20.10 in 2017, up by 542%. This looks like increasing again in 2018. Four clandestine graves were found in Nayarit this week, containing the remains of 33 people.

The SESNSP data also revealed that Ciudad de México (CDMX) is no longer a safe haven from the violence. There were 1,085 murders in CDMX in 2017. Tourist areas are now fully immersed in the violence too – and not just the well-documented rise of violent crime in Acapulco, the former pearl of the Pacific, in Guerrero. The number of murders in the tourist city of Cancún almost tripled from 86 in 2016 to 220 in 2017.

The Peña Nieto administration has previously celebrated taking out more than half of the 122 'most-wanted' leaders of criminal organisations on its kingpins list, but this has not had the desired effect. Instead, the criminal organisations appear to have adapted, fragmenting and clashing with other groups before re-emerging under a new leader.

The homicide figures also raise serious questions about the efficacy of the militarisation of public security. Peña Nieto has bequeathed his successor a controversial interior security law, enshrining the role of the military in law enforcement. This is likely to be a major issue on the campaign trail ahead of presidential elections on 1 July this year. So far Andrés Manuel López

Homicides by state (top 20)

| | |
|---------------------|-------|
| Guerrero | 2,318 |
| Baja California | 2,092 |
| Estado de México | 2,041 |
| Veracruz | 1,641 |
| Chihuahua | 1,578 |
| Jalisco | 1,369 |
| Sinaloa | 1,332 |
| Michoacán | 1,277 |
| CDMX | 1,085 |
| Guanajuato | 1,096 |
| Oaxaca | 919 |
| Puebla | 919 |
| Tamaulipas | 805 |
| Colima | 700 |
| Sonora | 693 |
| Nuevo León | 656 |
| Morelos | 602 |
| Zacatecas | 562 |
| Baja California Sur | 560 |
| Chiapas | 475 |

Electoral violence

The electoral caravan led by the presidential aspirant 'Marichuy' Patricia, an indigenous woman supported by the Chiapas-based Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), was held up late on 21 January while passing through the Tierra Caliente, one of the country's most violent regions located in the state of Michoacán. She and her companions were robbed of anything of value but unharmed. Patricia was heading to the Purépecha indigenous community of Nurío, in the municipality of Paracho de Verduzco, while endeavouring to collect signatures to register her candidacy as an independent in July's elections. So far she has managed just 171,000, a long way shy of the target of 866,593, with the deadline of 19 February looming every closer.

Obrador, of the left-wing Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena), is the only presidential candidate to present an alternative. López Obrador favours a negotiated amnesty for organised criminal groups. He has not revealed further details but with homicides spiralling ever upwards the public could be attracted to the proposal.

Oil theft skyrockets

As if the homicide figures were not difficult enough reading for the Peña Nieto administration, the state-controlled oil company Petróleos Mexicanos (Pemex) released a report of its own on 15 January revealing that there were 9,509 cases of oil pipeline theft in 2017. This is a massive increase of 38% on the 6,873 cases recorded in 2016.

The 'milking' of oil pipelines is growing at an alarming rate in Mexico. There were just 204 illegal taps recorded nationwide along Pemex's network of 57,000km of ducts in 2006 when Calderón began his six-year term by declaring a war on drugs. It is no coincidence that his crackdown prompted drug trafficking organisations to look for alternative means of making a profit. They began to forge alliances with local fuel thieves, known as huachicoleros, in 2011, which is when the annual number of illegal taps really began to take off.

Oil pipeline theft is predominantly concentrated in Guanajuato, Puebla, and Tamaulipas. The Pemex report found that most cases of illegal oil taps took place in Guanajuato in 2017 (1,696), followed by Puebla (1,343 compared with just 80 in 2011), and Tamaulipas (1,033). It is worth noting that the large number of cases of pipeline thefts in Guanajuato and Puebla in particular, states not traditionally renowned for high levels of violence, coincided with major increases in intentional homicides last year, according to the SESNSP report, as criminal organisations vie for control of the lucrative business. Indeed, Guanajuato was the tenth-most violent state in Mexico with 1,096 homicide cases, followed by Puebla, home to the epicentre of pipeline theft in Mexico known as the 'Red Triangle', with 919.

Militarisation of public security has made minimal impact on oil pipeline theft. Neither has a tough law approved in 2015, imposing prison sentences of between 15 and 25 years for pipeline theft. With the country's political parties now in full campaign mode, it is difficult to imagine any new measures to combat the crime making their way through the federal congress. As such, it would be a shock if the number of cases of illegal pipeline theft did not continue to soar again this year. It will be down to the next government to take further action. Imposing stricter controls to prevent service stations from purchasing stolen fuel would be one option, although they are often forced by criminal gangs. Adapting pipelines to make illegal taps more difficult would be another option. But combating corruption in Pemex (where rogue employees pass on the exact times fuel is going to pass through pipelines to the gangs) could have the biggest impact.

Duarte extradition

The governor of the northern state of Chihuahua, Javier Corral, launched a 'Caravan and march for dignity' on 20 January to traverse the 2,000km from Ciudad Juárez, on the US border, to Mexico City. Corral organised the march to condemn what he called the federal finance ministry's financial reprisals for his anti-corruption campaign [WR-17-01] and to demand that the federal government move to obtain the extradition of his predecessor César Duarte, thought to be sheltering in the US, to face corruption charges.

On the second day of the march, which is expected to take 16 days and reach Mexico City on 4 February, the protesters received a boost when the federal attorney general's office (PGR) announced an extradition request for Duarte. It might also have taken the wind out of their sails somewhat, however, with two weeks of marching ahead.

Other achievements?

In his balance sheet presented on 14 January, President Morales highlighted as particular achievements a reduction in the national homicide rate to 26.1 per 100,000 inhabitants, down from 27.3 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016, and efforts to address chronic malnutrition which affects 46.5% of the children in Guatemala on figures from the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). Earlier this month, the national information on food and nutrition security system (Sinsan) released figures which show that, in 2017, 111 children under the age of five died in Guatemala as a result of chronic malnutrition – down 31% on the 161 who died in 2016.

CENTRAL AMERICA & CARIBBEAN

GUATEMALA | POLITICS

Morales at half way point

President Jimmy Morales last week marked the end of the first two years of his four-year mandate with a state-of-the-nation address. Having failed to dispel transparency-related concerns stemming from the calls last year for him to be investigated over alleged illegal campaign financing [\[WR-17-34\]](#), Morales' insistence on his commitment to combating corruption rang somewhat hollow. These concerns have since intensified following a cabinet reshuffle as well as the recent election of Alvaro Arzú Escobar, the son of current Guatemala City mayor Alvaro Arzú (a former president 1996-2000), as president of the 158-member legislative assembly.

In his balance sheet presented last week, President Morales pointed to various initiatives as evidence of the commitment by his Frente de Convergencia Nacional (FCN-Nación) government to the fight against corruption. These include the open government action plan (Plan de Acción de Gobierno Abierto) which involves 73 public sector entities and other organisations. He also mentioned the decision announced in June 2017 by the Global Forum on Transparency and Exchange of Information for Tax Purposes of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to remove Guatemala from its blacklist of non-cooperating countries.

Yet, doubts regarding Morales' commitment to transparency have grown since August 2017 following his unsuccessful attempt to expel from the country Iván Velásquez, the director of the United Nations-backed anti-impunity commission in Guatemala (Cicig). This notably followed calls by Velásquez, along with the head of the attorney general's office (AG) Thelma Aldana, for Morales to be investigated over alleged illegal campaign financing. Aldana herself made clear her views regarding Morales on 15 January, telling reporters that the president is "no ally in the fight against corruption".

Along with civil-society groups like #JusticiaYa, Aldana also flagged up concerns about Arzú's election by congress which took place on 13 January. Like Morales, the legislature also faced criticism last year over its refusal to comply with the calls to investigate the president as well as its approval of changes to the criminal code (subsequently repealed) which would have weakened anti-corruption legislation. The election of Arzú, the sole member of his Partido Unionista (PU) bench in congress, has further compounded these fears. Arzú Sr faced calls last October from Cicig and the AG to be investigated over a case known as 'Pandora' – a corruption network headed by the country's most famous prisoner (until he was killed in a prison riot in 2016), retired General Byron Lima Oliva, who served as a security guard for Arzú during his presidency [\[WR-17-40\]](#). In an interview with TV station *CNN en Español*, broadcast on 17 January, Aldana said she hoped that the new congress president would "maintain a due distance from...his father's problems" and steer clear of "any possibility of intervening in this judicial procedure."

Cabinet reshuffle

A cabinet reshuffle undertaken on 16 January has cast further doubts as to Morales' declared commitment to transparency. The ministers shown the door were Sidney Samuels (environment), Ennio Galicia (social development), and Víctor Asturias (economy). The local media has been quick to flag up doubts regarding their replacements: Alfonso Alonzo Vargas, René Obregón, and Acisclo Valladares, respectively – all deputy ministers of their portfolios at the time of their promotion.

Valladares

The national daily *elPeriódico* reported that in November 2017 the residence of the new economy minister, Acisclo Valladares, was raided by Cicig and AG officials in relation to a corruption case involving Tigo, a telecommunications company majority-owned by international telecoms company Millicom.

Valladares, who was named commissioner of the national competitiveness programme (Pronacom) by Morales' predecessor, Otto Pérez Molina (2012-2015), has faced recent raids on his property in relation to a corruption case (see sidebar). He is the son of Guatemala's ambassador to the UK, Acisclo Valladares Molina, one of Morales' key advisers who reportedly accompanied the president to the UN last year when he complained about Velásquez, following the latter's calls for Morales to be investigated.

Meanwhile Alonso, another political adviser to Morales, is reportedly a personal friend of former president Alfonso Portillo (2000-2004) who pleaded guilty to money laundering charges in the US in 2014. According to *elPeriódico*, between 2014 and 2015 Alonso worked as an assistant in congress to former congress president Luis Armando Rabbé Tejada (2015-2016). Cicig and the AG have accused Rabbé of hiring people in congress who never performed any work. The national daily reports that Alonso has won the support of deputies from various benches through providing posts to their relatives. Those to have benefited reportedly include Partido de Avanzada Nacional (PAN) legislator Manuel Conde Orellana, and Ovidio Monzón of the Partido Todos.

SAT director fired

A further dismissal to have attracted concern was that of Juan Francisco Solórzano Foppa, the head of the country's tax authorities (SAT), which the finance ministry announced on 17 January.

In the post since March 2016, Solórzano was officially fired due to the SAT's failure to meet its target of raising Q57.4bn (US\$7.8bn) in revenue in 2017, with Q56.1bn raised. However, Solórzano – a former head of the AG criminal investigation unit (Dicri) at the time of his appointment – had the backing of Cicig and was widely respected.

The SAT has attracted widespread attention in recent years due to the high-profile 'La Línea' corruption case – the tax fraud corruption ring allegedly headed by Pérez Molina which ultimately forced his resignation.

CUBA | POLITICS

Deputies to choose Castro's successor nominated

The process to select a successor to President Raúl Castro moved a step closer on 21 January when Cuba's 168 municipal assemblies of popular power nominated the candidates to fill the 612-seat national assembly. The responsibility will fall upon national assembly deputies in a session beginning on 19 April to select the 31-member council of state and Cuba's first president outside of the Castro family since the establishment of the organs of popular power in 1976.

The municipal assemblies wield no real power. The candidates they nominated for the national assembly, along with candidates to fill the 1,265 seats in the country's provincial assemblies, were chosen from a slate compiled by the national electoral commission. The candidates will be 'elected' on 11 March. There is only one candidate per seat, although if a candidate fails to obtain 50% of the vote, an alternative has to be chosen.

President Castro was nominated to a seat in the national assembly along with his daughter Mariela, a deputy since 2013 representing Havana. Castro's successor is widely predicted to be his vice-president Miguel Díaz-Canel, who would be in no position to depart from the central tenets of the Cuban Revolution even if he wanted to. Castro will keep a watchful eye. He will retain the still more powerful position of first secretary of the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC) until at least 2021.

POSTSCRIPT

Quotes of the week

“It is the right decision. Imperialism and the Right were plotting to take over the economy.”

Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro justifies bringing presidential elections forwards by eight months.

“It is not me being convicted but the Brazilian people. Everything they are doing is so that I cannot be a [presidential] candidate, but I will be.”

Brazil's former president Lula da Silva reacts defiantly to a judicial ruling upholding his conviction for corruption and money laundering.

“We [Alianza País] were like neighbourhood bullies, who went out on the streets and did not know who to hit most.”

Ecuador's President Lenín Moreno accuses his party of failing to listen to different views in the past.

Ecuador's Moreno on course for big victory

Final opinion surveys indicate that Ecuador's President Lenín Moreno should comfortably win approval for all seven questions put to voters in a national referendum on 4 February. This would mark a significant triumph over his predecessor Rafael Correa (2007-2017) who is touring the country urging the electorate to reject Moreno's proposal to end indefinite presidential re-election and to revamp the Consejo de Participación Ciudadana y Control Social (CPCCS), which appoints the country's most senior non-elected officials.

Support for all seven questions in the referendum exceeds 70%, according to a nationwide poll of 1,862 respondents by Cedatos. It ranges from 71% in favour of ending indefinite re-election (which would prevent Correa from making a re-election bid in 2021) to 84% support for elected officials found guilty of corruption being barred for life from holding public office. Another poll by Diagnóstico, which was carried out in just Guayaquil, the country's largest city, produced similar findings.

In a television interview broadcast on 21 January, Moreno said that he had decided to hold the referendum to “freshen up democracy” in Ecuador. He said that combating corruption, increasing restrictions on mining activity, and enhancing environmental protection were major issues to emerge from the national dialogue process he held upon taking office. Moreno insisted he had “no interest in controlling the CPCCS”, saying his sole intent was to choose the best non-partisan people to run the body. He was also adamant that there be no ‘paquetazo’, economic adjustment, after the referendum.

Moreno went on to maintain that his government was keen to “refresh” foreign relations. He mentioned the possibility of applying for membership of the Pacific Alliance trade bloc, which comprises Chile (a traditional ally), Peru and Colombia (neighbours and competitors), and Mexico. This would mark a wholesale change to foreign trade policy. Ecuador currently belongs to the radical left-wing Venezuela-led bloc Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (Alba). Moreno also said that free trade agreements (FTAs) should be governed by the size of a trading partner not ideological affinity. He said that he had recently discussed with the US ambassador, John Todd, a bilateral FTA which would be even better than Ecuador recently sealed with the European Union (EU).

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